

“Reading After Trump, Episode 5 Elaine Treharne”

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Alex: It's been a few weeks, maybe more...

Kenny: It's been a busy quarter.

Alex: But we're back and I mean the idea of this podcast is to have conversations about literature in relation to our current political situation to show how different moments in literary history can illuminate the current moment and also how thinking about politics today can provide a frame into different literary moments. One of our goals is to bring a literary text each conversation onto the table and give something to the listeners in that way. And we're very happy today to be joined by Elaine Treharne. Thanks, Elaine.

Elaine Treharne: Good morning.

Alex: So Elaine is a professor of the humanities and of English here at Stanford and currently also the director of CESTA, which is the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis. I think Elaine occurred to us right away—I feel, Elaine, that you're always very mindful of what it means to think seriously about history, the alterity of the past, the rigors that we need to bring to understanding the past. Medieval literature is the kind of ... It's a limit point of the discipline of English and of the Department of English in terms of confronting questions of time and history.

And at the same time, your work is always about how we can reactivate the past in relation to present and relation to the future. A kind of unusually emphatic mix of holding the past and the contemporary together, insisting on their relationship. All of that feels like it resonates with some of the conversation we're trying to have with this podcast. So thanks for joining us.

Elaine Treharne: It's a great pleasure.

Alex: And we can dive in. Kenny, do you wanna get this started?

Kenny: Yeah. We thought we'd start with some prejudice. I think that a lot of people tend to have pretty negative impressions of the Medieval period and there's this quote from Kingsley Amis's 1954 novel *Lucky Jim* that seemed to sum it up pretty well: "Those who

profess themselves unable to believe in the reality of human progress ought to cheer themselves up as the students under examination had conceivably been cheered up by a short study of the Middle Ages. The hydrogen bomb, the South African government, Chiang Kai-shek, Senator McCarthy himself would then seem a light price to pay for no longer being in the Middle Ages. Have people ever been as nasty, as self-indulgent, as dull, as miserable, as cocksure, as bad at art, as dismally ludicrous, or as wrong, as they'd been in the Middle Ages?"

Elaine Treharne: Fighting words.

Kenny: Indeed.

Elaine Treharne: I mean, Kingsley Amis was there. I think he was trained in Oxford and there was a group of really very well known scholars and poets who went through a system at Oxford where they were forced to participate in Old English in its original and translate it in a way that, at the time, was very mechanistic and had to be literal and you needed to know your declensions and your paradigms. And I think for those who felt themselves to be more creatively inclined, they found it a very dulling experience and that, unfortunately, I think has influenced certainly Kingsley Amis. I think he talked about Old English as like elephant's sputum, in addition to this quotation. And Philip Larkin, was another one who they really did not get on with the topic and that's unfortunate, but also gives us fantastically meaty quotations like this that are so easy to refute.

That really kind of, I think, really deliberately mischievous. So absurd are they to compare the Middle Ages, whatever that would be, with mass destruction through the nuclear bomb or genocidal tendencies or the apartheid of the South African government or the purging of the McCarthy years. The Middle Ages isn't one thing, for a start. It's not just not one thing in Western Europe, which is certainly what Amis means. He's thinking about Western Europe. But it's not one thing when you think of it globally either.

When we talk about the Medieval Period, or the Middle Ages, 500 to 1500 in the West, at a time when Islam arose as a major faith. They were conquering through the Mediterranean and up into Spain. When the Silk Roads were opened to the Far East through China and Afghanistan and people like Marco Polo were traveling and also kinds of imaginative, creative travel writings were produced, many ascribed to people who'd never existed. And really very wonderful fictionalized, but quite exoticizing accounts of other lands.

And then in the West, you've got the split between the western and the eastern church, forming the great religions. One focused on Rome and Jerusalem and the other

focused on Constantinople and then kind of modern day Russia. Through that thousand years there's immense difference as well as tremendous, I suppose, movements that affected whole swaths of society.

I think that you can't talk about it in one way like this. That flattening is preposterous, but actually Amis is kinder to the Middle Ages than even modern very famous literary critics like Stephen Greenblatt have been. In his book *The Swerve* published very recently he talks about the Middle Ages in the same way as Kingsley Amis, but without his tongue in his cheek, which I feel Amis has. Greenblatt does, or tries to do, enormous damage to the Medieval period in his highlighting and foregrounding of what the Renaissance achieved and that in itself caused really tremendous, I suppose, kickback from not just Medievalists, but those who had rather better informed opinions.

He talked about ... This is Greenblatt now, something happened in the Renaissance. He said, "Something happened in the Renaissance, something that surged up against the constraints that centuries had constructed around curiosity, desire, individuality, sustained attention to the material world, and the claims of the body."

So in other words, the Middle Ages were all about constraint against curiosity and desire and individuality. Not only does that stem from a willful ignorance, but it also is quite damaging to the work that Medievalists are doing, which is not simply to be careful literary and linguistic critics, but also to recuperate, through disability studies, how it felt not to be able-bodied in the Middle Ages. Or through really fantastic gender studies to work out that women were, in fact, better off legally pre-1066 than they would ever be again, arguably, I say arguably, until the present day when things are not always that bright either.

I think these sweeping kinds of statements from those who don't work in the period are, as I think I have already proven, easy to counter.

Alex: Well, Elaine, I'm just thinking about the title of your book, *Living Through Conquest*, which I intuitively feel is doing some of that work of reorienting our perspective away from that image of rigidity or constraint or fixity and introducing a whole set of different historical terms and dynamic terms. I'm wondering if you could just talk about that book, the title, in relation to what you were just saying.

Elaine Treharne: Yeah, I think one of the things that I have consistently sought to do since I started out in this field is to talk about not just innovation as centuries unroll, but also continuities. Whereas we do think of the past in terms of alterity and otherness and, in fact, Medievalists use that to their advantage in talking about diversity and coming to

terms with people very different from yourselves, there is no doubt that humans are actually surprisingly unchanging at a kind of perhaps cognitive, but certainly emotional or emotive sense.

In terms of continuities, *Living Through Conquest* I think ... Which came out in 2012, was not the book I set out to write. It was going to be 120,000 words and one of those big books with lots of footnotes and this one was, I think it was 80,000 and a much faster read. And a distillation of 20 years of thinking about what the literature that survives in the post-conquest period in English could have effected in its producers and receivers, which had never ... Has still, has never really been tackled as a topic and what I did in that book was to build in an essential demand that we pay attention to colonial, post-colonial, and de-colonial studies. That we think about -

Alex: At the very origin point.

Elaine Treharne: At the very origin point and also to think about actual trauma through the lens of trauma studies, which I think probably itself emerged out of colonial and post-colonial studies. And, in fact, a few reviews have really not liked that. As if to say, that because this is pre-modern, we cannot take contemporary theory and apply it. But the English were conquered so they were colonized.

Alex: Yeah, what I love about the title is it's so simple and at the same time kind of raises, immediately, these theoretical complexities that sort of flood into this period.

Elaine Treharne: Yeah, and I was always thinking primarily in terms of literary production, not really language itself and not this sense of nationalism 'cause that doesn't really particularly interest me, but it was more about what were the producers of English doing producing those texts at a time when traditional histories would have us believe the English were so suppressed, there was no English literature produced: it was all was crushed by the conquerors and, in fact, that wasn't true. I headed up each chapter with a line from a Rudyard Kipling poem and that was deliberately to problematize the idea of the colonizer, but also to problematize the imperial way in which English historians, both in the 12th century, but also in the 21st century, view this whole era. There's a colonizing of the past.

I think it was, interestingly, Edward Said, who talked about the Medieval period as if it was a colony of the past and yet himself, of course, was the archetypal critic of the colonial enterprise. It was very deliberate and the present participle, specifically, very deliberate because I try to bring the idea of trauma and conquest into a present context of understanding and interpretation. I do stand by it. There are critics of it, but the older I get

and the more my brain is addled or matures, it's one of those, the more convinced I am that that line of approach is valid.

Alex: The question of just your political formation, in general, like over the last 30 years ... It feels like there's a deep relationship between a kind of politics and a political consciousness in these scholarly choices. How would you think through that? Your interest in Medieval studies to begin with and then the kind of scholarship you've done in relation to a broad sense of your political identity. On some level it feels like a rude question 'cause it's, in a way, a very personal question, but ...

Elaine Treharne: As long as I can remember, I've been interested in history. My mum's a historian, so our holidays were spent in cathedrals and castles and as long as I can remember I've wanted to study old things and particularly manuscripts or documents. My grandmother gave me a jewelry box and I dug out the cushioned parts of the jewelry box as I was convinced there would be a letter from the 19th century in there. Of course, there was nothing and I ...

Alex: And wrecked the box.

Elaine Treharne: Yeah, I still have it. I still have it. I've always been interested in that. Being Welsh in particular, I've always been conscious of being colonized from the very earliest time that you're in school and intellectually alert, you know that there is a tension between the English, abstractly, and the Welsh and you learn these stories of linguistic subjugation and the taking of resource.

There's this very famous story of a place called Tryweryn, which is in northwest Wales and it was a village inhabited with a church and so on. And it was drowned. A reservoir was created of the village, the village is underwater, in order to supply water for Liverpool, in England. Very near to my mum's house, just south of Aberystwyth is the broken down wall of a farmhouse and since the 1960s, there's been a piece of graffiti, which has been written and rewritten and rewritten to keep it fresh. It says, "Cofiwch Dryweryn." Remember Tryweryn. This is a part of the nationalistic movement of Wales in the 1960s, 70s, and into the early 80s, trying to reclaim something of the language and custom, but also a sense of national pride.

I grew up with that and then I ended up working on the very people who originally subjugated my people, the Anglo-Saxons, and pushed the Celts to the western fringes of the country and subsequently went on through the next millennium to plunder all the natural resources. But when the English themselves get conquered, I'm on the side of the underdog and I think that's partly how I live my academic life and also how I am as

a voter, I suppose. I feel very socialistically-inclined. Very much about social justice and about the role of the underdog, always. Even in a place like Stanford.

So it's of great interest to me to read through a different lens the materials that otherwise can seem at first glance, I think, to be so foreign to us. And actually the trends in the post-conquest period in English are seen also in Welsh literary production in the 12th century because they, too, were colonized by the Normans. And, of course, the Irish, who also were colonized by the Normans. And all three, Anglo-Saxons, Welsh, and Irish went through this phase of being de-humanized, mocked, bestialized, ridiculed, as well as actually forced to build the castles that subsequently physically oppressed their landscape. And, again, growing up with castles, the stone buildings of the Normans, those monumental acts of power, those edifices of power, were part of my entire landscape growing up.

It's fascinating to me how everything comes together in my work, but also in my general sensibility and I think leaving the UK and coming to live in the States 10 years ago has, and they say this is the case, magnified it like a hundred thousand times. When I go home, I talk about the fact that I can feel my ancestors in my feet as I walk the ground. I can feel that I belong, I am rooted, to that place. It's a physical reaction to the fields and the beach and the hillsides and I don't get that anywhere else in the world that I've lived, even longer than I lived in Wales and I think that's fascinating.

Alex: Yeah, it's fascinating to us because in our last conversation with Solmaz Sharif we were talking about when writers decide to become writers and the question of childhood experience and how it drives our scholarly identities and our political identities and it does feel like that question of when do we find our values and how do we find them. It's something that's been reawakened at this moment where we kind of have to search for what the base of our convictions can be to think about the world we're in now.

Elaine Treharne: Kenny's pointed out nationalism. I think what I'm talking about, feeling my ancestors through my feet in my own country, is a kind of benevolent response to space, place, time and this sense of belonging. There is an antithesis of that, of course, which is claims of ownership and who belongs and who has a right to be there. Patrick Geary wrote this book about maybe 12 or 13 years ago. I think it's called *The Myth of Origins*. I think that's right. Effectively, his book emerged out of the Balkan crisis, where he talks about the way that modern day peoples tribalize themselves based on, often, Medieval categories or categorizations that never had any truth in day to day living and cultural exchanges. But how this idea of who it is that we call our own kind of effects even these ideas of what is English, what is it to be French. Despite the fact that you might have been brought up in Britain, you can't be British if you don't look like this.

For Anglo-Saxonists, this is an actual problem right now, this is worth saying, today. We have colleagues in later Medieval periods who say, "You should change your names. You should stop being called Anglo-Saxonists." Because if you look up Anglo-Saxon on the internet, you get either WASP, you know, on the East Coast of America, that kind of description of one's own tribe, in inverted commas. Or you get the English Defence League or other very right-wing, nationalist, alt-fascist, neo-nazi groups who call themselves Anglo-Saxon. Not Anglo-Saxonists, but Anglo-Saxon.

And then, conflate that with the fact that, for scholarship in general, I suspect particularly in early literature, we are predominately white. Predominantly, less so nowadays, but predominately male. And it all kind of ties into a really desperate need, I think, an urgent need for us to articulate our welcome to all scholars. Our desire to talk about equality and diversity, to represent people of color both on our faculty and our staff, but also in our classrooms through the texts we choose to teach. To talk about using the work of wonderful scholars like Rick Godden or Christina Lee, to talk about disability studies in meaningful ways and to bring that to our students so that our students understand that they, too, whoever they are, whatever they do, belong in our classroom.

Alex: H ras the election of Trump ... Is it another version of that moving to the US? It's basically served to intensify those convictions, to intensify that sense of the urgency of those values that you already had, but are now being challenged on a different level and in a different intensity.

Elaine Treharne: Yeah. It's almost like being colonized, isn't it? The shock reaction to that.

Alex: Yeah, a lot of our conversations this year have been about shock. I mean maybe a little less now than in January, but that seemed like the most important affect or emotion initially.

Elaine Treharne: Yeah, it's a sort of shock and then now I worry increasingly there's a complicity because if you're not actively protesting or resisting, either through the things that you teach, the desire to show diversity, the desire to have students understand that a thousand years ago the treatment of a woman would be better than in some states in the US right now. When I say better, I mean more humanely, more fairly, more equally. It's incumbent on us to make clear to students that there are alternatives to what they see governmentally. There are ways to elucidate issues of social justice, of the upholding of the law, of a much more ... I wouldn't call it democratic, but a much more ... A sense of contribution from the community. In these early literatures and I'm thinking pre-1600, how much they have to bring to bear on contemporary situations.

Kenny: One of the phrases that's stuck with me most about the study of literature is the idea that people ... this is by TS Eliot. That people in the 20th century, 21st century, are provincial in time. That people may be very cosmopolitan in place, but they're very provincial in time. People have less of a sense of what it actually meant to be alive, to inhabit the mindset of someone that lived a thousand years ago. When the present gives you a series of shocks and a limited range of options, that actually understanding something about the past gives you a sort of anchoring in other ways of being human and dealing with the world.

Elaine Treharne: Eliot, as in so many instances, Eliot kind of hits the nail on the head. I think if you do not know the kind of long history ... And when I talk long history, for Text Technologies, which is a project that I work on, we're talking 70,000 BCE to the present day. When you don't know something of the long history of human endeavor and experience, you function in a contextless way yourself. You function in a contextless way. You think things are new and haven't happened before. You think something isn't as bad as it was. I think you're not able to get a sense of perspective and a sense of cultural and intellectual, perhaps, aesthetic and perhaps even scientific, or in terms of invention, you're not able to get a sense of the legacy.

That, to my mind, very little is new. You can find patterns in the past. In fact, prior to Brexit in the UK last June, there were warnings of a similarity to some 80 or so years ago. Well, it's a western global scale, or an anglophone global scale. There's this idea that there are patterns in the behaviors of societies. It goes right the way back to the fall of Rome, probably prior to that, too. That society reaches a kind of apex of indulgence and excess and then must necessarily come crashing down, but normally it takes a terrible shock or some kind of invasion to effect that. Perhaps what we see in American government at the moment is this invasion of the non-specialist. The kind of invasiveness of bluster rather than expertise, rather than practice, rather than an appreciation of the craft of politics, or whatever it happens to be in this instance.

I have taught students in the past who could not tell me as teacher what happened in 1930s Europe. Could not tell me, so therefore, couldn't make connections with contemporary resonances with that period. There was a lot of talk post-November the eighth of the emergence of these very far-right parties. So students can't make those connections. A little bit bandwagony now, but I tell you what the humanities does is it allows us all to connect the dots. It allows us to see beyond the trees to the bigger kinds of pictures about human endeavor and human experience. I am absolutely certain that that is essential for our day-to-day well-being, nevermind the future of the choices that we make as groups of people who are able to articulate what we do through the vote. I think

it's essential to give students the broader history of what we've done in the last few thousand years as people on this planet.

Kenny: Well, so, I was going to save this til the end, but--there's a question that I've wanted to ask you for years, but it's almost too big a question to ask. But what do you think that people, in the period that you study, what do you think they had that we lack?

Elaine Treharne: Well, I mean apart from smallpox and the inability to, I don't know, to stop gangrene. It's a brilliant question, Kenny, and it's one that I have thought very deeply about because as a Medievalist, I would want to say things like look at what they had in terms of their literature. Look at the law codes, look at the fairness. It was a system that was monarchical, it was hierarchical, but on the other hand, everyone was looked after in a way that you definitely cannot say is true now in contemporary Western society especially.

We sort of think of Anglo-Saxons perhaps as sort of peasants, unless you were a monk, carrying around turnips, limping because, I don't know, they had a running sore on their leg. Simple-minded, unthinking, unfeeling. And this was actually one of the things that brings me back to *Living Through Conquest*. It was one of the things in my book. I talked about Knut, the Anglo-Scandinavian king of England, 1016 to 1035, who took a load of hostages, which they did in those days. In fact, of course, we still do this on a kind of global scale. Took a load of hostages and then negotiated a deal, so released the hostages at Sandwich in 1016, but before he did that he just thought he'd just make sure everyone knew about Knut so he cut off their ears and their noses.

Now, historians who would read that would be like, "Oh, dear. He cut off their ears and their noses," and that's it. Act of monarchical brutality. But actually imagine those people for their whole lives brutally disfigured, that's if they got past the septicemia and the infection that would perhaps inevitably set in. Brutally disfigured for the rest of their lives, carrying around the mark of the brutality of the age. When you think like that, when you think more sensitively -

Alex: You mean about the survivors.

Elaine Treharne: About the survivors. And less about the obviousness of it and begin to think about what these things meant on the ground in 1016. Then when you start to look at lexis, when you start to read the poems, when you start to look at the homilies and other kinds of texts, you begin to see a whole new world emerge that is not the world of the literary critic, if you like, but is the world of the sensate literary critic, or the sensate historical analyst.

I was just thinking about feelings and there's a lot of sadness, that is true. And this idea of the Monty Python simple-minded, peasant type just is not borne out in the literature or the law codes or the scriptural holy books that were produced or the accounts of the bravery of individual warriors. It is not borne out in the wills of women, in what we know through place names, in what we can see in the extant fabric that's left in Anglo-Saxon England, but also, of course, across the world from these early periods.

Our modern word "bliss" is Old English. Bliss is the word for happiness. Our word for dream has been influenced by "draumr," the Old Norse word, but dream originally mean joy or pleasure. There are many other simplexes, that is these individual nouns or adjectives, but when we get onto the compounds, we have things like "eadlufu," which means the happiness from love. Happiness that you get as a result of love. Or "heahsæl," high happiness, over-happiness, exorbitant happiness.

In fact, there is a word, "ofersælp," which means pleasures that exceed propriety. Too much, that's an excess, an "ofer," obviously bad in a kind of Christian sense, I suppose. And "geoguðmyrð," which means the joy of being young. These kinds of compounds teach us that there is a nuance to the emotive responses of the Anglo-Saxons that we cannot express without a whole phrase in contemporary English. And the words are all familiar to us. They're the same words. "Glíwstól," which is glee-stool, or seat of joy. I have a seat of joy in my office actually where I sit and I do feel joyful. And then on Friday night, "gytesæl," it's the joy of wine pouring.

You can tell something from a subtle and really nuanced and detailed analysis of Anglo-Saxon texts. You can begin to see a culture emerge that is so far away from Stephen Greenblatt or John Cleese. And, actually, much brighter, much lighter. Not on a daily basis necessarily, but the danger of the kind of simpleton peasant model is that you would imagine, and we say this in lecture—Kenny, you've sat through those lectures, where you say mortality rates, especially infant mortality rates were much higher. Life expectation, must shorter than contemporary times, with this idea that somehow we must live forever now. We'll be cryogenically frozen if they can't cure cancer by the time I get it when I'm 82 or whatever.

That idea that we must live forever and that life expectancy was shorter and, oh, tough luck, and they knew that so they didn't really mind. Or I've lost my fourth child in childbirth, nevermind. As if they didn't grieve like humans grieve. As if they didn't feel. And, in fact, lots of the poetry and lots of the lexis was to be as challenged, as sorrowful, as exuberant, as anxious, as bitter, as we are now.

Alex: Yeah, just that idea that there's different language for happiness and that it changes over time. We express our emotions through language and language evolves and

changes and ... It's really striking, that sense of the granularity to how you would express joy.

Elaine Treharne: I like that. I might just go off and do something about that. The granularity of the Anglo-Saxon experience, bringing it down to that. To the finest kind of detail.

Alex: Speaking of happiness.

Kenny: Speaking of happiness, we asked for a particular piece of literature to focus on and we have this poem here, "Wretched."

Elaine Treharne: Which is not the title it's given in editions, including my own anthology, where it's called "Wulf and Eadwacer" or Eadwacer, depending on how you choose to pronounce that. Wulf and Eadwacer is a title given to the poem in the 19th century when all of the editors of this material were very scholarly older men. Often, what would you call them? Gentlemen scholars. In the beginnings of their books they would say, "I would like to thank Ms. Jones and Mrs. Dinglewald for kindly ..." What do you call it? Transcribing?

Alex: Transcribing. Typing.

Elaine Treharne: "Transcribing, editing, and translating this text for me." And then, of course, their name never appears on the book so there's this whole underclass of people bringing this material to the public's attention. It was given the title "Wulf and Eadwacer" and it is regarded as one of the so-called Old English elegies. I have given it the title "Wretched" because I think that is appropriate, but in the manuscript, which is the Exeter Book of Old English Poetry it has no title because no Old English poem survives with its title. There is no title. None of them has a title. Fascinating thing to think about. Titles have such significance on the way that we even walk in through the door of the poem. We see what's on the door through what's given to us as a title.

Alex: And the title's a little bit like what you were just saying about these terms for happiness. It gives a kind of box that you put the text in then. You have a title, it's like ...

Elaine Treharne: And particularly interesting about "Wulf and Eadwacer" as a title is that it's two possibly male antagonists in the poem, but the poem is spoken by a woman, but she's unnamed. But you give the poem the title of the two antagonists so it's even less appropriate I think to reflect what's happening in this very short lament.

Kenny: Would you read it?

Elaine Treharne: Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife.

Willað hy hine aƿecgan gif he on ƿreat cymeð.
Ungelic is us.
Wulf is on iege, Ic on oƿerre.
Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworpen.
Sindon wælreowe weras þær on ige.
Willað hy hine aƿecgan gif he on ƿreat cymeð.
Ungelic is us.
Wulfes Ic mines widlastum wenum dogode
þonne hit wæs renig weder, one Ic reotugu sæt.
þonne mec se beaducafa bogum bilegde:
wæs me wyn to ƿon; wæs me hwæþre eac lað.
Wulf, min Wulf, wena me ƿine
seoce gedydon, ƿine seldcymas,
murnende mod, nales meteliste.
Gehyrest ƿu, Eadwacer? Uncerne earmne hwelp bireð wulf to wuda.
þæt mon eaþe tosliteð ðætte næfre gesomnad wæs, uncer gieedd geador.

For my tribe it's like being given a tribute.
They'll want to consume him if he comes on that crowd.
It's not like that for us.
Wulf's on one island, I'm on the other.
Fast-bound is that island, surrounded by fen.
They are murderous men there on the island.
They'll want to consume him if he comes on that crowd.
That's unlikely for us.
I traced the wide travels of Wulf in my wonderings
when it was rainy weather, and I sat weeping.
Then he, battle-hardened, laid arms about me.
That was pleasure for me; still, there was pain for me too.
Wulf, my Wulf, my wonderings of you
made me sick—your seldom coming,
my mourning mind—not the missing of meals.
Can you hear, Eadwacer? Wulf will carry our wretched whelp to the woods.
That may easily be split apart what was never spliced, the riddle of us both together.

Alex: When you get a translation like this, which seeks to make fluid these sequences of phrases, what you can't see are all of the alternatives from which one could choose. Meaning's obviously dependent on the translator's choices. All listeners or students of this poem need to pull up, there are probably 30 or 40 easily accessible translations of this work, and just look at the differences in the way that people have chosen to explicate what's going on in this text.

Kenny: Were there bits that you struggled with? Dilemmas between words.

Elaine Treharne: There are words ... Line four, "Wulf is on one island, I'm on the other." That's fairly ... Would be very difficult ...

Alex: But that's an important line, too. There are these lines that stand out in that way. They're so emphatic.

Elaine Treharne: Very emphatic. What's really interesting about this poem, and again, I tried to get this in the translation, is that these verse lines are often ... They're end-stopped and that's very unusual with this regularity so it is deeply emphatic, very declarative, an authoritative text. And we tend to think of women's discourse, even women's poetic composition ... And there are really interesting writings on this, of course, by [inaudible] and so on ... As being much less declarative and authoritative. But at the same time as it's declarative and authoritative, it is almost impossible to pin down what is going on here and the other thing that's fascinating about this and why it does resonate with students now is there is no sense of temporality. Well, we know that somebody's on ... There's a present tense.

Alex: He's on one island ...

Elaine Treharne: "And I'm on the other." And, "My wonderings of you have made me sick," so there seems to be a temporal antecedent here. And, "I traced your travels when it was rainy weather." But the thing...the closing, "That may easily be split apart what was never spliced." That's so ultimately ambiguous. We would think of this in terms of its atemporality, its timelessness. It's timelessness within the confines of the poem itself, but also its timelessness in terms of its explication. "Our wretched whelp." It could be Wulf -

Alex: And that's where you get the title. I just realized this.

Elaine Treharne: This is her Wulf, right? This is the person maybe that she is absolutely in love with and he's gonna carry their -

Alex: Child.

Elaine Treharne: Possibly illegitimate child cause it's an affair or some kind of non-prescribed relationship. It's gonna carry the wretched child to the woods. To safety? Except you don't have to have Wulf as a personal name. This could be a wolf. You don't need a definite article or an indefinite article. A wolf will carry our wretched child, in which case that child's presumably had it and is almost a kind of Spartan putting the child

on the hillside type of motif. There's nothing she can do about it. She's done to all the way through this and it's her utterance that gives her power, gives her space, gives her time, gives her presence. And not the things that are being done to her, which is all about being fettered and enclosed and even arms are laid around her.

There's a poem called "The Wife's Lament," which is ... It's not similar, but it has some of the same motifs. It's a heroic poem because we're talking about tributes and crowds and murderous people. At the same time, it's really outside that genre in as much as it's a female speaker and it's a kind of countervailing explication of a system that is cruel. We know that. We come to this material with a set of expectations and a lot of students will think it's gonna be Beowulf and they're all gonna be chopping each other's arms off. And then you're presented with this and I present it always without a title and I just ask the students ... They've looked at it. And it will make you cry if you sit and you go through it with a fine-tooth comb, it could make you cry.

Alex: It does bear a lot of weight.

Elaine Treharne: It does. It is infinitely sad. It insists on your participation because what is happening? Even once you have a multitude of translations, what is happening? The only thing you really know is there's danger, there's cruelty, and there's -

Alex: There's that interiority.

Elaine Treharne: Terrible sadness. Actually, what's interesting about the sadness is it's ineffable because these words do not clarify, do not resolve, so it's ineffable. The other thing that it's about, and this is one of these things about relevance. I think a lot of the time Medievalists get a bit prickly when you say, "Well, how can you demonstrate relevance," because you wouldn't ask the same of Shakespeare. You just wouldn't. Well, I mean, I don't know. There's been a bit of a Shakespearian ... Who was it? Delta and Bank of America.

Alex: Delta and, was it, Bank of America.

Elaine Treharne: Because of Julius Caesar.

Alex: Delta and Bank of America. Those beacons of morality and propriety.

Elaine Treharne: Pulling funding, wasn't it? For some production of Julius Caesar or something. The relevance of this comes from, A, its insistence on your emotive engagement, and, B, the obvious tremendous discord between groups and the outcasting and the possible murder of groups. You don't want to, I don't know, be facile and say, "Oh, you know, she's like a refugee," because she's not like a refugee cause she can't go

anywhere so she's not able to flee. But you can say that this is an explication of somebody's terrible, desperate desperation at being sidelined, imprisoned, outlawed, put over there, in order to stop her presumably having something to do with Wulf or the person who's on another island. That idea of being imprisoned, separated because of difference, because of not complying in some way.

Alex: And it's not just that that's what the poem's about, but you get the sense that the lyricality of it is kind of emerging from that somehow.

Elaine Treharne: Yes, and I think that "Ungelic is us," "it's not like that for us," can be both heartfelt and desperately sad. It can also be an indicator of a resolute refusal to change or a resolute refusal to be like those others. They're obviously ... In that case, it can be read in really engagingly interesting ways, different ways, but our sympathy is with this woman. No matter what she's done. That's the thing. No matter what she did, this is the voice of someone who has been victimized, set aside, and I think that that can be moving. It can be just a reminder of the fact that our emotions and our interiority, as you say, Alex. I think a thousand years to a thousand years ... I can't say it's unchanging, but there's enough for it to be familiar.

Kenny: Yeah, I remember that sort of shock with this where...I have a sense ... people lived a thousand years ago, they lived and they were born and they lived and they died. I think a kind of assumption that whatever happened to them wouldn't be the same as my experience. But there's just something so personal about this.

There's this passage from *The Road to Wigan Pier* by Orwell where he's looking out of a train window and he sees a woman who lives in the slum as he's going past and just makes eye contact for a second. And he says, "It struck me that we are mistaken when we say it isn't the same for them as it would be for us and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. She knew well enough what was happening to her. Understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was." There's just the sense like this was real human pain that you can understand or sympathize with. It's just remarkable that it got set down and that we still have it here to look at.

Elaine Treharne: Yeah, do you know what's really interesting, actually, is we're able to fill in the interpretative space that this poem allows us with our own emotional baggage, if you like. I think if you've ever been isolated or hurt or let down or your family has been really furious with you or something, what you will bring to this poem will be replete with your own experiences. And with so much interpretative space it becomes a very powerful emotional engagement that's demanded. What Orwell's talking about is that imaginative sympathy, right? He imagines that she knew well enough what was happening to her. I think actually reading literature allows us to begin to feel what

others feel because we're asked to participate through the reading of the novel or the poem. It's so important. But on the other hand, what literature like "Wulf and Eadwacer," or "Wretched," does or what Orwell is talking about when he's on the train and sees a woman who lives in the slum of the mining community, what they're talking about is a one-to-one experience.

It's focusing on the individual and when you think about where we are in the world right now when we see bombings on the ... Think about scale. Bombings and children suffering and refugees, little babies being washed up on shore who've tried to get away from conflict and can't be allowed into places. The scale of it desensitizes us. Even though they're individuals, they're part of this much larger kind of horde and I think it desensitizes us. What Old English poetry does, and what Orwell is doing there and what many other texts that we read in English do ... Or other languages, obviously. Is bring us right back to the individual, to the one-on-one. That is what sparks response, is that one-on-one.

You did ask me earlier what we've lost and I don't know that I ... I think I managed to avoid that question, but I do think that we have lost something of a sense of hope that for the Anglo-Saxons was implicit all the time. And that comes with belief and it doesn't matter what you believe in, but the cynicism of the modern world ... I don't feel cynicism when I read Old English and early Medieval texts.

Kenny: What cynicism do you mean?

Elaine Treharne: Cynicism about us as humans. "Oh, we're rubbish, aren't we?" Or, "We can't change that, that guy who's in power. What can I do?" This idea of hope, but also resilience. I know we talked about resistance earlier on. What we see here in this poem and in many other works is this insistence on a one-to-one relationship through her turmoil and her tremendous conflict, both interior and obviously imposed upon her, is a sense of resilience, a sense of wisdom. "They'll consume him if he comes into that crowd." And a sense of acceptance. There's no end to this. This is her fate, if you like. There's no Christian overlay here either, which is unusual. There's no sense of salvation of the termination of this terrible turmoil for her.

When I read Old English, "The Battle of Maldon" or *Beowulf* or any of these texts, I read resilience and even in times of successive conflicts, which we have now, there's an ability to be resolute and to seek to overcome that would do well to emulate.