ANOTHER SOLUTION TO THE CRITICS’ RIDDLE:
WULF AND EADWACER REVISITED

John M. Fanagan concludes his article on *Wulf and Eadwacer*\(^1\) by saying that “his interpretation is open to those who will choose other combinations of the words in the text”. In the present article I shall take up the glove and provide an interpretation that is at the same time close to and opposite to Fanagan’s, but also one that conflicts less with the general tenor of the poem.

Fanagan’s is an “internal” interpretation, based on a close reading of the poem. However, whilst analyzing the poem he makes a number of assumptions that are open to criticism:

1. on p. 132 he suggests that the *beaducafa* \(^\text{11}\) is someone other than *Wulf*, and promises that this will be proved. This is never done: on p. 134 the identification *beaducafa*/ *eadwacer* is made, but not substantiated (as again on p. 135). I should like to suggest that, instead, the *beaducafa* is not the same as *eadwacer*, but rather as *wulf*. After all, semantically *wulf* “wolf” and *beaducafa* “the one brave in battle” are closer to each other than *wu/f* and *eadwacer* “one watchful of property”. As will become clear later on, my interpretation of the poem does not hinge upon this identification, but does contribute to it.

2. on p. 133 Fanagan rightly remarks that most previous editors have taken the *bonne-bonne* clauses of lines 10-11 as correlative – and he follows suit. That most previous editors have taken these clauses together does, however, not prove that they were right. It is also possible to take lines 9 and 10 and lines 11 and 12 together:

   Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode
   *bonne hit* wæs renig wedge and ic reotugu sæt
   *bonne mec se beaducafa* bogum blegde
   wæs me wyn to *bon*, wæs me hwaþre eac lað.\(^2\)

   I suffered with far-ranging thoughts of
   my Wulf when it was rainy weather and I sat
down in misery.
   When the one bold in battle (Wulf) laid his
   arms around me, there was joy in that for
   me, but also loathing.

   It is clear from the poem that Wulf is on the woman’s mind: as Fanagan has also noted, “the name [of eadwacer], if such it is, occurs just once, compared to five times for Wulf” (p. 132) and again: “so, the general drift of the poem becomes fairly easy to grasp: the sad woman is lamenting the absence of her beloved Wulf who is on another island, *féast* (5) suggesting that their separation has some degree of permanence” (p. 133). In addition to this lines 13-15 make clear why “there was joy in that for me, but also loathing”: Wulf’s visits were rare, and the thought of having to part again and subsequent longing for him made her sick:
Wulf min Wulf, wena me þine
seocce gedydon, þine seldcymas,
murnende mod, nales meteliste.

Wulf, my Wulf, my thoughts of you,
my mourning heart, your rare visits,
not lack of food (have) made me sick.

It should be noted that the past tense gedydon need not be rendered as a perfect in modern English and may refer exclusively to the past. The woman’s statement is therefore ambiguous: the rare visits may be the rare visits of the past or – and in that case we have an understatement here – the rare visits refer to the present situation. Considering the number of ambiguities in the poem, both interpretations should be considered simultaneously.

The woman’s misery at the absence of Wulf is expressed forcefully in “þonne hit wæs renig weder”, which may be taken literally, but also as a symbol of sorrow and misery (cf. the use of dene dimne, dena uphea, bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne in the Wife’s Lament to express misery – apart from literally indicating physical surroundings).

3. on p. 135 Fanagan suggests that the hwelp of line 16 must refer to Eadwacer’s child. It is surprising that someone who until then has managed to point out the subtleties and double meanings of the text suddenly fails to see that hwelp is used here to refer to a young wulf. To explain, as Fanagan does, that hwelp is used because wolves carry their cubs in their mouths just will not do. Quite appropriately it is said in the poem that wulf will carry their child to the wood, i.e. bring it into safety (wolves preferably haunt dense woods and forests).

The remaining objections I have against Fanagan’s interpretation are the logical outcome of my three main objections give above. Fanagan has produced a consistent interpretation of the poem, and the result inevitably is that if one (or more) of his arguments is (are) not accepted, the conclusion becomes unacceptable, too.

In Fanagan’s interpretation Wulf is “probably her socially recognised husband, fiancé or lover” (p. 134) and the woman has degraded herself by giving her body to beaducafa/eadwacer. Consequently her people no longer want her, but Eadwacer is still acceptable to them. After all, he is “a valiant member of a warlike society” (p. 134) who, poor soul, cannot help it if a woman “wants to throw herself at him”. This statement would be acceptable if it had come from a twentieth-century probation-officer, made in defense of a young criminal, but as an interpretation of the first two lines of this poem it is, to put it mildly, somewhat idiosyncratic and unconvincing and would have been good for a few Anglo-Saxon laughs. It is one thing to say that “we must not neglect the more enigmatic sections of the poem”; it is something totally different to force an interpretation upon two lines that are semantic and syntactic cruces of long standing. Because Fanagan does not want to admit defeat, in itself admirable,