A Fragmentary Archive: Migratory Feelings in Early Anglo-Saxon Women’s Letters

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ABSTRACT

The letters by Anglo-Saxon women in the Boniface correspondence are connected by cultural practices and emotions centered on the conversion mission that functioned to maintain connections between the Anglo-Saxon diaspora. A striking recurring focus of these letters is on loss and isolation, which connects them to the Old English elegies. Many of the letters describe the writers’ traumatic experiences that result from the death or absence of kin. These are women who endured the trauma of being left behind when others migrated overseas or who, in traveling away from their homeland, found themselves isolated in an alien environment, displaced in time as well as space. This article offers an analysis of the letters, focusing on the queer temporalities they explore, the queer emotions they evoke, and the queer kinships that they forge. It argues that the women’s letters represent fragments of an early queer archive of migratory feelings.

KEYWORDS
Anglo-Saxon; elegies; emotions; feelings; letters; poetry; queer; temporality; women

Introduction: Queer emotion/queer time

The letters of early Anglo-Saxon women found in the collection that has come to be known as the Boniface correspondence represent the earliest surviving writing unquestionably attributable to named Anglo-Saxon women. These letters, some written by women missionaries who traveled to Europe in order to convert others to their beliefs, offer remarkable insights into the writers’ emotions as well as their experiences of exile and isolation. While well known within the field of medieval studies, they are less familiar to those working on women’s writing or sexuality and gender studies in other periods. Yet my contention is that they can be considered as fragments of an early queer archive of migratory feelings. Drawing on Ann Cvetkovich’s work on the cultural politics of queer feeling (Cvetkovich, 2003), I suggest that her work on films and narratives that explore modern transnational and diasporic trauma, including colonization and slavery, has something to offer the reader of early medieval texts about migration and isolation. Such a
comparison has to be handled with sensitivity. The early Anglo-Saxon missionary nuns cannot be seen as victims of trauma, according to Cvetkovich’s definition, where trauma is defined in terms of “experiences of socially situated political violence” whether as a result of catastrophic world events or of everyday experience (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 3). On the contrary, the Anglo-Saxon missionary narratives are framed as discourses of power, as is outlined in Nicholas Howe’s important study of migration in Anglo-Saxon England (Howe, 1989). As Howe explains, for Boniface and his supporters, life itself was perceived as a pilgrimage, and the missionary’s journey to convert the Germanic people was understood in typological terms, as the fulfilment of events foreshadowed in the Book of Exodus. Yet, while not suggesting a simple symmetry in terms of dynamics of power between Cvetkovich’s subjects and my own, I nevertheless argue that the comparison across time, cultures, and histories, shockingly presentist as it may seem, is useful in its own terms. What my analysis shares with Cvetkovich’s project is an understanding of “cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7). Furthermore, a number of personal testimonies left behind in the letters of the Anglo-Saxon nuns explore their experiences of distress that, I suggest, resonate with what has been described as queer desire’s “long history of association with failure, impossibility, and loss” (Love, 2009, p. 21). Many of the letters in this archive are marked by an overwhelming sense of suffering caused by absence, which seems at odds with the missionary fervor demonstrated elsewhere in the collection.

The surviving letters of these women represent only a fragment of what must have been a much larger archive. Allen J. Frantzen’s definitions of the fragment as a remnant of cultural processes now “cut off from the social worlds in which [it] once functioned” and as “a quotation taken out of context” are helpful here (Frantzen, 1996, p. 321 and p. 323). It is not simply the case that many more letters by Anglo-Saxon nuns than have survived must have been written and exchanged. The letters that have come down to us seem to have been selected and preserved for reasons not necessarily envisaged by the letter writers. Much of the Boniface correspondence was probably gathered together in the first instance by Boniface’s disciple and successor, Lul, possibly, in part, as a guide to letter writing (Orchard, 2001). Nevertheless, as Andy Orchard (2001) and Lisa M. C. Weston (2010) have both shown, despite its diffuse nature, the correspondence is characterized by intense intertextuality and a common literary or epistolary language and also by a common set of emotional values centered on experiences of solitude and isolation.

To some extent, these emotional values are comparable to those found in Old English verse in famous poems such as *Wulf and Eadwacer, The Wife’s
Lament, The Wanderer, and The Seafarer, elegies that are familiar to readers beyond the confines of academic scholarship through modern translations and lyrical rewriting. Poems such as The Wanderer and The Seafarer have been translated and transformed throughout the 20th century and into the 21st by writers such as Ezra Pound, W. H. Auden, Edwin Morgan (Jones, 2006), and, more recently, Gwyneth Lewis, whose poem “Sea Virus” is inspired by The Seafarer (Lewis, 2011, p. 64). It is worthwhile pausing to consider why these elegies continue to resonate, because their continuing appeal may also suggest that the Anglo-Saxon women’s letters have the potential to speak to present-day readers. As Chris Jones points out, for modern poets “Old English is simultaneously a locus of alterity and similitude” (Jones, 2006, p. 5). The modern poets who rework the Old English elegies might be compared to the “amateur” 19th- and 20th-century scholars discussed by Carolyn Dinshaw in her recent study of queer temporalities, How Soon is Now?—scholars who approach medieval texts from “positions of affect and attachment” (Dinshaw, 2012, p. 6). The Anglo-Saxon poems seemingly disclose private emotions of grief, melancholy, nostalgia, and longing that are stimulated by experiences of isolation, exile, abandonment, and loss of kin and community. This is a poetry that reaches across time, enabling an affective response that does not, or does not necessarily, require an understanding of the historical, social, or linguistic contexts in which it was produced (Hadbawnik & Reynolds, 2015).

The paradoxically comprehensible incomprehensibility of the Old English poems is all the more important given just how shifting their historical, social, and linguistic contexts seem to be, with many of the elegies open to multiple and conflicting interpretations (Trilling, 2009). This body of poetry, then, like the collection of women’s letters in the Boniface correspondence, is fragmentary according to Frantzen’s definition cited above. The power the elegies continue to wield well over a thousand years after their composition might be understood in terms of queer historiography as defined by Carla Freccero:

Queer historiography is fantasmatic, past time apprehended through fantasies and wishes, and yet it also takes seriously what is spectral in the present, the sense that something or someone (many of them) is haunting. … Haunting thus describes, in both its historical and familial resonances, the inheritance of an unfinished demand, an injunction from the past, or an injunction from elsewhere, the not-thereness that splits the present, that strikes it with the unforeseen and unforeseeable event; a memory, like lightning, that briefly illuminates a fragment (Freccero, 2011, pp. 64–65).

The 20th- and 21st-century reworkings of the Old English elegies are haunted by an Anglo-Saxon past that is only partly, momentarily, understood, but which can nevertheless touch, if only fleetingly, the present. At the same time, the elegies are themselves haunted, are themselves concerned with past-present encounters (Trilling, 2009; Joy, 2005; Liuzzo, 2003). Some of the Anglo-Saxon
letters, too, evoke a sense of “not thereness.” While recent scholarly studies that engage with the emergent new interdisciplinary focus on the history of the emotions offer culturally specific analyses of affectivity and feelings such as compassion in medieval Europe (Frantzen, 2005; DeGregorio, 2005), the theorized approaches of Dinshaw and Freccero offer insight into how the Old English elegies continue to resonate, despite—or precisely because of—their resistance to being fixed in time and meaning (see also Hadbawnik & Reynolds, 2015). The shifting or elusive relationships and circumstances that lie behind the emotions evoked in these poems are simultaneously compelling and confusing. Similar claims may be made for the Anglo-Saxon women’s letters, which, I posit in my conclusion, share this affective pull.

Like the Old English elegies, the Anglo-Saxon women’s letters discussed in this article are queer not because they are (necessarily) concerned with same-sex desire, but insofar as, to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s formulation, they “tend toward ‘across’ formulations,” most noticeably across genders and sexualities, but also, one might add, across time (Sedgwick, 1993, p. xii; see also Foucault, 1996). I argue, then, that the early Anglo-Saxon women’s letters, while distinct in key respects, bear some similarities to the elegies, in terms of the queer temporalities they explore, the queer emotions they evoke, and the queer kinships that they forge.

Oh brother, oh my brother: Berhtgyth’s queer loss

Something of the historical context surrounding the production, exchange, and reception of the Anglo-Saxon women’s letters in the Boniface collection is still known. This is in contrast to the elegies, the origin of which is much more obscure. (Found in a single codex known as the Exeter Book [Exeter, Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501, ff.8–130], the production of which dates to the second half of the 10th century and thus to the Benedictine revival; the Old English elegies date from a much earlier time.) Thus, the writer of two early Latin poems embedded within three elegiac letters can be identified by name, family, and status: She is Berhtgyth, daughter of Cynehild, and kinswoman of St. Boniface’s fellow reformer and successor Lul, and, like her mother, she was an Anglo-Saxon woman missionary in Thuringia. Christine Fell observes that the Boniface collection includes, broadly speaking, letters spread across two groups of women: the first from those residing in England, the second from those who have moved to Germany (Fell, 1990, p. 37). Berhtgyth is from the second group. She is mentioned in Otloh’s Life of Boniface, where she is described as being highly educated and as being given the role of teacher in Thuringia (Fell, 1990, p. 38). Her high levels of literacy are confirmed by her letters and poems, which were written following the death of her mother and which describe her loneliness in vivid terms.
In the first surviving letter, Berhtgyth beseechingly asks her brother Balthard, in rhythmic prose, why he has not visited her: “Why is it, my brother, that you have let pass so long a time, that you have delayed to come? … Oh brother, oh my brother, how can you afflict the mind of me, who am naught, with constant grief, weeping and sorrow, day and night, through the absence of your love?” (Dronke, 1984, pp. 30–31). Peter Dronke first pointed out the similarities between Berhtgyth’s descriptions of her love-longing for the absent Balthard and the anxious laments for exiled or distant lovers expressed in Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament. The speaker of the former poem for example, cries out “Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine /seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas, /murnende mod …” [Wulf, my Wulf, my hopes of you /have made me sick, your rare visits, /a mourning mind...] (Treharne, 2004, pp. 64–65). On the surface, Berhtgyth’s situation seems somewhat different to that of the speaking voice in Wulf and Eadwacer, and, of course, she writes in Latin, the language of power and of conversion. Furthermore, it is clear that her isolation from her brother is a consequence of her circumstance, as an Anglo-Saxon nun living in Germany (whether or not that circumstance was her choice). The nature of the speaker’s loss in Wulf and Eadwacer is more obscure, but the separation being lamented was clearly imposed upon her by others. Nevertheless, despite these differences, the parallels are striking, with the emphatic repetitions and urgent questionings and, of course, the idea of death evoked to capture the intense suffering that the separation has caused the speakers.

Berhtgyth’s second letter (Tangl, 1916, pp. 284–285) draws on the metaphor of the sea also found in Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament as well as in the male-voiced exile poems The Wanderer and, of course, The Seafarer:

Multae sunt aquarum congregationes inter me et te, tamen caritate iungamur; quia vera caritas numquam locorum limite frangitur (Tangl, 1916, p. 282).

[There are many congregations of waters between me and you—still let us be one in love, for true love is never broken by severance of place (Dronke, 1984, p. 32).]

“The congregation of waters” that God created in Genesis 1.10 (“congregationesque aquarum appellavit maria”) is more than the sea that creates a physical barrier between Berhtgyth and Balthard. It is also witness to the “caritas” or “true love” that unites sister and brother in their spiritual marriage. The relationship between brother and sister was one of the strongest and most intimate kinship bonds of the time, and the intensity of Berhtgyth’s feelings are manifest.

The metaphor of the sea or other waterway standing for enforced separation is also found in the elegies in the lines “Wulf is on iege, Ic
on oþerre. /Faest is þaet eglond, fenne biworpen” [Wulf is on an island, I on another. /That island is secure, surrounded by fen] (Wulf and Eadwacer in Treharne, 2004, pp. 64–65) and “Ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum /ofer yþa gelac” [First my lord went away from the people /over tossing waves] (The Wife’s Lament in Treharne, 2004, pp. 76–77). The sea, waterways, and storms are significant in these Anglo-Saxon poems and letters that memorialize the traumas of migration and separation, whether written by or in the voice of those who feel or find themselves compelled to set out on a journey or by or in the voice of those left behind. Yet their significance changes according to the gender of the speaker. For Boniface himself, in his own letters, as for the speaker in The Seafarer, traveling across the sea is “a Christian act” (Howe, 1989, p. 110). In contrast, according to Stacy S. Klein, “the female speakers [of the elegies] … envision exile as being trapped in place and consigned to interminable stasis” (Klein, 2006, p. 115). Berhtgyth too represents herself as constrained spatially and temporally, unable to return to her homeland and her beloved brother. For all the Biblical references, and despite her own active role as a missionary, Berhtgyth does not represent herself in the same terms as does Boniface. Whatever the reality behind her situation, she does not represent herself as one who has chosen exile in fulfilment of the divine plan, but as one who has exile forced upon her.

Cvetkovich describes individual testimony as “trauma’s paradigmatic genre” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 123) and it is certainly the case that of all the letters in the Boniface collection, Berhtgyth’s are the ones that most read as individual testimonies. They are infused with Biblical allusions, and she presents herself as Job-like in her suffering. At the same time, her love-laments for her absent brother resonate with the language of the Song of Songs: The reader is again and again forced to confront and question the sheer intensity of her feelings toward her sibling. As with Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament, where the identity of the speakers, the circumstances of their exile, and the nature of their relationships are all ambiguous, there is a riddling quality to Berhtgyth’s writing. At the end of 10 lines of rhyming octosyllabic verse written in a style that mirrors the alliterative half-lines of Old English poetry, her second letter contains, at an invocation which seems to be intended to end her separation from her brother:

Valeamus angelicis victrices iungi milibus,  
Paradisi perpetuis perdurantes in gaudiis.  
Elonqueel et Michael, Acaddai, Adonai, Alleuatia, alleluia (Tangl, 1916, p. 285).

[May we flourish, victresses joined with the angelic thousands,  
Living forever in the perpetual joys of Paradise,  
? (sic) Elonqueel and Michael, Acaddai, Adonai, Alleuatia, Alleluia (translated in Stevenson, 2005b, p. 95).]

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As Jane Stevenson points out, “Berhtgyth underlines the vehemence of her plea for her and her brother’s safety and salvation with a string of magical names (mostly names for God in garbled Hebrew) which she may have thought of as ensuring that her prayer would be heeded” (Stevenson, 2005b, p. 95). The hope that she might be united with her brother in heaven seems highly conventional, but elsewhere Stevenson draws our attention to a gender confusion in these lines—the Latin feminine plural noun “vitrices” is used to describe Berhtgyth and her brother rather than the masculine “victores.” This may indicate that the poem was first written for another woman rather than for Berhtgyth’s brother and only subsequently incorporated into the letter (Stevenson, 2005a, p. 90). Lisa M. C. Weston comments, “it is perhaps interesting that a female-female bond of purely synthetic monastic kinship offers Berhtgyth a less conflicted space for the reconstruction of self than the female-male bonds she shares with her brother in blood and in faith” (Weston, 2010, p. 243). However, this conclusion is, perhaps, too easy—why should “synthetic” same-sex kinship be assumed to be “less conflicted” than a biological sibling relationship between a woman and man?

The gender confusion points to a gap between the ostensible object of longing in the poem identified as the recipient of the letter (Berhtgyth’s brother) and an alternative, unnamed object, gendered female. The riddle of this particular poem is not who is the speaker or what has happened to her, as is the case with The Wife’s Lament, which opens with the statement “Ic ðis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre, /minre sylfre sið” [I relate this mournful riddle about myself, /about my own journey] (Treharne, 2004, pp. 76–77). Rather, as in Wulf and Eadwacer, where the identity of Wulf in particular is unclear, to the extent that we cannot even be sure that he is a man rather than a beast, the unanswered question in Berhtgyth’s poem is: Whom does the speaker really desire?

The third letter, written in response to a reply from Balthard that does not seem to have been entirely satisfactory, is less elaborate in its language, but it too ends with a short poem, which, like the earlier one, shows the influence of Aldhelm in its composition. Although the verses seem to offer hope, “Christ will abolish sorrows and wash away sins both new and old with His great mercy” (translated in Weston, 2010, p. 242), the overall tone of the letter is similar to the earlier one, and the theme of exile remains as Berhtgyth remembers how “I was bereft of my parents in my youth and remained here alone” and she continues to plead to Balthard that he come to her (Dronke, 1984, p. 33). Once again, Berhtgyth represents herself in passive terms, as subject to misfortune, rather than as one who has chosen to travel abroad. The concluding lines of The Wife’s Lament certainly resonate with Berhtgyth’s poetry and prose: “Wa bið þam þe sceal /of langoðe leofes abidan” [It is misery for those, who, longing, /have to wait for a loved one] (Treharne, 2004, pp. 78–79). In this her final surviving letter, Berhtgyth
describes how it is her wish that she should be able to visit the graves of her parents where she can end this “temporalem vitam” or “transitory life” (Tangl, 1916, p. 286; my own translation), a commonplace that nevertheless reminds us of the laments of the Wanderer (“Her bið feoh laene; her bið freond laene; /Her bið mon laene; her bið maeg laene” [Here, wealth is transitory; here a friend is transitory; /here a man is transitory; here a kinsman is transitory] [Treharne, 2004, pp. 46–47]) and of the Seafarer (“þis deade lif, /laene on londe” [this dead life, /transitory on land] [Treharne, 2004, pp. 50–51]). There is little reason to think that Berhtgyth’s wish will be fulfilled. However, the desire to be united in her death with her dead parents found in Berhtgyth’s final surviving letter resonates too with modern diasporic nostalgia or a “diaspora aesthetic,” which Stuart Hall describes in these terms: “the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins,’ to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning” (Hall, 2003, p. 245). Berhtgyth, despairing of being with her brother, at least while she remains in this life, also wishes to “go back to the beginning.”

**Cultural production and migratory desires**

The larger collection of correspondence associated with Boniface, including the other letters to and from religious women a generation older than Berhtgyth who survive within it, provides a crucial context for understanding Berhtgyth’s writing, but it is one that illustrates the extent to which Berhtgyth’s letters stand apart from the others. According to Stevenson, women “bore serious responsibilities” in Boniface’s mission to convert the pagans, and their role as educators was vital (Stevenson, 2005b, p. 94). While Berhtgyth’s letters do not overtly address the matter of conversion, perhaps in part because the Christian mission in Germany was more established by the time she was writing but also perhaps because to do so would present her in a more active role than she wishes to assume, most other letters—whether written by nuns in England or on the continent—are much more explicitly concerned with this topic. Understanding Boniface’s circle in terms of the Anglo-Saxon diaspora may be productive. Talking specifically about queer diasporas, Cvetkovich argues that they “move beyond Benedict Anderson’s model of imagined community by forging transnational circuits of cultural reception and production” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 121). While the Old English elegies are typically thought of as poems of exile (Greenfield, 1989), and Boniface described himself in one letter as “an exile in Germany” (Kylie, 1911, p. 92), this conceptualization may be restrictive. Again, talking about modern texts, Cvetkovich goes on to contrast the experience of exile “which frequently presumes a place of natural origin and emphasizes the loss of one’s nation as a trauma in a negative sense,” with a diasporic or transnational stress “on the possibility that acknowledging traumatic loss can be a
resource for creating new cultures” (Cvetkovich, 2003, pp. 121–122). Berhtgyth, it can be argued, in her last letter in particular, figures herself as an exile, but as in many of the other letters, her response to the traumas associated with migration is highly productive. These letters in the Boniface collection are only part of the surviving evidence of the circuits of reception and production that extended between England and the continent. This evidence, taken as a whole, testifies to the importance of this religious network of fostering and maintaining affective as well as spiritual bonds through shared knowledge and creative exchange. As Howe notes, “against great obstacles of distance and culture, the ecclesia as community could be preserved through letters” (Howe, 1989, p. 141). The importance of friendship, and the extent to which it is celebrated, within these letters, should not be understated (Wallace, 1995; Weston, 2008, 2010), but accounts of the pain of those who find themselves without friends or kin and the suffering of those left behind are equally significant. A considerable number of the letters of both groups of women address the feelings of the writers, who, because of pilgrimage or missionary migration, find themselves separated from their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, and other more distant kin and from their close spiritual friends. As is the case in the Old English elegies, there is often something queer about the longings expressed, whether or not they appear erotic or sexual when viewed from a presentist perspective, because they are based on intense relationships that are not based solely on narrow modern normative heterosexual definitions of desire (Lochrie, 2005) and from a more historicist perspective because of the complex, shifting, and at times confusing ways in which kinship, friendship, gender, identity, desire, and time are represented.

A number of letters survive to and from another woman from the first group of letter writers in the collection, a woman known as Bugga. Barbara Yorke points out that Bugga is a diminutive and the woman’s name was Hæaburg (Yorke, 1998, p. 148). An early letter to Boniface written from England, jointly written by Bugga and her mother, Eangyth, echoes closely the language of Boniface’s own correspondence in which he describes at length his own suffering when mother and daughter lament that they “are weighed down by a crushing load of misery, and by the distraction of worldly affairs” (Kylie, 1911, p. 62). They relate their concern for the souls of the monks in their care in their double monastery (the identity of which is unknown, although it may have been in Kent [Yorke, 1998, p. 149]), the poverty that they have to endure, and their troubles at the hands of the king and his servants. They go on to lament the “loss of our friends and the band of our relatives and kinsfolk”:

Non habemus filium neque fratrem, patrem aut patrum, nisi tantum unicam filiam penitus destitutam omnibus caris in hoc saeculo, preter unam tantum sororem eius
et matrem valde vetulam et filium fratri eorum, et illum valde infelicem propter
ipsius mentis et quia rex noster eius gentem multum exosam habet (Tangl,
1916, p. 23).

[Neither son nor brother, father nor uncle have we, but an only daughter, almost
destitute of everything valued in this life, an aged mother, her sister and their
brother’s son. He is very unfortunate, because of his own disposition and the
hatred which the king bears his race (Kylie, 1911, p. 63).]

As with Berhtgyth’s poem in her final letter to Balthard, discussed earlier,
there is a riddling quality to this letter, as the identities of the two women of
different generations are merged and the reader is required to unravel the
web of relationships: Neither woman has a brother, father, or son; the
daughter is Bugga; the aged mother, Eangyth. The sister, Eangyth’s, is passed
over without comment—her worth seems minimal. The brother’s son
(Bugga’s cousin) is named subsequently as Denewald; he too is considering
joining Boniface’s mission, and thus their isolation will be even greater. The
tone of this letter to some extent echoes that of the letters of Berhtgyth to
Balthard, with their concern with abandonment and their paradoxically
shared solitary suffering. Even though these two women remain in their
monastery, the metaphors they use are those associated with the trauma of
migration. But unlike the women speakers in Wulf and Eadwacer and The
Wife’s Lament, and unlike Berhtgyth, Eangyth and Bugga do not represent
themselves as trapped in space, but as travelers, albeit unfortunate ones. The
pains of the mother and daughter draw on imagery of waves crashing against
rocks and a boat that capsizes and breaks up in the storm. The seasonal
rhythms are disrupted—the women allude to the days “when time lengthens
in July or August,” but of course the days actually begin to shorten in these
months (Kylie, 1911, p. 64). The women share this experience of nature’s
asynchrony, this queer feeling of being out of time, of being, as Dinshaw puts
it, “out of sync with the ordinarily linear measurements of everyday life”
(Dinshaw, 2012, p. 4). Summer brings no solace: The women “are weary of
life and find it loathsome to live” (Kylie, 1911, p. 64).

Eangyth and Bugga explain their own isolation as itself a form of exile
even though, paradoxically, it is they who remain at home in England. Their
kin have either died or traveled abroad on pilgrimage. Yet, although sepa-
rated from Boniface “by a long stretch of land and sea and the borders of
many provinces” (Kylie, 1911, p. 65), this distance can be traversed by letters
and also physically. Howe comments that, “when Boniface describes him-
self … as being tossed on the stormy seas of Germanic heathendom, we hear
not simply a Christian speaking but an Anglo-Saxon Christian whose reli-
gious destiny has been marked by his people’s history” (Howe, 1989, p. 128).
Eangyth and Bugga deliberately draw on Boniface’s own metaphor with
similar effect, and in so doing, in contrast to Berhtgyth in her letters to her
brother, they attribute to themselves a spiritual virility that seems on closer examination somewhat at odds with their own situation, at home in England. However, the composite “we” briefly switches to “I” when Eangyth writes about her long-felt desire to visit Rome that originated when “my only daughter was still in the years of her youth” (Kylie, 1911, pp. 65–66). Together, mother and daughter seek Boniface’s intercession and ask for clear guidance about whether to undertake this journey. Pilgrimage is often thought of as a form of voluntary exile (Whitelock, 1950), whereby in leaving home pilgrims find their true spiritual home, but in the context of the Boniface correspondence, pilgrimage is also a significant cultural practice among the Anglo-Saxon religious diaspora. Rome rather than England or Germany is for the women, as it is for Boniface, the central point of the Christian map. It is for advice on this matter that Bugga and Eangyth have greatest need of a friend.

The topic of pilgrimage recurs in a letter from Boniface to Bugga, dating to some time in the 720s or 730s, in which he discusses the merits of traveling to Rome (Kylie, 1911, pp. 68–70). Boniface is circumspect in his recommendation, and elsewhere both Boniface and Lul fall back on antifeminist stereotypes when they write about women pilgrims who end up in prostitution or living immoral lives (Fell, 1990, pp. 36–37). Here however Boniface merely acknowledges Bugga’s concerns about other religious men and women and suggests to Bugga that the journey would be advantageous if, in remaining where she is, she is unable to enjoy the “freedom of a quiet mind” (Kylie, 1911, p. 68). He also recommends that she get in touch with another nun, Wethburg, who has previously made the pilgrimage. Boniface tells Bugga that he has already contacted Wethburg himself to discuss Bugga’s predicament and notes that Wethburg advises against traveling while Rome is under threat from the Saracens. Within the context of pilgrimage, connections between women, who will be able to give practical advice on travel for women, were evidently very important. Wethburg is mentioned in an earlier letter written by another nun who had studied under Boniface, Ecgburg. Ecgburg wrote to Boniface describing her grief brought about by the death of her beloved brother Oshere. Ecgburg describes how Boniface became for her “father and brother” in the place of Oshere (Kylie, 1911, p. 57) and how her trust in him is based on the “affection which I know thou didst always have for my brother” (Kylie, 1911, p. 58). It is however Ecgburg’s devastation following the imprisonment in Rome of her sister Wethburg that sets this letter apart, uniquely describing, as it does, such a close, even passionate bond between women:

Et postquam mihi simul carissima soror Uuethburg quasi inflicto vulnere iteratoque dolore subito ab oculis evanuit, cum qua adolevi, cum qua adoravi idem nutricum sinus, una mater ambobus in Domino et dereliquid; lesum testor: ubique dolor,
ubique pavor, ubique mortis imago. Mallui mori, si sic Deo auspice, cui arcana non latent, placuisset vel tarda mors non tricaverit. Sed quid dicam nunc? Ante inprovida tandem nos non amara mors, sed amarior divisio separavit ab invicem, illam, ut reor, felicem, me vero infelicem, quasi quoddam depositum, huic seculo servire permisit, sciens enim, quantum illam dilexi, quantum amavi, quam nunc, ut audio, Romana carcer includit. (Tangl, 1916, pp. 19–20)

[And after my dearest sister Wethburg—a new wound, a fresh grief—suddenly vanished from my sight, with whom I grew up and was nurtured at the same breast, for the one mother bore us, in Jesus’ name I declare everywhere was sorrow and desolation, and the face of death. I should have preferred to die, if so it had pleased God, to whom hidden things are plain, or if tardy death had not delayed. But now, what shall I say? Before that hour, not bitter death but a still more bitter parting unexpectedly divided us, her I think, the happy one, me the unhappy one, left, like something cast aside, to serve this world. I loved her so dearly, whom now, I hear, a Roman prison holds. (Kylie, 1911, p. 58)]

This letter anticipates, in its description of the writer’s torment and longing, that of Bugga and her mother, Eangyth. Within it, Ecgburg incorporates sacred, learned, and literary allusions (including references to Jerome’s letters and The Aeneid) alongside an image of the “storm-tossed sailor” (Kylie, 1911, p. 59) that Boniface uses elsewhere to describe himself, but she combines this image with that of the “anxious mother” waiting for her son’s return from the sea. Ecgburg thus ascribes to herself roles that are simultaneously “active male and passive female” (Weston, 2010, p. 237). In a further example of asynchrony, of queer untimeliness, Ecgburg writes about the death of Wethburg in prison as if it has already happened.

**Conclusion: Feeling asynchronous**

Quid est, frater mi, quod tam longum tempus intermisisti, quod venire tardasti? Quare non vis cogitare, quod ego sola in hac terra et nullus alius frater visitet me neque propinquorum aliquis ad me veniet? ... O frater, o frater mi, cur potes mentem parvitatis meae adsiduae merore fletu atque tristitia die noctuque caritatis tuae absentia adfligere? (Tangl, 1916, p. 282)

[Why is it, my brother, that you have let pass so long a time, that you have delayed to come? Why do you not want to remember that I am alone upon this earth, and no other brother will visit me, or any kinsman come to me?... Oh brother, oh my brother, how can you afflict the mind of me, who am naught, with constant grief, weeping and sorrow, day and night, through the absence of your love? (Dronke, 1984, pp. 30-31)]
To conclude, I will return to my starting point: Berhtgyth’s letters to her brother. More specifically I want to look at her first letter, which I quote here at slightly greater length and in Dronke’s own formatting in order to reveal his surprising decision in translating this passage into modern English, to transform it into poetry. Dronke’s choice is one that has not hitherto received any critical attention. However, in the light of Dinshaw’s study, recovery, and reevaluation of the work of amateur scholars in *How Soon is Now?*, it is one that requires comment. Dronke, as a professional academic at the University of Cambridge, married to the Old Norse scholar Ursula Dronke (formerly Brown), seems quite unlike the queer amateurs described by Dinshaw—figures such as the first editor of the late medieval visionary text *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Hope Emily Allen, or the fictional Thomas Colpeper in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s 1944 film, *A Canterbury Tale*. Yet in transforming Berhtgyth’s letter into poetry, in translating it into another form as well as another language, Dronke transforms himself from professional academic into poet, and thus an amateur of sorts, implicitly aligning himself with a tradition of modernist and modern renderings of the Old English elegies. According to Dinshaw, “amateur medievalist readings bring out or enact temporal multiplicities found in the medieval texts that are the foci of their affections” (Dinshaw, 2012, p. 29). Dronke, in choosing to translate this passage as poetry, betrays that he has been touched, perhaps overwhelmed, by Berhtgyth’s Latin prose and that it has for him a particular, queer immediacy. In changing the form of the work in front of him, without acknowledging that he has done so, and thus in a sense compromising his own position of scholarly detachment, he merges Berhtgyth’s voice with his own. Dronke’s poetic translation thus articulates his own complex desires—the desire for, or to be, Berhtgyth, the desire for the “brother,” the desire for the past—desires that render him “naught.” If Dronke’s poetic translation reveals the affective pull of the past, Berhtgyth’s letters stand out among the others by and to women in the Boniface correspondence because of the intensity of the emotions described, whether erotic or familial or both, and because of Berhtgyth’s own sense of being out of time, of being excluded from that strong sense of Christian temporality within which Boniface locates himself and within which he locates his female supporters. Berhtgyth, trapped in a perpetual suffering present, like the female speakers in the Old English elegies, describes how it feels to be asynchronous (see Dinshaw, 2012, p. 105).

Yet, if Berhtgyth’s letters stand apart in the archive, taken as a whole, the women’s letters in the Boniface correspondence are connected by cultural practices and productions as well as emotions that center on the conversion mission and that function to keep alive connections between the Anglo-Saxon diaspora, including pilgrimage, kinship, and spiritual friendship and support. Furthermore, queer moments, whether moments of asynchrony or of gender crossing, are found throughout the collection. The most striking recurring focus of these letters, and of the poetry embedded within them, is
that on loss and isolation. Many of the letters are concerned with describing
the writers' traumatic experiences that result from the death or absence of
kin, and, in one case at least, the imagined death of a beloved kinswoman.
The pain they describe is closely tied to the missionary activities of the nuns
and of their families and friends. These are women who endured the trauma
of being left behind when others migrated overseas or who, in traveling away
from their homeland, found themselves isolated in an alien environment,
displaced in time as well as space. Taken as a whole, these letters—with their
foci on the emotions associated with crossings and exile—represent frag-
ments of an early queer archive of migratory feelings.

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