## The Husband's Message: Modern English Translation

"The Husband's Message" is an Old English (i.e. Anglo-Saxon) poem from the *Exeter Book*, the oldest extant English poetry anthology. "The Husband's Message" may or may not be a reply to "The Wife's Lament," another poem in the same collection. The Angles and Saxons were Germanic tribes and the poem is generally considered to be an Anglo-Saxon riddle (I will provide the solution), but its primary focus is on persuading a wife or pledged fiancée to join her husband or betrothed and fulfill her promises to him. The *Exeter Book* has been dated to 960-990 AD, so the poem was probably written no later than the tenth century, and perhaps earlier. The version below is my modern English translation of one of the earliest poems of English antiquity. There are links to other translations below the poem, including the evocative Anglo-Saxon classic "Wulf and Eadwacer." The latter is perhaps the first English poem by a female poet that remains known to us today ... unless "The Wife's Lament" is even more ancient!

## The Husband's Message

anonymous Old English poem, circa 960-990 AD loose translation/interpretation by Michael R. Burch

See, I unseal myself for your eyes only!
I sprang from a seed to a sapling,
waxed great in a wood,
was given knowledge.

was given knowledge, was ordered across saltstreams in ships where I stiffened my spine, standing tall, till, entering the halls of heroes,

I honored my manly Lord.

Now I stand here on this ship's deck, an emissary ordered to inform you of the love my Lord feels for you. I have no fear forecasting his heart steadfast, his honor bright, his word true.

He who bade me come carved this letter

and entreats you to recall, clad in your finery, what you promised each other many years before, mindful of his treasure-laden promises.

He reminds you how, in those distant days, witty words were pledged by you both in the mead-halls and homesteads: how he would be Lord of the lands you would inhabit together while forging a lasting love.

Alas, a vendetta drove him far from his feuding tribe, but now he instructs me to gladly give you notice that when you hear the returning cuckoo's cry cascading down warming coastal cliffs, come over the sea! Let no man hinder your course.

He earnestly urges you: Out! To sea!

Away to the sea, when the circling gulls hover over the ship that conveys you to him!

Board the ship that you meet there: sail away seaward to seek your husband, over the seagulls' range,
over the paths of foam.
For over the water, he awaits you.

He cannot conceive, he told me, how any keener joy could comfort his heart, nor any greater happiness gladden his soul, than that a generous God should grant you both to exchange rings, then give gifts to trusty liege-men, golden armbands inlaid with gems to faithful followers.

The lands are his, his estates among strangers, his new abode fair and his followers true,

all hardy heroes, since hence he was driven, shoved off in his ship from these shore in distress, steered straightway over the saltstreams, sped over the ocean, a wave-tossed wanderer winging away.

But now the man has overcome his woes, outpitted his perils, lives in plenty, lacks no luxury, has a hoard and horses and friends in the mead-halls.

All the wealth of the earth's great earls now belongs to my Lord ...

He only lacks you.

He would have everything within an earl's having, if only my Lady will come home to him now, if only she will do as she swore and honor her vow.

Other Anglo-Saxon/Old English poems: <u>The Ruin</u>, <u>Wulf and Eadwacer</u>, <u>The Wife's Lament</u>, <u>The Husband's Message</u>, <u>Deor's Lament</u>, <u>Caedmon's Hymn</u>, <u>Bede's Death Song</u>, The Seafarer, The Rhyming Poem, Anglo-Saxon Riddles and Kennings