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**Aspects of Vocabulary in Selected
Old English Riddles**

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MA (Hons) English Language

**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the
Degree of MPhil(R) in English Language**

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Introduction

This project proposes a study of aspects of vocabulary in selected Old English Riddles of The Exeter Book as the new field of interdisciplinary semantics (see Biggam 1997 etc.) offers a major opportunity for reevaluation of these complex texts.

Scholars such as Niles (2006) believe that it is crucial in interpretative works to read texts historically, offering readings from an Anglo-Saxon rather than a modern perspective in order to reconstruct a contemporary world-picture. I shall apply these principles to this project, drawing upon evidence and information supplied by major resources (some of which are only recently available), e.g. the *Thesaurus of Old English* (Roberts and Kay, 2000) the *Historical Thesaurus of English* (Kay [et al.] 2009), the *Toronto Dictionary of Old English* (Cameron, Amos and di Paolo Healey, 2007-) and its accompanying Corpus (di Paolo Healey, 2000).

When discussing her use of interdisciplinary semantics in *Grey in Old English* Biggam says that “the disciplines of linguistic analysis, literary studies, social and economic history, and scientific evidence can all contribute to our understanding of colour statements in text” (Biggam, 1998, 15). Biggam’s methodology in her semantic studies *Blue in Old English* (1997) and *Grey in Old English* (1998) is to use each of these disciplines to study each known occurrence of each appropriate word in order to devise a semantic profile of each lexeme. Biggam’s method effectively demonstrates that, contrary to what was previously believed, the Anglo-Saxons used a varied vocabulary to express both the colour blue and greyness. In this study I undertake a linguistic analysis on certain aspects of vocabulary in selected riddles and use social, economic, historical and scientific evidence to find new readings and solutions.

In this project I study Riddles 4, 8, 44 and 45 of the Exeter Book and following Biggam's example I supplement my argument by making reference to some of the following topics:

Agriculture during the Anglo-Saxon period (*Riddle 4*), the Anglo-Saxon's relationship with birds (*Riddle 8*) and Anglo-Saxon Sexuality (Riddles 44 and 45). I demonstrate that earlier scholarship is often repeated but that an open mind combined with a socio-historic perspective can provide persuasive new readings and solutions to the riddles.

Chapter 1 – A General Discussion on the Exeter Book and Riddles

I am noble, known to rest in the quiet
Keeping of many men, humble and high born.
The plunderers' joy, hauled far from friends,
Rides richly on me, shines signifying power,
Whether I proclaim the grandeur of halls,
The wealth of cities, or the glory of God.
Now wise men love most my strange way
Of offering wisdom to many without voice.
Through the children of earth eagerly seek
To trace my trail, sometimes my tracks are dim
(Williamson, 1982, 154).

Riddle 95, the last riddle in the Exeter Book, is solved by some people as 'riddle'. To others the creature of the riddle is a 'dream', 'the soul', 'the moon' or a 'wandering singer' (Williamson, 1982, 219). Whatever the solution one thing is certain, that the riddles of the Exeter Book are metaphoric treasures that can provide the modern reader a window through which to view aspects of Anglo-Saxon life. Critics have traditionally viewed riddles as a minor genre or in the words of Hegel, "a lower form of art" (Cook, 2006, 125). I however think, like Aristotle that "metaphor begins with deception and ends with the recognition of a deeper truth" (Williamson, 1982, 36). The riddles of the Exeter Book can provide a deeper truth to

the everyday life of the Anglo-Saxons as “thoughtful probing of the milieu and the language, the riddles reveals quirks and moods of the Anglo-Saxons quite unlike anything we find in other poetry” (Mitchell and Robinson, 2007, 244). Before I explore varying aspects of Anglo-Saxon life in Riddles 8, 4, 44 and 45 it is important to first place the riddles of the Exeter Book in a historical context. The following chapter is therefore a general discussion on the riddles and the Exeter Book.

The Exeter Book

The Exeter Book (Exeter Cath.MS.3501) is an anthology of poetry gifted to Exeter Cathedral not later than 1072 by Leofric, bishop of Exeter. It is believed that the book was written about seventy or eighty years before Leofric became bishop, in around 1046 (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, x). Leofric was born and educated in Lotharingia, an area corresponding to parts of present day France, Germany and the Netherlands. Leofric compiled a list of books and objects to be gifted to Exeter Cathedral upon his death. Within this list of donations is a reference to a book which most scholars take to be a reference to the Exeter Book (Muir, 1994, 3). Leofric’s list of donations survives in three copies (two in Old English, one a later Middle English version) which vary slightly from each other. Two of the lists are in Old English. The more recent of the two Old English versions appears in the Exeter Book, folios 1a-2b (Forster, 1933, 10). Forster notes that this list may have wrongly been included within the Exeter Book as this list mentions “this English Gospel Book” and perhaps was instead intended to be part of the Cambridge Gospel Book which was also gifted to Exeter Cathedral by Leofric, and in 1574 was moved to the University of Cambridge (Forster, 1933, 12-14). There is evidence to support this theory: the Cambridge Gospel Book is nearly the exact size of the Exeter Book and the state of folio 8 in the Exeter Book suggests that it was the start of the manuscript

for a long time (Forster, 1933, 12-14). The Exeter Book comprises 131 folios and it appears that there are around seven folios missing.

Each riddle usually begins with a large capital letter (Williamson, 1977, 12) and its end signified by the punctus punctuation mark (Forster, 1933, 60-65). The poems are written in the West-Saxon variety of Old English with elements of Anglian (Forster, 1933, 66). Forster notes that for the period, the language must have seemed archaic to the scribe and it could be assumed that the scribe was copying from an older source which was written either completely or partly in Anglian (Forster, 1933, 66).

It cannot be said with any degree of certainty where the Exeter Book was produced. Flower believed it was produced in a West Country monastery that was not part of any of the main production centres (Flower, 1933, 90). He notes that the Square “a” found throughout the Exeter Book is similar to that found in a charter produced at Crediton in 974 (Flower, 1933, 8). The bishopric seat of Devon and Cornwall was originally based in Crediton before Leofric requested it to be moved to Exeter due to Crediton’s vulnerability to pirate attack (Chambers, 1933, 5). Therefore Leofric may have acquired the Exeter Book at Crediton. Krapp and Dobbie believed this may have been the case (Krapp and Dobbie, xiv) as did Swanton (Swanton, 1974, ii). However this type was found throughout the south of England so cannot be used to prove a place of origin; Connor has instead argued that Exeter was the place of production (Connor, 1993, 33-47). Muir believed that due to the connections to Leofric, either Crediton or Exeter must have been the place of production (Muir, 1994, 3). Butler in 2004 argued that the Exeter Book was produced by a scriptorium based in Glastonbury. Butler bases his argument on Lambeth Palace Library MS 149, another manuscript gifted by Leofric and believed to be from the same scriptorium as the Exeter Book, as the name of St Mary’s has been scratched from

Lambeth MS 149. Butler believes that the St Mary's referred to is situated in Glastonbury. Butler however does admit this claim is based on only circumstantial evidence (Butler, 2004, 181-215). Overall there is not enough evidence to state with any certainty where the Exeter Book was produced.

It appears that a scholar from the 16th century glossed a few lines on folios 9 and 10 of the Exeter Book. This hand is believed to be Laurence Nowell, Dean of Lichfield (d.1576) (Chambers, 1933, 34). The manuscript was not studied again until 1705 when Bishop George Humphries published a book on the manuscript (Chambers, 1933, 34). However it was only later that serious scholarly work was undertaken on the Exeter Book when Nikolai Grundtvig made a transcription of it in 1830, followed by Chambers in 1831-32 and Benjamin Thorpe in 1842. Thorpe's transcription included a translation on the facing pages. Grein produced an edition in 1857-58 using the Thorpe transcription. Chambers, Forster and Flower edited the 1933 facsimile of the Exeter Book which was used by Krapp and Dobbie to produce their edition of the Exeter Book in 1936. Bernard Muir published his edition of the Exeter Book in 1994 after studying the manuscript over a period of years (Muir, 1994, 3-5).

Sources

The Exeter Book contains a range of shorter poems including elegies, Christian poetry and Christian allegories together with some 96 riddles in three distinct groups. It is impossible to say with any certainty who composed the riddles. Scholars once were of the opinion that Cynewulf was the author but that theory has since been debunked (Williamson, 1977, 9).

Within the Exeter Book, Riddles 1-59 lie between *Wulf and Eadwacer* and the *Wife's Lament* in folio 101a-115a. Riddles 30b and 60 appear between *Homiletic* fragment 11 and *The Husband's Message* in folios 122b-123a. Some scholars have questioned whether Riddle 60 may instead constitute the opening lines of *The Husband's Message*. The third group of riddles, 61-95, occurs after *The Ruin* and the end of the book between folios 124b-130b. There is a folio missing between *Riddle 40* and *Riddle 41* (between folios 111 and 112). This would suggest that there are riddles missing thus supporting the theory that the riddles of the Exeter Book, like the Latin riddles, were intended to comprise of one hundred riddles.

The Latin riddles were well known to the Anglo-Saxons, as the fifth century Latin poet Symphosius greatly influenced the work of Anglo-Latin poets Aldhelm (d. 709), Tatwine (d.734) and Eusebius (d.747). Symphosius composed a set of a hundred riddles with each consisting of an entitled solution and three lines of poetry (Williamson, 1982, 7). Tatwine wrote forty Latin riddles while Eusebius wrote sixty. Aldhelm similarly composed one hundred Latin riddles. Some of the Exeter Book riddles appear to be influenced by these Latin riddles.

Symphosius' riddles 40, 16, 12 and 95 are probably sources for Exeter Book riddles 65, 47, 85 and 86 and *Riddle 4* is probably an analogue to Exeter Book *Riddle 91* (Crossley-Holland, 2008, 100-14). While Symphosius may have been a source for these riddles it is worth noting that structurally the poems are very different as Symphosius' riddles are only three lines long with each line usually being a sentence or independent clause (Williamson, 1977, 24).

Exeter Book *Riddle 40* is a translation of Aldhelm's *Riddle 100, De Creatura* and *Riddle 35* of the Exeter Book is a close translation of Aldhelm's *Riddle 33*. It is

generally accepted that Aldhelm's *Riddle 80* and *Riddle 89* may be analogues for the Old English riddles 63 and 49 (Crossley-Holland, 2008, 99-14). While Aldhelm may have influenced these riddles there is no evidence to suggest that he rendered these particular poems in Old English or in fact if he was the author of the other ninety-three riddles. Their different structure suggests not: the Latin riddles offer their solution at the very beginning and they turn on a single metaphor. In the Old English riddles by contrast, the "I" is unknown and the multiple metaphors are expanded. The values of the heritage Germanic culture are marked and the tone at times echoes elegiac poems such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Williamson says that the Latin riddles "lack the imaginative power which allows the poet to sense, sing and celebrate the nonhuman world around him" but the Old English riddles "are projective plays. They expand the self and inspire the world with lyrical power. They play with mystery" (Williamson, 1982, 8).

Damage to the Riddles

A number of the riddles are defective due to the damage to the manuscript. Major damage is as follows and all but the first are found in the last group in the collection at the end of the Exeter Book.

Riddle 41: the first few lines are missing which suggests that a folio is missing.

The rest of the affected riddles are found in the last group in the collection at the end of the Exeter Book.

Riddle 63: the second half of the riddle is too damaged to edit (folio 125a).

Riddle 67: Lines 3-8 are too damaged to edit (folio 125b).

Riddle 71; the last two lines are too damaged to edit (folio 126a).

Riddle 72: Lines 1-5a too damaged to edit (folio 126a).

Riddle 73: lines 9-21 are damaged (folio 126b).

Riddle 78: only 23 words remain in the eight lines of the riddle.

Riddle 82: Of the original six lines only 4 fragments of lines remain (folio 127b).

Riddle 84: is also badly damaged and lines 11b-20 and 43-56 cannot be edited (folios 128a-128b).

Riddle 88: Lines 1-8 of Riddle 88 are damaged (folio 129a).

Riddle 91: two lines are missing from Riddle 91 (folio 129b).

Riddle 94: is badly damaged (folio 130b).

This damage causes difficulty in the editing of the poems and the subsequent solving of the riddles.

Modern Scholarship and the Old English Riddles

Benjamin Thorpe's edition of the Exeter Book (1842) marked the start of scholarly attention on this set of texts. Franz Dietrich (1859) was one of the first scholars who tried to solve all the riddles and many of his solutions remain unchallenged today.

Craig Williamson produced an edition of the riddles of the Exeter Book with his solutions (1977) and later a book of the riddles in translation (1982). Kevin

Crossley-Holland also produced a book of the riddles in translation complete with solutions (Crossley-Holland, 1978). Scholarly interest remains current, with Niles

proposing new solutions for a number of riddles, arguing that it is important to read the riddles from an Anglo-Saxon perspective and if possible to answer them in Old

English (Niles, 2006, 7). At a June 2009 conference (LOMERS: Studies in the

Exeter Book) Jennifer Neville asserted that too much importance is placed on solving the riddles and that the answer always overshadows the text. She argued that the practice of modern editions presenting solutions along with the riddles means that modern readers read the riddles differently from an Anglo-Saxon; she argues that the solution was not intended to be given as they were not originally in the text. She has an interesting theory that there is actually no limit to the number of possible solutions for each riddle.

Types of Riddles

The riddles are “a metaphoric and metamorphic celebration of life in the eye of the Anglo-Saxon” (Williamson, 1982, 3). As their nature is of an ambiguous nature the purpose of a riddle is to both challenge and deceive. Often the answer is an object that is speaking through prosopopoeia or a creature that takes on the characteristics of another. Prosopopoeia is the imaginative device that allows inanimate objects to have human characteristics and the power of speech. As well as the riddles this device was used to great effect in the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*. Anglo-Saxons would also engrave their swords and jewellery using prosopopoeia, and example of this is the famous King Alfred jewel which says, ‘*Aelfred mec het gewyrcean*,’ ‘Alfred made me.’

Williamson groups the riddles in general into fourteen categories, reproduced here (Williamson, 1982, 19-23):

1. Biomorphic group. In this group the subject is compared to some living thing but it is uncertain whether the creature is a person, animal or plant e.g. *Riddle 87* ‘bellows’, which is described as being alive but it is difficult to say if it is a person, animal or plant.

2. Zoomorphic group. The subject is compared to an animal e.g. *Riddle 31* ‘bagpipes’.
3. Anthropomorphic group. The subject is compared to a person e.g. *Riddle 8* ‘nightingale’.
4. Phytomorphic group. The subject is compared to a plant e.g. *Riddle 71* ‘sword’.
5. Inanimate object group e.g. *Riddle 59* ‘chalice’.
6. Multiple comparison group. The subject is compared to variety of things e.g. *Riddle 24* ‘jay’/ ‘magpie’ which can “bark like a dog, bleat like goat, honk like a goose, shriek like a hawk.”
7. Selected details group e.g. *Riddle 28* ‘ale’.
8. Neck Riddle group. This is a riddle that is told in order to save the life of the teller. As the teller will die if the riddle is solved the riddle can usually only be solved by the teller (Cook, 2006, 119). Taylor invented the term ‘neck riddle’ and says that this type of riddle is not really a true riddle due to the solution requiring secret knowledge that only the teller knows (Taylor, 1951, 1). A true riddle is often defined as one whose question contains enough evidence to be answered (Cooke, 2006, 120). In the riddles of the Exeter Book *Riddle 86* is the only neck riddle solved as ‘the one-eyed seller of garlic.’ This solution is only known as the *Riddle 86* is derived from the Latin riddle by Symphosius.
9. Arithmetical group. The function of the subject is described as an arithmetical puzzle e.g. *Riddle 36*.
10. Family relation group e.g. *Riddle 46* which is about Lot and his family.

11. Cryptomorphic group. In this group the solution is concealed within the riddle e.g. *Riddle 19* which contains runes.

12. Homonymic group. The solution depends on a homonym e.g. *Riddle 92* where the solution Old English boc can mean either 'beech' or 'book'.

13. Erotic group. This constitutes the double-entendre riddles, e.g. *Riddle 44* which has the solution 'key'/'penis', discussed later.

14. Tricky question group. There are no Old English riddles in this category (Williamson, 1982, 19-23).

Solutions

Part of the fun of reading/reciting a riddle is finding a solution. The Exeter Book does not provide solutions to the riddles but over the years commentators have agreed on the following solutions to selected riddles:

Riddle 5 Shield

Riddle 6 Sun

Riddle 7 Swan

Riddle 9 Cuckoo

Riddle 10 Barnacle goose

Riddle 11 Beaker of wine

Riddle 12 Ox and its hide

Riddle 13 Ten chickens

<i>Riddle 14</i>	Ox and its horns
<i>Riddle 16</i>	Anchor
<i>Riddle 20</i>	Sword
<i>Riddle 21</i>	Plow
<i>Riddle 23</i>	Bow
<i>Riddle 24</i>	Magpie
<i>Riddle 25</i>	Onion
<i>Riddle 26</i>	Gospel book
<i>Riddle 27</i>	Mead
<i>Riddle 29</i>	Moon and sun
<i>Riddle 30</i>	A Tree or grove
<i>Riddle 31</i>	Bagpipes
<i>Riddle 32</i>	Merchant ship
<i>Riddle 33</i>	Ice floe
<i>Riddle 34</i>	Rake
<i>Riddle 35</i>	Mail-coat
<i>Riddle 37</i>	Bellows

<i>Riddle 38</i>	Bull calf
<i>Riddle 40</i>	Creation
<i>Riddle 41</i>	Water
<i>Riddle 42</i>	Cock and hen
<i>Riddle 43</i>	Soul and body
<i>Riddle 44</i>	Key and penis
<i>Riddle 45</i>	Dough
<i>Riddle 46</i>	Lot and his family
<i>Riddle 47</i>	Bookworm
<i>Riddle 48</i>	Paten
<i>Riddle 50</i>	Fire
<i>Riddle 51</i>	Quill pen and fingers
<i>Riddle 52</i>	Flail
<i>Riddle 53</i>	Battering-ram
<i>Riddle 54</i>	Butter churn
<i>Riddle 56</i>	Loom
<i>Riddle 58</i>	Well-sweep

<i>Riddle 59</i>	Chalice
<i>Riddle 61</i>	Shirt
<i>Riddle 62</i>	Boring tool
<i>Riddle 63</i>	Glass beaker
<i>Riddle 64</i>	Ship
<i>Riddle 65</i>	Onion
<i>Riddle 66</i>	Creation
<i>Riddle 71</i>	Sword
<i>Riddle 72</i>	Ox
<i>Riddle 73</i>	Spear
<i>Riddle 77</i>	Oyster
<i>Riddle 79</i>	Horn
<i>Riddle 80</i>	Weather vane
<i>Riddle 83</i>	Gold/ore
<i>Riddle 84</i>	Water
<i>Riddle 85</i>	Fish and river
<i>Riddle 86</i>	One-eyed seller of garlic

<i>Riddle 87</i>	Bellows
<i>Riddle 88</i>	Inkwell (made from an antler)
<i>Riddle 91</i>	Key
<i>Riddle 92</i>	Beech tree/book
<i>Riddle 93</i>	Inkwell
<i>Riddle 94</i>	Creation

These solutions are generally agreed upon but this does not necessarily mean they are correct. Many of the agreed solutions were first suggested in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and it appears that later commentators have relied upon this early work. An example of this is the solution for *Riddle 38* ‘bull calf’ which was first suggested by Dietrich in 1859. The accepted solution for *Riddle 5* ‘shield’ was first suggested even earlier in 1835 by Muller who also solved *Riddle 26* as ‘book’. In 1859 Dietrich proposed the solution ‘cuckoo’ for *Riddle 9* and that has been accepted by all editors and scholars. Another solution proposed by Dietrich that is universally accepted is *Riddle 16* ‘anchor’ again proposed in 1859. More examples of Dietrich’s early suggestions that are accepted by most editors and contributors are *Riddle 14* ‘ox and its horn’, *Riddle 21* ‘plough’, *Riddle 24* ‘jay’ or ‘magpie’, *Riddle 31* ‘bagpipe’ and *Riddle 34* ‘rake’. Other early solutions were provided by contributors such as Trautmann (e.g. *Riddle 45* ‘dough’) in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth century. This all would suggest that most editors and contributors of the later twentieth century have relied upon this early work.

While many solutions of the riddles are generally agreed upon, there are still a number of which the commentators dispute the solution. These are:

<i>Riddle 1-3</i>	Storm at sea/ an earthquake/wind (Williamson,1977)	Are they all one riddle? Trautmann (1915), Erhardt- Siebold (1949) Williamson (1977), or 3 separate riddles Mackie (1934) Krapp and Dobbie (1936)?
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<i>Riddle 4</i>	Water bucket: Harleman- Stewart (1981) Millstone: Dietrich: (1859) Flail :Trautmann (1915) Lock :Holthausen (1920) Bell :Tupper (1910) Devil : Heyworth (2007) Plough: Ferri-Cochran (2009)
<i>Riddle 8</i>	Pipe : Dietrich (1859) Wood Pigeon: Dietrich

(1865)

Bell: Trautmann (1894),

Holthausen (1899)

Jay: Tupper (1910), Mackie

(1934), Krapp and Dobbie

(1936), Crossley-Holland

1979)

Chough: Mackie (1933)

Thrush: Young (1942)

Nightingale: Tupper (1910),

Wyatt (1912), Trautmann

(1915), Williamson (1977),

Salvador Bello (1999)

Owl: Williamson (1977)

Riddle 15

Fox: Brett (1927)

Badger: Dietrich (1859)

Hedgehog: Holthausen

(1907))

Riddle 17

Bee skep: Osborn (2005)

Ballista : Dietrich(1859)

Fortress: Dietrich(1864),
Wyatt (1912), Williamson
(1977)

Oven: Trautmann (1915)

Riddle 18

Jug of wine: Williamson
(1977) Leather bottle:
Dietrich (1859)

Riddle 19

Ship: Williamson(1977)
Falconry: Hicketier(1888)

World riddle: Trautmann
(1915),Tupper (1910)

Riddle 22

Ursa Major :Blakely (1958)

Wagon of stars:
Williamson (1977)

Month of December:
Dietrich (1859)

Bridge: Trautmann (1915)

Riddle 28

Ale: Tupper (1910)

Wine-cask: Dietrich (1859)

Harp: Trautmann (1915)

Yew-horn: Williamson

(1977)

Riddle 36

Ship: Trautmann (1915),

Tupper (1910),

Krapp and Dobbie(1936),

Williamson (1977)

A sow with a litter of five

piglets: Dietrich (1859)

Riddle 39

Speech :Williamson (1977)

Time: Trautmann (1915)

Day: Dietrich (1859),

Wyatt (1912)

Moon : Tupper(1910),

Mackie (1934)

Riddle 49

Falcon cage: Dietrich

(1859)

Bookcase: Dietrich (1865),

Tupper (1910), Mackie

(1934)

Riddle 55

Shield :Dietrich (1859)

Scabbard: Dietrich (1865)

Weapon-rack: Liebermann

(1905)

Cross :Tupper (1910)

Riddle 57

Generally agreed to be a
species of bird, but which
species?

Swallows :Dietrich (1859),

Tupper (1910), Williamson

(1977)

Starlings: Dietrich (1865)

Swifts :Trautmann (1915)

Jackdaws :Erhardt-Siebold

	(1947)	
<i>Riddle 60</i>	Reed-pen: Dietrich (1859), Tupper (1910), Wyatt (1912) Mackie (1934) Rune-staff: Trautmann (1915)	Is it part of the <i>Husband's</i> <i>Message</i> : Blackburn (1900), Elliot (1955), Leslie (1968), Kaske (1967), Goldsmith (1975)?
<i>Riddle 67</i>	Bible: Tupper (1910), Mackie (1934), Wyatt (1912), Williamson (1977)	Lines 3-8 are damaged so unable to be translated. This makes finding a solution difficult.
<i>Riddle 68</i>	Ice: Dietrich (1859) Krapp and Dobbie (1936) Iceberg: (Riddle 69 only), Williamson(1977) Petrified wood :Wyatt (1912) Christ walking on the water: Eliason (1949)	Is it part of Riddle 69? (only Thorpe (1842) ,Trautmann (1915) and Krapp and Dobbie (1936) take them as separate riddles)

Riddle 70

Harp :Trautmann (1915)

Lyre: Pope (1974),

Williamson (1977)

A shepherd's pipe:

Dietrich (1859),Tupper

(1910), Wyatt (1912),

Mackie(1934)

Riddle 74

Cuttlefish: Dietrich (1859)

Water: Trautmann (1915)

Siren: Tupper (1910)

Swan: Holthausen (1925)

Ship or ship's figurehead:

Williamson (1977)

Riddle 75

Hound and hind:

Trautmann (1915), Tupper

(1910)

Urine :Williamson (1977)

Riddle 78

Oyster :Trautmann (1915)

Is much damaged so it is

extremely difficult to make

Tupper (1910) sense of it.

Lamprey: Williamson
(1977)

Riddle 82: Crab :Holthausen (1919) Is also much damaged.
Harrow :Williamson (1977)

Riddle 89: Is defective and only twenty
words remain in this ten line
poem.

Riddle 90: Web or loom: Williamson is the only Latin poem in
(1977) the collection and the
solution has been
problematic for editors

Riddle 94 is badly damaged

Creation :Tupper (1910),
Trautmann (1915)

Riddle 95 Riddle: Trautmann(1915)
Moon

:Tupper(1910),Mackie

(1934)

Wandering singer :Dietrich

(1859), Wyatt (1912)

Book: Williamson (1977)

Nearly one third of the riddles have still to be solved successfully so it would it appear scholars have much work still to do.

Cultural Significance of the Exeter Book Riddles

Dorothy Noyes says that riddles in general were often told in times of transition; at harvest, courtship and death (Noyes, 1998, 551-52). Marie Nelson believes that the riddles of the Exeter Book performed a social function as the riddle “provided a structure for the competitive exercise of verbal skills; and within that structure some riddles permitted performers to play aggressive roles sanctioned by the culture of which the game itself was a part, while others presented well thought out responses to destructive forces of the natural world” (Nelson, 1991, 445). She believes that in a fun, safe environment the riddle solver learns to solve the riddles in a verbally aggressive manner and the skills learned in defending himself can be transferred into day-to day life (Nelson, 1991, 445-50). Edward B. Irving, Jr notes that there is a considerable amount of heroic imagery specific to Germanic culture found in the riddles. He proposes that they “occasionally furnish some authentic experience possibly not considered worthy of more serious treatment, expressed in facetious ‘play’ mode and therefore safely”(Irving, Jr, 1994, 199). He goes on to observe that

the riddles may have been a mode of discussing certain aspects of Anglo-Saxon life. An example he gives is *Riddle 15* where the fox/badger is being hunted by dogs. This riddle, he argues, conveys the experience of many normal Anglo-Saxons during wartime, and the fear they would have felt when cornered by an enemy and trying desperately to save their children from being killed by the enemy (Irving, Jr, 1994, 202-203). The riddle is therefore not about an animal but about people “driven to act like animals and how they would feel” (Irving, Jr, 1994, 204) when attacked by a marauder. Other heroic imagery is contained in *Riddles 1-3*, *Riddle 20*, *Riddle 23* and *Riddle 53* (Irving, Jr, 1994, 204-207).

The word riddle originates from the Old English *raedels* which means ‘council’, ‘opinion’, ‘conjecture’, ‘discussion’, ‘imagination’ as well as ‘enigma’ and ‘riddle’ (BT). Therefore riddles may have been used to educate. Latin was the language of the learned especially within the church and outside of these circles Latin would not have been widely known. So it was the vernacular that most people would have used. The poetry and the riddles would have been transmitted orally and it is possible that they were used as a tool to remind people of their origins and culture. Patrizia Lendinara says that along with the gnomic poetry and charms, the riddles are wisdom poetry (Lendinara, 2005, 267). They are however each very different.

“Riddles ask questions but proverbs assert. Riddles upset what is usual; proverbs offer conventional wisdom. Riddles can be a game or a contest; proverbs seem to preclude games by coming at once to a conclusion. Riddles like unusual language; proverbs strive for plainness” (Cook, 2006, 124). Frye has said that “the riddle is essentially a charm in reverse for it represents the revolt of the intelligence against the hypnotic power of commanding words” (Frye, 1976, 126).

Mary Carruthers speaks of how in the Middle Ages memory was deemed to be the highest form of intelligence (Carruthers, 1990). In the Anglo-Saxon period memory would also have been prized in a culture before books. Modern culture is visual while the Anglo-Saxon culture was aural. The riddles are short in length so would have been relatively easy to memorize. It can be imagined that they would have been the source of much amusement while people worked together, or gathered with family and friends. Riddles, almost uniquely in the literature of the period, allow the reader to view the everyday life of the Anglo-Saxons. As Wilcox says, “in the love of paradox, in the delight of comic inversions, in the temporary disruption of social order, the riddles hint at a literature of licence and of play that has otherwise been mostly lost in the transmission of a culture from a thousand years ago” (Wilcox, 2005, 58).

Chapter 2

RIDDLE 8, A New Solution

Ic þurh muþ sprece mongum reordum,
wrencum singe, wrixle geneahhe
heafodwoþe, hlude cirme,
healde mine wisan, hleoþre ne miþe,

eald æfensceop, eorlum bringe
blisse in burgum, þonne ic bugendre
stefne styrme; stille on wicum
sittað nigende. Saga hwæt ic hatte,
þe swa scirenige sceawendwisan

hlude onhyrge, hæleþum bodige
wilcumena fela woþe minre.

(Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, 185).

Proposed Solutions

Riddle 8 is found on fol.103a of the *Exeter Book* second in a sequence of four riddles whose proposed solutions are birds.¹ Scholars over the years have suggested many solutions for *Riddle 8* and these are listed below:

<u>Solution</u>	<u>Proposed by</u>
Pipe	Dietrich (1859)

¹ Riddle 7's proposed solution is Swan, Riddle 9's is cuckoo and Riddle 10 can be solved as Barnacle-Goose. Riddle 24 and Riddle 80 can also be solved as a bird. Riddle 24's proposed solution is Jay/Magpie and two of the solutions for Riddle 80 are hawk or Falcon

Wood Pigeon	Dietrich (1865)
Bell	Trautmann (1894), Holthausen (1899)
Jay	Tupper (1910), Mackie (1934), Krapp and Dobbie (1936), Crossley-Holland (1979)
Chough	Mackie (1933)
Thrush	Young (1942)
Nightingale	Tupper (1910), Wyatt (1912), Trautmann (1915), Williamson (1977), Salvador Bello (1996)
Owl	Williamson (1977)

The solutions ‘pipe’, ‘wood pigeon’, ‘bell’ and ‘chough’ are inspired by what appears to be a rune-like mark in the margin just above the text of the riddle on fol.103a. The early German scholars Trautmann (1894), Dietrich (1859) and Holthausen (1899) argued that this mark was the runic symbol for “C” and all of them therefore proposed solutions beginning with that letter. Dietrich first proposed ‘pipe’, Latin *camena* but then emended his solution to ‘wood pigeon’ OE *cuscode*. Trautmann (1894) and Holthausen (1899) both solved the riddle as bell, OE *clugge*. Wyatt questioned this solution, observing that both words for ‘bell’ in OE were feminine, but *eald aefensceop* is masculine in gender, so too must be the solution (Wyatt, 1912, xxxvi). Mackie suggested ‘chough’ OE *ceo* and Tupper supported his solution jay by using the ‘C’ rune and observing that the Latin for jay is *cicuanus catanus*. More recent scholarship has argued that either this rune-like mark relates to the previous riddle (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, 326) or that it is not a runic symbol but

a mark made by a post-medieval reader (Williamson, 1977, 156). Attention to the facsimile shows that the mark probably belongs to *Riddle 7*. Young agrees with Krapp and Dobbie that if the symbol were a title rune then it would be in the middle of the line (Young, 1942, 308) but instead it is an inch to the left of the last two words of *Riddle 7*. It has been suggested the mark represents ‘cen’ as ‘cygnus,’ refers to the swan of *Riddle 7*. However it does not look like a standard ‘cen’ rune (Williamson, 1977, 53). It is difficult to say with any certainty therefore that the mark represents a solution. It has also been suggested that the mark could be a roman letter ‘n’ indicating the solution nightingale. However the mark is thin and long it does not look like a typical ‘n’ of the period (Williamson, 1977, 156). There is also no evidence to suggest that the scribe himself was responsible for the mark at all; it could instead have been made by a post-medieval reader who was perhaps trying to indicate the solution. As the symbol is not with any certitude a runic symbol, cannot be attributed to *Riddle 8* and cannot be definitively said to be made by the scribe then any solution based on this runic symbol must be discounted.

A number of scholars including Tupper and Crossley-Holland argue that jay is the solution due to the riddle’s similarity with *Riddle 24* which contains its own solution, *OE ‘higora’, jay or magpie* (Crossley-Holland, 1979, 105-106).

Riddle 24

Ic eom wunderlicu wiht—	wræsne	mine stefne,
hwilum beorce swa hund,	hwilum	blæte swa gat,
hwilum græde swa gos	þone	hwilum gielæle swa hafoc,
hwilum ic onhyrge	haswan	earn,
guðfugles hleoþor,	hwilum	glidan reorde

muþe gemæne,	hwilum mæwes song,
þær ic glado sitte.	G mec nemnað,
swylce E	ond R O fullestef,
H ond I.	Nu ic haten eom
swa þa sieð stafas	sweotule becnaf.

(Mackie, 1934, 114).

Translation

I am a wonderful creature. I vary my voice; sometimes bark like a dog,
 sometimes bleat like a goat, sometimes shriek like a goose,
 sometimes scream like a hawk.

Sometimes I mimic the grey eagle, the cry of that warlike bird,
 sometimes I utter from my mouth the voice of the kite,
 sometimes the song of the sea-mew, where I sit making merry.

I am spelt by G and A and R,

completed by O, H and I.

Now I am named as those six letters clearly signify.

(Mackie, 1934, 115)

Although the creatures of both riddles are described as having many voices and are mimics, OE *onhyng*e, *Riddle 8* (line10) and *Riddle 24* (line 4)the similarity between the poems ends there. The creature of *Riddle 24* also describes the different kinds of voices it imitates and the runic symbols spell out the solution OE *higora*, ‘ jay’ or ‘

magpie' but this does not happen in *Riddle 8*.² There is not enough evidence to support the claim of similarity and therefore a solution which depends on this cannot be taken seriously.

Mackie says that like the creature of *Riddle 8* a jay, sings in a modulated voice but in fact such birds have a screaming voice.³ Tupper emends *sceawendwisan* to *sceawendspraec* from the Latin *scarilitas*, which he translates as scurrilous. Jays are not scurrilous or buffoon-like but are rather shy birds that live in woodlands and are difficult to see.⁴ Yarrell notes that it is only when "it sees a fox or a cat it can produce a scolding outcry" (Yarrell, 1871, 324-325). It therefore seems unlikely that the jay is the bird of *Riddle 8*.

There is considerably more evidence to suggest that the solution may be 'nightingale'. Williamson, Tupper and Trautmann all compare Aldhelm's *De Luscinia*, to *Riddle 8*.

Aldhelm's XXII Nightingale

My glorious voice warbles with various melodies:

I shall never sing my song with a harsh-sounding beak. For all that I

am dusky in colour, yet am not to be scorned for my singing;

Thus I do not cease singing in the face of a frightening future fate:

For winter puts me to flight, but I shall

return as soon as summer comes

² Jackdaws and woodpeckers were also known by the name *higora* (BT)

³ < www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/j/jay > [accessed 30/10/2009]

⁴ < www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/j/jay > [accessed 30/10/2009]

(Lapidge, 1985,74).

Young (1942, 310-11) and Krapp and Dobbie (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, 325) do not believe the similarities are sufficient to argue that *Riddle 8* is meant to be an imitation of *De Luscinia*. There are a few similarities with *Aldhelm's De Luscinia*. Both birds sing with variety, Aldhelm's bird with various melodies and the bird of *Riddle 8* with many voices, *mongum reordum*. Neither bird will cease their singing. However there are no other similarities within the texts so it is difficult to say with any certainty if the poet meant to use *Aldhelm's De Luscinia* as a model for *Riddle 8*.

Both Wyatt and Williamson believe that the poet of *Riddle 8* is punning on the phrase *eald aefensceop*, 'old night singer' (Williamson, 1977, 154) which they compare with the OE compound *nihtegale* 'singer of the night'. The nightingale has a beautiful song, "of high quality, with a succession of high, low and rich notes that few other species can match".⁵ It sings throughout the day and night. However nightingales are secretive and are difficult to observe even when they are singing.⁶ *Riddle 8* suggests that the bird in question is something of a jester performing a buffoon's song, *sceawendwisan*. So while the nightingale serenades with its beautiful song it would not be performing it for everyone to see and it is also difficult to imagine the elegant nightingale as a jester performing a show.

Young proposed instead the solution 'thrush' arguing that the creature of the riddle imitates OE *onhyringe* (Young, 1942, 13). According to Young nightingales can only imitate with difficulty. A thrush however is able to imitate other birds including nightingales; Anglo-Saxons actually confused the two birds (Young, 1942, 13).

Thrushes sing with modulated voices and are able to continue their melody. Young

⁵ www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/n/nightingale [accessed 30/10/2009]

⁶ www.rspb.org/wildlife/birdguide/name/n/nightingale [accessed 30/10/2009]

further argues that thrushes are not shy and live beside the dwellings of people (Young, 1942, 13-14). They sing from “obvious high posts” so could possibly be the bird of the riddle.⁷

Four Cruces

Riddle 8 is difficult to solve due to four cruces, *nigende*, *scirenige*, *sceawendwisan* and *heafodwoþe*. Scholars have interpreted these cruces differently and thus supplied different solutions. As these four words are vital to the understanding of the riddle it is important to look at each word individually. Wyatt, Mackie, Williamson, Young and Salvador Bello all read *nigende* as *hnigende*, the present participle of *hnigan*, ‘bow oneself’, ‘bend’, ‘bow down’. Williamson and Salvador Bello argue that men would revere the song of a nightingale (Williamson, 1977, 157-158). Trautmann and Tupper read *nigende* as *swigende*, silence (Krapp and Dobbie, 136,326).

Opinion has differed on how best to interpret *scirenige* and some controversial suggestions have been made. Wyatt reads *scire cige*; brightly call which might describe the sound of a nightingale (Muir, 1994, 581). Young accepts this reading (Young, 1942, 310). Williamson, Tupper, Mackie, Krapp and Dobbie all read *scirenige* but emend it to *scericge*, ‘actress’, ‘female jester’/ ‘minstrel’ asserting that “this is obviously the proper meaning, whatever the form of the word may be” (Krapp and Dobbie, 326).

Williamson translates *sceawendwisan* as ‘jesting songs’. His nightingale is like an actress who loudly imitates showing (dramatic) songs (Williamson, 1977, 158).

Salvador Bello supports reading (Salvador Bello, 1999, 66). However this does not describe the song of the nightingale. Tupper reads *sceawendwisan* as

⁷ <www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/s/songthrush/videos> [accessed 30/10/2009]

sceawendspreac and believes it is an apt description of a jay, but as stated above this reading is wrong. Mackie translates *sceawendwisan* as habits of a buffoon and he thought that it was an apt description the song of the jay but as stated above this is not true of the jay's behaviour.

The *hapax legomenon* *heahfodwoþ* similarly causes difficulties. Williamson translates it as 'head voice' (a falsetto tone) which could describe a nightingale's register. He admits however that the phrase is first recorded in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* of 1849 and there is no evidence of its earlier use within the language (Williamson, 1977, 156-57). *Heahfodwoþ* could be instead being rendered as 'chief song' and Young favours this translation (Young, 1942, 310). Crossley-Holland offers deathless melodies (Crossley -Holland, 12). These translations could describe the song of pretty much any bird.

I do not think that the riddle will satisfactorily be solved until *nigende*, *scirenige*, *sceawendwisan* and *heahfodwoþe* are elucidated. I believe that some scholars may have relied upon earlier work as translations recur over the years. I have attempted to make a translation of each of the words. I have read *nigende* as *hnigende* like Wyatt, Mackie, Williamson, Young and Salvador Bello as I was unable to find any evidence to suggest a new reading.

There seems no difficulty in reading *scirenige* as an adverb+adjective compound meaning *brightly new*; no emendation is required. In an adverb+adjective compound the adverb is always the first element (Kastovsky, 1992, 374) and *scirenige* follows this pattern. So the first element is *scire* an adverb that means brightly and the second element is the adjective *nige*, new. In most Old English dictionaries *scire* is defined as bright. It would appear that *scire* is used when describing the brightness

of clothes or appearance. The more common element used in compounds associated with brightness is *beorht* and is used to describe the tone or quality of light. Equally bright is *efenbeorht*, radiantly bright is *freabeorht*, *fulbeorht*, *wlitebeorht*, bright as the sun is *sigelbeorht*, heaven bright is *heofonbeorht* and gold-bright is *gold-beorht*. *Torht* is used in compounds that are describing light with nature, i.e. *geartoorht*, spring-bright, *morgentorht*, morning bright, *meretorht*, bright from the sea and *sigeltorht*, as bright as the sun. *Torht* may also be used with compounds that compare the joy of fighting and winning in battle. *Sigetorht* is victoriously radiant, *hildetorht* is shining in battle. *Rudortorht* and *swegltorht* both are used to mean heaven bright and it would be interesting to know if they are used differently from the *beorht* compounds to mean heaven bright. It would appear that *scire* is used in a specific sense when describing brightness. Evidence of this is that *scirwered* means clothed in radiance, *scirham* means clad in bright mail and *scirmaeled* is brightly adorned. *Scirmaeled* is found in line 230 of the poem *Judith*, *scirmaeled swyrd*, when the retainers drew brightly adorned swords from their sheaths (Treharne, 2006, 206). *Scirenige* in *Riddle 8* therefore seems to refer to the bird's appearance, perhaps to the bird's plumage after moulting when its feathers are brightly new.

As Hall I have translated *sceawendwisan* as buffoon's melody. The first element of the compound *sceawendwisan* means buffoon and the Latin gloss that Tupper misrepresented could be used as evidence to support that *sceawend* means buffoon as the Latin *scarilitas* means buffoonery. A rare but attested meaning of *wise* is 'melody', found in *Menologium* (line 70), 'wise *gesingan*' (Dobbie, 1942, 51). This use of *wise* is very rare as *swinsung* is the word that is more commonly used to mean melody. It does not need to be a concern that this usage can only be found once elsewhere. Kastovsky notes that words can be used specifically within poetry and

that poets will use words that are different from everyday language. Words used can be archaic, metonymic or metaphorical (Kastovsky, 1992, 352) so this can make the reading of poems difficult for the reader. This use of words can be seen by three other Old English words that mean melody but are found in only one poetic source: *myrgþe* is found in lines 59 and 74 of *The Rune Poem*, *sweghleopor* is found in line 42 of *The Panther* and *sweglrad* is in line 27 of *The Riming Poem*. The riddles are deliberately enigmatic so the poet could be using very rare words in order for the reader to work harder to find a solution. By using obscure vocabulary the poet is keeping the solution a secret. Kastovsky quotes Schucking who spoke of “thick veils obscuring what is described” in Old English poetry (Kastovsky, 1992, 352) and this seems especially true of the riddles.

Like Williamson I have translated *heafodwoþ* as *head voice* (Williamson, 1977, 156-57). It could also be translated as chief voice but *head voice* implies a certain tone that the reader can imagine. The OED supplies an interesting quotation from 1880. This quotation is from Harte’s *Brigg’s Love story*, “Come here! she cried in a small head voice not unlike a bird’s twitter” . Although a millennium removed from the composition of *Riddle 8*, such a usage emphasises the tone and register of bird song, whereas ‘chief song’ perhaps implies a specific sound or melody.

The Solution

After reviewing the four cruces I arrived at the following translation of *Riddle 8*.

Riddle 8

I speak from my mouth with many voices

I sing with trickery

often change my head voice, loudly cry out

I keep my habit and I do not

refrain from song.

An old evening singer I bring merriment

to men in the dwellings.

When I cry out, they bow down

And sit quiet, reverent in their dwelling.

Say what I am called

who, brightly new

loudly mimics a buffoon's melody

and announces with my voice many welcome things to men.

Most scholars have translated *wrencum* as 'modulation' which signifies the bird's vocal abilities but I have translated it as 'trickery' (BT) as this would highlight the bird's performance. As *sceawendwisan* makes clear, the bird is not just a singer but a performer.

The modifications of these translations made me question the solution. When I first began studying this riddle it appeared to me that most editors and commentators relied heavily on the work of the earlier scholars and the consensus among early scholars was that the creature of the riddle was a bird, the question was which bird?

Initially like most scholars, I thought that the bird in *Riddle 8* was a nightingale.

Like Williamson I had believed that the poet was punning on nightingale with his

eald aefensceop. However the nightingale is a secretive bird so while it can serenade with a beautiful song and men may be reverent to its melody the nightingale is not a performer. It sings while hidden in woodland. It is difficult to imagine this shy bird entertaining with a clever show or even staying close to the homesteads of people. Nightingales are considered elegant birds and so it would be hard to imagine a nightingale performing a buffoon's melody. I discounted jay as the solution as it is also a secretive bird and would not perform its song next to the dwelling of men. I also believe that a song thrush should be discounted as I do not believe the Anglo-Saxons would be reverent to a bird that they ate. The Anglo-Saxons ate many wild birds and caught them in large numbers with nets or by hawking (Hagen, 2006, 142). The bones of song thrushes have been found at Anglo-Saxons sites (Hagen, 2006, 141-42). Yarrow additionally notes that they are "not so gregarious as some other of the species of the genus" (Yarrow, 1871, 264) so which puts in doubt their ability to perform a buffoon's song. If earlier scholars had been able to apply some of the aspects of interdisciplinary semantics to their work they may also have concluded that the creature of the riddle could not be a nightingale, a jay or a song thrush.

I propose instead that the bird in *Riddle 8* is a robin. The robin belongs to the same family (turridae) nightingales and song thrushes. The robin is one of only a few British birds who sing all year round and sing from the top of trees. The tone and register of its song could be described as *heafodwope*, head voice. They are well adapted to poor light so will sing long into the evening so could be described as *eald aefensceop*.⁸ The RSPB report that the birds will sing next to street lights so maybe these birds sang next to men's dwellings. On Radio 3's The Essay broadcast on 1 February 2011, poet Ruth Padel said that there is evidence from the 15th and 16th

⁸< www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/r/robin/index> [accessed 30/10/2009]

century that Robins would live in human's dwellings during the winter months. This mirrors the Scottish robin that sheltered from the harsh winter of 2010/2011 in an Aberdeen Co-op enjoying the company of shoppers.⁹

While robins have a special place in the hearts of the British people they are very territorial and will fight any bird who intrudes on its territory. Even the ancient Greeks commented on this behaviour with Zenodotus' proverb, one bush does not shelter two robins (Lack, 1944, 108-11). Yarrell describes the robin as pugnacious (Yarrell, 1871, 309) and perhaps these many entertaining battles could be viewed as a buffoonery. The robin therefore is entertaining the Anglo-Saxon spectators like a boxer. It has to use all its fighting skills to vanquish the invader and this would be highly entertaining for any spectator. Yarrell's description of the bird has echoes of *Riddle 8*, "the sprightly air of this bird, the full dark eye and the sidelong turn of head, give an appearance of sagacity and inquiry to its character which aided by its confidence, has gained it friends" (Yarrell, 1871, 307). This description of the bird's sagacity and confidence supports the notion that it could perform like a jester and produce a buffoon's melody. An interesting fact is that the robin has two different songs. It has a more subdued song which sounds sad during autumn after it moults. Then in the spring it is more powerful, confident and happy sounding.¹⁰ Perhaps in *Riddle 8* the robin is *scirenige*, brightly new with a fine coat ready to breed and fight off intruders.

Of course, it is not necessarily the case that Anglo-Saxons distinguished between birds in the same manner as we do. It would appear that they did, as even though nightingales, thrushes and female robins could be mistaken for each other, the birds

⁹ < <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-12309169> > [accessed 08/01/2011]

¹⁰ < www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguides/name/r/robin/index > [accessed 30/10/2009]

each had a unique name. The robin was known as a *raedda* or *rudduc* because of its red breast. The Old English words *raedda* and *rudduc* are masculine therefore corresponding to with the gender of *eald afensceop*, so allowing the riddle to be solved in its own language.

It would appear that the Anglo-Saxons did not eat robins as their bone remains have not been found at the excavated Anglo-Saxon sites (Hagan, 2006, 140-43). That is not to say that it is not possible as their tiny bones may have been destroyed over time. However thrush remains have been found and as they are the same size as robins then it can be assumed that if robins were eaten then remains would have been found. The Anglo-Saxons may have thought the robins were special and chose not to eat them. Folklore tells that the robin is a “weather prophet” (Cooper, 1992, 194) and Yarrell writes that people believed that the robin predicted fine weather by its choice of song and stage (Yarrell, 1871, 308). This would be of vital importance to the Anglo-Saxons who depended on the land for sustenance. In Scandinavia the robin was a “form of the storm-cloud bird and sacred to Thor” (Cooper, 1992, 194). The robin is connected to the Promethean legend and it brought fire from the underworld. This is then linked to Christian mythology that the robin took water to the souls in hell and that fire scorched its chest red (Cooper, 1992, 194). Another Christian legend is that the robin tried to take out the nails during the crucifixion and he was stained with Christ’s blood (Cooper, 1992, 194). Ruth Padel said that during the Middle Ages it was taboo to kill a Robin as it would bring bad luck. She also notes that the British robin is more gregarious than the European Robin who is hunted for food in France, Italy and Malta.¹¹ Robins originally lived in dense areas of long grass but British Robins have evolved to live nearer to human habitation as a ready source

11 www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006x3hl> [accessed 04/02/2011]

of food. This would suggest that from earlier than the Anglo-Saxon period the robin was not hunted for food in Britain. The folk rhyme “Who killed cock robin” is believed to have originated in the Late Middle Ages. If the Anglo-Saxons believed that the robin was connected to these myths or perhaps to any myth now long forgotten then they may have treasured these birds and so would not eat them. They are certainly treasured throughout Britain today and have always been associated with Christmas cards and the first Valentine card produced in 1850 depicted a robin postman.¹²

Robins are birds full of lively, confident character that delight us today. They sing different songs with the seasons, they can imitate other birds, they are birds that sing all year round and they are evening singers and bring amusement to men. They like to sing near light so can be found near human habitation, they have a lovely song and because of folklore and legend people are reverent to them. They moult and their red breast changes hue with the seasons, they perform fighting shows against intruders and their song announces if the weather is going to be good. Ruth Padel describes robins as an emblem for warmth and hope.¹³ Perhaps the Anglo-Saxons felt so too and immortalised the robin in Riddle 8. In the words of William Wordsworth (*The Redbreast and the Butterfly*)

ART thou the bird whom Man loves best,

The pious bird with the scarlet breast,

Our little English Robin;

The bird that comes about our doors

¹² <www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006x3h> [accessed 04/02/2011]

¹³ <www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006x3h> [accessed 04/02/2011]

When Autumn-winds are sobbing?

Art thou the Peter of Norway Boors?

Their Thomas in Finland,

And Russia far inland?

The bird, that by some name or other

All men who know thee call their brother,

The darling of children and men?

Chapter 3

Riddle 4

Ic sceal þragbysig þegne minum,
hringan hæfted, hyran georne,
min bed brecan, breahrtme cyþan
þæt me halswriþan hlaford sealde.
Oft mec slæpwerigne secg oðþe meowle
gretan eode; ic him gromheortum
winterceald oncweþe. Wearm lim
gebundenne bæg hwilum bersteð;
se þeah biþ on þonce þegne minum,
medwisum men, me þæt sylfe,
þær wiht wite, ond wordum min
on sped mæge spel gesescgan.

(Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, 183 but with the manuscript reading of *hringan*, line 2).

Riddle 4 has been described as being the “most puzzling riddle in the Exeter Book” (Williamson, 1979, 141). Why does finding a solution prove to be so difficult? The challenge in finding a solution comes from the large number of ambiguous words contained within the riddle: *þragbysig* (line 1), *þegne* (line 1), *halswriþan* (line 4)

and *slæpwerigne* (line 5). To find a solution the solver must decide how best to read each of these words. The difficulties with these words are as follows:

1) The *hapax legomenon* compound *pragbysig* (line 1) has been translated variously as ‘occupied for a time’ (B-T), ‘perpetually’ (Bright) and ‘long busy’ (Clark Hall). Most editors accept B-T’s definition as *prag* usually means a ‘space of time,’ ‘course of time,’ ‘season’. The definition of *bysig* in the DOE is ‘active, occupied, busy’. Heyworth notes that *bysig* is found only six times in the poetic corpus and that in each time it is used, it denotes the subject being intensely busy (Heyworth, 2007, 177).

2) *þegne* (line 1) can be translated either as servant or master. All solvers have taken the *þegne* from line 1 to be the same person as the *hlaford* in line 4 (Ferri-Cochran, 305). A thane was in the Anglo-Saxon period, both a nobleman and a servant of the king (B-T). Any free man could become a thane as long as he possessed five hides of his own land, a church, a kitchen, and a bell-house, a judicial seat at the burgh-gate and a seat in the *witena gemot* (B-T). So the thane would be master/lord of his own land but also the servant of the king. B-T defines *hlaford* as a lord and a nourisher. The thane could be said to be both lord and nourisher, as it is his land/animals that feeds his family and servants.

3) *Halswriþan* (line 4) is another *hapax legomenon*, a N+N compound which probably means ‘neck collar’, or ‘neck ring’ from its constituent elements *hals* ‘neck’ and *wriþa*, defined as ‘band, thong, rein or bridle’ (B-T).

4) The riddles final *hapax legomenon*, *slæpwerigne* (line 5) has two potential meanings, either ‘weary for sleep’ or ‘weary with sleep’ (B-T). Williamson notes

that if *þragbysig* (line 1) means ‘perpetually busy’ then the creature of the riddle would be ‘weary for sleep’ (Williamson, 1977, 144).

It is not just these words that make the riddle so ambiguous but also:

5) The poem features what appears to be a number of references to rings: *hringan hæfted* (line 2), *halswriþan* (line 4) and *bæg* (line 8) and the reader has to decide if the riddle is speaking about the same ring or if each is a separate unit. The phrase *hringan hæfted* (line 2) can itself mean a number of things. It can mean ‘bound with rings’, ‘bound by treasure’ or ‘condemned with fetters’ (Heyworth, 2007, 80).

6) What is the *bed* (line 3) that is broken? Is it an actual bed for sleeping on or is it something metaphorical?

7) *Breahtme* (line 3) is also ambiguous. Williamson thinks that it could mean “with a clamour, noisily or instantly occurs” (Williamson, 1977,144) The DOE records that *breahtme* is a noun found 27 times in poetry and defines it as “a sound, loud noise, cry, clamour, acclaim” (DOE).

8)The riddle’s ending adds to the ambiguity as it ends rather differently from the usual riddle endings of ‘*saga hwaet ic hatte*’. Is this significant to the solving of the riddle?

Riddle 4 has been solved as:

Tupper: bell (1910).

Bradley: dead man called from the grave to wear the oracle collar (1911).

Wyatt: unsolved (1912).

Trautmann: flail (1915).

Holthausen: lock. Holthausen later changed his solution to hand mill (1920).

K Mackie: unsolved (1934).

Krapp and Dobbie: unsolved (1932).

Erhardt-Siebold: hand mill (1946).

Shook: *feder* or *penna* (1974).

Williamson: unsolved (1977).

Crossley: Holland-Bell 1979).

Harleman-Stewart: water bucket (1981) Discussed below.

Niles: water bucket (2006).

Heyworth: the devil (2007) Discussed below.

Ferri-Cochran: a plough team (2009) Discussed below.

Though many have left the riddle unsolved due to all the reasons of ambiguity stated above, a number of scholars have given a solution, some with more success than others.

I agree with Williamson that Bradley's 'necromancer' solution is "more like an outwitted riddle-solver's cry in the dark than a plausible solution" (Williamson, 1977, 142-43). Again I agree with Williamson that Shook's solution of *penna* is illogical. Shook argues that the 'ring' within the riddle is the nib of the *penna*, which is wound about with thread. He goes onto say that the breaking of the 'ring' is the breaking of the thread although if his solution were correct it would be the ring thread which has broken. Williamson points out that Shook also reads *hringan*

haefted wrongly as ‘noise when taken up’ and reads *bed* out of context as ‘prayer’ (Williamson, 1977, 142).

Tupper’s suggested solution bell is much more plausible than either Bradley’s or Shook’s. Tupper suggested that the ring is the band which ties the clapper to the bell or is perhaps the actual clapper itself. However this solution is not generally accepted and I have rejected it as a probable solution the bell.

Trautmann suggested solution of the riddle is ‘flail’. A flail was an instrument the Anglo-Saxons used for threshing corn and as a weapon. Unlike a modern flail which has metal chains connecting the various parts, the caplets of an Anglo-Saxon flail would have been made of leather, thus reducing the possibility of the flail tangling during use. The Anglo-Saxon flail was made up of a hand staff for the thresher to hold, a *swiple* that strikes the corn, the leather caplets at the top of both the hand staff and the *swiple* and the middle band (a leather thong) which joins the hand staff to the *swiple*. The problem with this solution is the curious description of the flail as *slæpwerig* or indeed, *winterceald* as wheat would not be threshed during the wintertime. For this reason this solution must be rejected.

The problem with the solution of ‘hand-mill’ (Holthausen and Erhardt-Siebold) comes from the reference to the many rings in the riddle. Erhardt-Siebold says that this problem can be solved if we take the many sockets found on the hand mill to be the rings described within the riddle (Erhardt-Siebold, 1946, 620- 23). Hand-mills were very important to the Anglo-Saxons and their grain production (Erhardt-Siebold, 1946, 620). However, as Erhardt-Siebold herself says while fragments of millstones have been found by archaeologists we do not know what the actual hand mills looked like because vital components, made from wood, have perished

(Erhardt-Siebold, 1946, 623). Her diagram of the hand mill is therefore almost entirely reconstructed. Erhardt- Siebold bases her solution on a theory that Riddle 4 is describing a technological advance of the hand-mill during the Anglo-Saxon period but there is no archaeological evidence to prove that any such innovations took place. There are other problems with the hand mill solution, including, once again, the description of it as *slæpwerig* is apposite? I do not believe there is sufficient evidence either archaeological or within the language of the riddle itself to support hand mill as the solution.

The previous chapter on *Riddle 8* showed that most editors accepted the solutions of ‘jay’ or ‘nightingale’ that was put forward by the scholars from the first half of the twentieth century. Recent commentators of *Riddle 4* however have used aspects of interdisciplinary semantics for example, the study of archaeology, theology and agriculture to find new and innovative solutions to the riddle. The following solutions therefore require further consideration:

Water-bucket- Ann Harleman-Stewart (1981)

In solving the riddle Harleman-Stewart deals with the ambiguities of *Riddle 4* in the following way:

1-*Pegne* (line 1): both servant and master. The servant of the house is the master of the bucket.

2-*Pragbysig* (line 1): busy with the season. Compounds with *bysig* normally have something to do with being busy.

3-*Halswriþan* (line 4): neck wreath. This is the ice which has formed over the top of the water.

4-*Slæpwerigne* (line 5): sleep weary. The servant has just woken and is tired.

5-*Hringum hæfted* (line 2): bound with rings. Harleman-Stewart says that the bucket is fettered by iron hoops.

6-*Bæg* (line 8): a collar, which again is the ice over the top of the water surface.

7-*Bed* (line 3): the ice

8-*Lim* (line 7): limb (arm or branch) that breaks the ice

9-*Breahtme* (line 3): the ice is broken noisily by the servant.

Harleman-Stewart's *Riddle 4* describes a water bucket that has been left out overnight and the water inside has frozen on the top. First thing in the morning a servant wakes and breaks this icy coating with a stick. As Harleman-Stewart notes the Anglo Saxons would have used stave-built wooden buckets to carry and hold water (Harleman-Stewart, 1981, 54). These buckets would be made of wooden staves that were bound by four wooden hoops, which were secured by two vertical metal bands. A metal handle was attached to the top hoop. Such buckets have been found in Anglo-Saxon graves. Harleman-Stewart does admit that we do not know exactly how Anglo-Saxons used water domestically but makes the assumption that they were probably used in a similar manner to the Vikings who used water to boil food and for washing (Harleman-Stewart, 1981, 54).

Harleman-Stewart observes that in solving the riddle and by exploiting the ambiguities, "the double meaning is transformed from mere ambiguity to paradox. Thus the ambiguity is rendered functional, both meanings contributing to the picture that is gradually being built up of the riddle's referent" (Harleman-Stewart, 1981, 57). Therefore Harleman-Stewart asks "What can be broken by both an arm and a

branch, what can be approached by someone who is both servant and master?”
(Harleman-Stewart, 1981, 57-58). She does not decide on which of the number of
meaning of the ambiguous words applies best applies to the riddle; instead she uses a
variety of possible meanings simultaneously in trying to find the solution.

Harleman-Stewart also draws attention to elegiac echoes in *Riddle 4*, comparing it
with poems such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* with their images of winter,
coldness, water, ice and early morning. Like the speaker of *Riddle 4* the wanderer
and the seafarer are bound and fettered (though theirs is due to their mental state, not
their physical state). This genre crossing imagery is therefore a common theme of
Anglo-Saxon culture.

The devil-Melanie Heyworth (2007)

In solving the riddle Heyworth deals with the ambiguities of *Riddle 4* in the
following ways:

1-*Pegne* (line 1): servant-master (Satan)

2-*Pragbysig* (line 1): long-busy

3-*Halswriþan* (line 4): neck ring

4-*Slæpwerigne* (line 5): sleep-weary

5- *Hringum hæfted* (line 2): bound with rings. Heyworth believes both the narrator
and his Satan master are fettered.

6-*Bæg* (line 8): collar

7-*Bed* (line 3): bed (sleeping place)

8-*Lim* (line 7): a limb

9-*Gromheortum* (line 6): hostile ones

Heyworth's *Riddle 4* is about a devil eternally busy following his servant-master Satan. To Heyworth this implies a "perverted hell, an inversion of the ideal social order" (Heyworth, 2007, 190). This devil and his servant master are both bound by fetters. Her reading of the riddle gets very complicated after this and it is here that her argument breaks down. She believes that the riddle narrator has broken his peace with God and is serving a condemned servant-master. The devils' work is never done and is *winterceald*, of ill-omen. She says that the *wearm lim* is a metaphoric description of the devil breaking his moral obligations to God. She says that the *lim* may refer to a penis so the devil here breaks his obligation to God by way of sexual transgressions and the violation of marriage. There seems no evidence within *Riddle 4* to support this. Heyworth is also of the opinion that the closing lines have two separate meanings, one for the solver and one for the devil narrator. The duality of the closing lines is to remind the solver to conduct penitential service to eradicate the devil within; he will also be able to tell that the riddle was a false tale used by the devil to tempt. For Heyworth the solver is like Juliana, and confirms his/her faith by being undeceived by the devil-narrator. If the riddle has been solved wrongly then the solver is like Eve and has been fooled by the devil (Heyworth, 2007, 190).

I am unconvinced that *Riddle 4* is about a devil. In Anglo-Saxon literary works the devil is largely only found in ecclesiastical works (Dendle, 2001, 12) and although the riddles were copied in a monastic environment they are not generally regarded as being an ecclesiastical text. There are no mentions of the devil in secular laws and while the devil is mentioned in charms and in medical records this is a different devil

than the devil that features in hagiography (Dendle, 2001, 13-14). The devil of the charms appears “simply as a malicious natural force, which has assailed the unlucky rather than the morally guilty, and which may be repelled through a precise application of herbal and liturgical remedies” (Dendle, 2001.13). It is my opinion that Heyworth is looking too deeply into the riddle and finding metaphors which are not actually present.

Plough team- Shannon Ferri-Cochran (2009)

In solving the riddle Ferri-Cochran deals with the ambiguities of *Riddle 4* in the following ways:

1-*Pegne* (line 1): Unlike most scholars Ferri-Cochran reads this as servant and is a separate person to the *hlaford* of line 4. However she reads this *hlaford* (line 4) to be the same *hlaford* found in *Riddle 21*. The solution of *Riddle 21* is generally accepted as ‘plough’ and the *hlaford* is generally thought to be the ploughman.

2-*Pragbysig* (line 1): ‘routinely busy’, describing the plough team’s seasonal work patterns.

3-*Halswriþan* (line 4): the yoke.

4-*Slæpwerigne* (line 5): the ox after ploughing would be weary for sleep or as she thinks is weary for more sleep after being woken in the morning.

5-*Hæfted hringum* (line 2): bound to rings. Ferri-Cochran notes that this mirrors the bound ox of *Riddle 72* (generally solved as ox) (Ferri-Cochran, 2009, 304).

6-*Bæg* (line 8): wheel of the plough. As above Ferri-Cochran notes the mirroring of this word in *Riddle 72* (Ferri-Cochran, 2009, 304).

7-*Bed* (line 3): this is the earth the plough will break. One of the definitions for *bed* is bed in a garden (BT) and Ferri-Cochran takes this to be the soil in the field.

8-*Winterceald* (line 7): describes the time of year when the animal is woken.

9-*Lim* (line 7): Ferri-Cochran reads this with a long vowel thus reading the word as the heavy or wet soil which breaks the plough. However Ferri-Cochran acknowledges that the long vowel changes the metre of the line.

In Ferri-Cochran's *Riddle 4* the oxen are woken by a boy and they are bound to a plough. It is winter time and the plough team are about to do the first ploughing of the year. The plough team is led by the ploughman but the plough wheel is broken by the earth. The boy is happy as he can rest while the ploughman repairs the plough. The oxen are happy to be freed from the yoke while the plough is being repaired.

My translation

Long busy I am fettered with rings,

I must gladly obey my master, break my bed and loudly proclaim
when my master gives me a neck collar.

Often a man or woman has called on me when I am sleep weary;
winter cold I answer them, the fierce-hearted ones.

Sometimes a warm limb breaks the bound ring on me,
it is pleasing to my master, a dull man, and also to myself, if I know anything and
can in words successfully tell my story.

My solution is ox pulling a plough

Unlike Ferri-Cochran I believe that the solution is only one ox who is relating how it feels to be woken on a cold winter morning to be made ready for ploughing. The neck collar is the yoke to which the plough is attached with the various ‘rings’ being the means by which the animal is fettered to the yoke while the *bæg* (line 8) is the plough wheel. Ferri-Cochran argues that both the servant and the ox are happy to get a rest when the plough is broken by the mud. I however think that the warm *lim* (line 7) is the arm used by the ploughman/household servant to remove the plough and the yoke after the ploughing is complete. Both are happy that it is the end of the day and work is finished.

I have interpreted each of the problematic words in the following way:

1-*Pegne* (line 1): master. I have read this to be the same person as *hlaford* in line 4.

Like Ferri-Cochran I think this metaphorical use of *hlaford* mirrors *Riddle 21*.

However the master at the end may represent the boy who helps the ploughman to goad the oxen.

2-*Pragbysig* (line 1): long-busy. I have agreed with Heyworth that this *hapax legomenon* indicates intense busyness with *prag* intensifying *bysig*. In my reading the ox is continually occupied with the activity of ploughing.

3-*Halswriþan* (line 4): ‘neck collar’. The yoke by which the ox is attached to the plough

4-*Slæpwerigne* (line 5): ‘weary with sleep’. The ox is tired as he has just been woken up. I have used this translation but it could equally be ‘weary for sleep’ if the ox is occupied with ploughing. As Harleman-Stewart suggests, the ambiguities of the meaning can be exploited to find the correct solution.

5 *Hringan hæfted* (line 2): ‘fettered with rings’. This is both the neck collar/yoke and the wheel of the plough that the yoke/ox is attached to.

6-*Bæg* (line 8): wheel of the plough.

7-*Bed* (line 3): the ox’s sleeping area. The DOE translates *min bed breccan* (line 3) as either ‘to break my bed’ or leave my resting place’. I do however, believe that the poet is playing with the ambiguities of this word as *bed* can also mean ‘bed for plants’, ‘garden plot’ (DOE) which could be the field which is being ploughed. Maybe the poet intended this word to be used polysemously and both meanings contribute to the solution. What leaves its sleeping place and also breaks the garden plot? An ox.

8-*Winterceald* (line 7): the ox is cold as it is a winter’s morning

9-*Lim* (line 7): arm. It is certainly the case that Anglo-Saxons were known to add lime to second and third grade land to improve its quality. However it may not be necessary to read as Ferri-Cochrane if one assumes, as I do, that the *lim* is the arm removing the yoke.

10- I did initially have a problem with *gromheortum* (line 6). The DOE notes that this compound ‘fierce in heart’ is found within the corpus on five other occasions; disproportionately in poetry including *Riddle 4*, once in *Beowulf* to describe Grendel and once in *Guthlac A* to describe the *gromheorte* devils that torment Guthlac. I think however it could describe the person who goads the oxen on who needs to be fierce in heart to ensure that the work is completed on time.

The Plough

The Anglo-Saxons would have composed a riddle about the plough as it was a vital agricultural implement and during the Anglo-Saxon period it was instrumental in changing farming methods and areas of habitation.

The Belgic plough was a technological advance that was ideal for the heavy forest soils of southern Germany, Denmark and Northern France. It was probably used on some of the Roman Britain villas but its extensive use only came after the Anglo-Saxons settled in Britain (Prothero, 1937, xxxvi). This Belgic plough was larger than both the Celtic and Roman ploughs. The new Anglo-Saxons preferred to settle in the valleys and the heavier Belgic Plough was ideal to plough the denser soil. The Belgic Plough led to the agricultural advancement of the Anglo-Saxon age, the 'three-field' management system. Under this system crops "followed each other in regular sequence broken by equally regular periods of rest or fallow" (Postan, 1972, 55). Under the three field system one field would be left fallow while the other two would be used to grow winter and then spring crops. The more valuable winter crops were always grown on the land that had previously been fallow while spring crops were grown in the field that had grown the winter crop (Postan, 1972, 55). This cropping change meant that the Anglo-Saxons could substitute wheat for rye as the main winter crop (Postan, 1972, 56). Archaeological evidence from a site at Staunch Meadow, Brandon shows that the Anglo Saxons grew rye, barley, wheat, oats and flax which would have grown in ploughed fields,(Murphy, 1994,35-37). Place name evidence show how essential these crops were to the Anglo-Saxons. The Old English word for barley was *bere* and so the place name Berwick (Northumberland) refers to the cultivation of barley and Whaddon (Cambridge shire) refers to a wheat hill as *hwaete* was OE for wheat (Hooke, 1998, 132). Archaeological evidence shows that

there was continuous land cultivation by the Anglo-Saxons and the plough would have been vital to this. Charters from the Midlands refer to wheat, barley, rye, oats and beans and peas. Oxen were essential to the cultivation of the land and there is place name evidence to describe the sites where oxen were kept e.g. Oxcombe (Lincolnshire), Oxendon (Northamptonshire) and Oxenhall (Shropshire) (Hooke, 1998, 134).

The plough was made up of a share, a coulter, a mouldboard and a wheel. This plough was then attached to a plough team of up to eight oxen (Prothero, 1937, xxxvi). The Germanic settlers also introduced a new method of harnessing the animals to the plough as the Roman method, which affixed a collar to the animal's neck was considered highly inefficient (Postan, 1972, 51). This new harness hitched the animals to the plough by means of a shoulder yoke which was linked to the plough by traces tied to a whipple tree (Postan, 1972, 51).

The plough cycle was usually as follows:

After harvest the fallow had to be ploughed and manure spread.

Winter corn was then sown.

In another field the fallow had to then be ploughed for the spring corn followed by the ploughing in the barley stubble once the animals were moved away from it.

During the winter, ploughing was started again on Plough Monday (the first Monday after Epiphany) as the spring corn land had to be ploughed again.

In March or April the spring corn was sown.

In summer hay had to be made, the corn crops reaped and beans and peas harvested.

The fields then had to be ploughed again in preparation for the next cycle (Prothero, 1937, xliii-xliv).

I believe that the ox in the riddle has been woken during winter, perhaps on Plough Monday, and is then attached to a Belgic plough. The ploughing cycle would have been well known to the Anglo-Saxons who would have understood why the ox had been woken up on an old winter morning ready to work. *Riddle 4* recalls Aelfric's description of a ploughman:

I work hard; I go out at daybreak, driving the oxen to the field, and I yoke them to the plough. Be it never so stark winter I dare not linger at home for fear of my lord: but having yoked my oxen, and fastened share and coulter, every day I must plough a full acre or more. I have a boy driving the oxen with a goad-iron, who is hoarse with cold and shouting.

(Aelfric, *Colloquium*, pp. 19-20; trans. Hooke, 1998, 134).

Both narratives are set in the winter time, both describe the fettering of the oxen and both describe the ploughing of the field. Both describe the goading of the animal and the hard work involved. *Riddle 4* is uniquely couched from the animal's perspective.

As discussed above Ferri-Cochran has provided the most compelling solution for *Riddle 4* and I have expanded on her findings to argue that the riddle is solved as an ox pulling a plough. The ploughman was an important man during the Anglo-Saxon period as in Aelfric's words, "the ploughman feeds us all" (Aelfric, *Colloquium*, 115) and as shown above the ox and the plough were essential to the advancement of Anglo-Saxon arable farming techniques.

Chapter 4

Anglo-Saxon Sexuality and the Double Entendre Riddles

The double entendre riddles of the Exeter Book are riddles 25, 44, 45, 54, 61, 62, 63, 87 and possibly 12. They are all written in a variety of styles but they can all be solved with a sexual solution. Why then were they included in an anthology compiled by monks and does their inclusion in the Exeter Book give clues to Anglo-Saxons attitudes to sexuality? The first part of this chapter will try to discuss these questions by studying the social and literary evidence available. The second part of the chapter will study aspects of vocabulary in two double entendre riddles in order to try to understand Anglo-Saxon attitudes to sexuality and also to also find new solutions to the riddles.

To understand why these riddles were included in the collection it is important to understand Anglo-Saxon attitudes to sexuality. This is more difficult than it would first appear as Anglo-Saxon literature seldom explicitly makes reference to sexual activities. The best source of information on Anglo-Saxon sexual behaviour is the Anglo Saxon Laws and the Penitentials. They however only give a small snapshot of Anglo-Saxon attitudes to sex. There is also the problem of early modern and Victorian scholars who found the language of the Penitentials obscene and thus ignored certain passages during translation or edited the language so that it was acceptable to the audience (Janes, 2008, 34-37). As Bridbury has said, “ historians are more than usually tempted to manipulate such evidence to suit their predilections” (Bridbury, 1992, 48). An example Janes gives of this type of editing is the use of Latin terms to describe certain sexual practices e.g. femoral intercourse (Janes, 2008, 35). Some scholars such as McNeill and Gamer simply referred to any

same sex sexual activity by the expression, homosexual practices. Jane however states that the term 'homosexual' was "a creation of later nineteenth-century thought" (Jane, 2008, 35). Therefore if the text has not been translated accurately we cannot fully understand Anglo-Saxon sexuality. Allen J. Frantzen has undertaken much work on the study of the Penitentials and it is his work that I rely upon in the following discussion of the Anglo-Saxon Laws and Penitentials.

The Anglo-Saxon Laws mainly deal with marriage and adultery. This is due to the fact that adultery was deemed to be a crime against property as a woman was firstly the property of her father and then after marriage her husband. With regards to inheritance it is vital that an Anglo-Saxon man knew that the offspring he produced with his wife was indeed his biological child as he did not want to leave his property/wealth to another man's child. It was deemed necessary therefore in this period to have penalties that punished adultery and encouraged women to stay faithful to their husbands so ensuring legitimate offspring. During the same period in the Middle East the law in Baghdad stated that if a man bought a girl then he had to wait one menstrual month before having vaginal sex with her so to ensure the legitimacy of any offspring (Kennedy, 2008,182-83). In the Middle East and in Anglo-Saxon England a woman's market value and her opportunity to marry was dependent on her chastity and if she was found to have had sex before marriage or had committed adultery then this "diminished her desirability as a wife or concubine" (Frantzen, 1998, 142).

The punishments for adultery were as follows:

The Laws of Aethelbert

A married freeman who “lay” with a maiden belonging to the king had to pay 50 shillings,

If he “lay” with a grinding servant, he had to pay 25 shillings and if he “lay” with a serving servant he had to pay 12 shillings.

If the freeman “lay” with another freeman’s wife he had to pay *wergild*, and find him a second wife.

If the freeman “lay” with a servant’s wife he had to pay double compensation (Frantzen, 1998, 142-143).

The Laws of Alfred

Same as above and relied on *wergild* system of compensation (Frantzen, 1998, 143).

The Laws of Cnut

Cnut defined what adultery was,

“An act committed by a married man who fornicated with an unmarried woman, another man’s wife and a nun (as she was married to God)” (Frantzen, 1998, 143).

If a married man fornicated with a slave he had to free her and make peace with God (Frantzen, 1998, 143).

Under Cnut a new law came into force that if a woman committed adultery she lost all her property and had her ears and nose cut off (Frantzen, 1998, 143). This is brutal but would have proved to be a powerful deterrent.

Cnut introduced other laws about sexual misconduct. These were: no fornication, no prostitution and no sex during Lent. It was set in law that a man could not abduct a nun nor rape her. Aethelbert and Alfred also had laws about sex outside of marriage. Abduction which was to be taken by force (though sex may not have taken place) was punished, as a girl was the property of her father. In abducting a girl, a man committed a crime against the girl's father. Rape, sexual assault and incest all carried the penalty of paying the appropriate wergild (Frantzen, 1998, 143-144). Men who used prostitutes were not punished but the women were driven out of the town (Frantzen, 1998, 144). It is also surprising to note that there were no secular laws against homosexuality until 1533 (Frantzen, 1998, 144).

The church Penitentials do not have many penances for unmarried heterosexual men and woman. Like secular law they tend to concentrate on adultery and unlike secular law homosexual practices.

Adultery:

If a married man had sex with a virgin then the punishment was one year penance (Frantzen, 1998, 146). If he had sex with another man's wife or a nun the punishment was four year penance (Frantzen, 1998, 146). If an unmarried man had sex with another man's wife then the penance was seven years (Frantzen, 1998, 146). If a woman committed adultery she lost all right to her property and her husband could send her away (Frantzen 1998, 146). However a woman could not leave her adulterous husband. If a man had sent his wife away and had then taken a second wife then his penance was seven years (Frantzen, 1998, 146).

Homosexuality:

The church was very concerned about same sex sexual activity. There were many canons against male homosexual acts. If a man often fornicated with another man or beast he was to do penance for ten years. This increased to fifteen years if the offender was over twenty (Frantzen, 1998, 151). Homosexual men were also punished depending on what role they took in the activity. Sodomites had to do penance for seven years and this was reduced to four years if the sodomy happened only once (Frantzen, 1998, 151). A 'mollis', received the same penance as an adulteress. A 'mollis' was the partner who was 'like a woman' in the activity. To punish the 'mollis' like a woman highlights that the behaviour was unnatural and the punishment was intended to bring shame on the 'mollis' (Frantzen, 151-52). Anal intercourse between a man and his wife was also punished with four years penance (Frantzen, 1998, 152). Men who engaged in interfemoral intercourse had to do penance for one year (Frantzen, 1998, 162). Oral sex between men was especially frowned upon and both parties involved had to do penance for seven years (Frantzen, 1998, 162). It would seem that the Anglo-Saxon church viewed homosexuality as a crime against nature and as akin to bestiality.

Female homosexuality:

Only 13 percent (6 canons) of the Penitentials that dealt with homosexual activity was aimed at female same sex behaviour (Frantzen, 1998, 150). If a woman had sex with another woman she was to do penance for three years (Frantzen, 1998, 150). If a nun fornicated with another nun she was to do penance for seven years (Frantzen, 1998, 150). If a woman touched herself so as to excite herself then she was required to fast for two years (Frantzen, 1998, 150).

Unmarried people:

Under the Penitentials if a man and woman fornicated outside of marriage they had to fast for one year. This was reduced if they had fornicated only once (Frantzen, 1998, 148). If the unmarried couple started to act but did not consummate the relationship they had to fast during the fasting period and on Wednesdays and Fridays for a year (Frantzen, 1998, 149). This would suggest that fornication outside marriage was not a serious offence (Frantzen, 149). Incest however was taken seriously probably as it would have been deemed like homosexuality and to go against nature (Frantzen, 1998, 148). The Anglo-Saxons may also have been aware that the offspring of closely related family members could produce damaged unviable offspring. Therefore if a man had sex with his sister the penance was seven or twelve years (Frantzen, 1998, 148). If brothers had sex then the penance was fifteen years (Frantzen, 1998, 148). There is no mention of sex between sisters and this was perhaps because there was no penetration involved.

Frantzen believes that no sociology of Anglo-Saxon sex can be made from studying the laws and Penitentials (Frantzen, 1998, 167) however I have tried to make a few general observations about Anglo-Saxon attitudes.

1-Homosexuality was viewed as a sin that went against God's natural laws and was viewed in to be equal to bestiality and incest (Frantzen, 1998, 170-71) and men who took the passive role were punished like women. It is strange that, while punishable in the churches penitential homosexuality was not punished in the Anglo-Saxon Laws. Considering the Anglo-Saxons originated from the Germanic warrior culture it is unusual that they did not punish homosexuality. The Anglo-Saxons obviously valued the warrior culture as Anglo-Saxon literature contains many references to it

so we could have expected them to punish anything which is contrary to warrior values. In Old Icelandic culture homosexuality was shameful and to claim that a man was homosexual was a punishable offence under the Icelandic law code. The law says that there are three words, if exchanged between people will cause the penalty of full outlawry. These words are *ragr*, *stroðinn* or *sorðinn* and furthermore a man has the right to kill if another man calls him one of these words. *Storðinn/sorðinn* refers to a person or an animal who has been buggered by a man and *ragr* refers to a person who is willing or inclined to play the female part in sexual relations (Zoega, 1910). To suggest a man was a homosexual was the very worst of insults and could be punished by death or full outlawry as to be a homosexual was to be cowardly and morally perverted. If homosexuality was punished so severely in Iceland it is surprising that the Anglo-Saxons of the same period did not have similar laws.

From the evidence it can be deduced that:

1) Female homosexuality was largely ignored and only seriously punished if it involved nuns as they were viewed to be married to God or if women used phallic like objects to penetrate each other.

2) Women were viewed as property of their father and then their husband.

Compensation for adultery had to be made to the father or cuckold husband.

3) It was important within Anglo-Saxon culture to ensure legitimacy of children by having laws which discouraged adultery.

4) It would appear that sex outside marriage was not taken seriously. However this was probably only the case with members of the lower classes. Women of middle to

upper classes would have carried a high bride price so if they were found to have sex outside of marriage their marriage value would decrease and their family shamed.

There have been many theories as to why the monks chose to include the double entendre riddles in the collection. Smith's theory is that the inclusion would have allowed the monastic community, who were forbidden to think about "the desires of the flesh", to develop their spirituality when finding innocent solution (Smith, 2000, 80-81). By including the riddles and finding the innocent solutions they were overcoming base human desire. Smith says that a form of sexual censorship would have suited both lay and monastic community (Smith, 2000, 80-82). The monks included the riddles because they could see the innocent solution thus giving the riddles legitimacy while the lay community were still able to enjoy the bawdy solution.

Rulon-Miller's theory is that the double-entendres were a shared text for men "who lived in the homoerotically charged atmosphere of a medieval monastery, and who traded erotic badinage as a way to covertly express homosocial desire" (Rulon Miller, 101). I would have to disagree with this theory as it has been shown above that homosexuality was viewed as unnatural and the penance for homosexuality was lengthy. Rulon -Miller agrees with Freud that sexual jokes are a sign of aggression and the double-entendre riddles are aggressively laughing at women (Rulon-Miller, 2000, 99-126). Rulon-Miller seems to have undergone a humour bypass and missed the point of double-entendre riddles being a joke.

Smith says "the success of a joke turns on its invocation and then resolution of a sense of incongruity, on the ability to find similarity between dissimilar things" (Smith, 2000, 82). Freud says "Where a joke is not an aim in itself (that is it isn't

innocent) there are only two purposes that it may serve. It is either a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire or defence) or an obscene joke (serving the purpose of exposure)” (Freud, 1960, 115). If this is the case then as Smith says the joke has “the potential for shame and embarrassment” (Smith, 2000, 82).

Presumably he means in the case of the double entendre riddles the person who solves the riddle obscenely is held up to be a deviant. This however is not the case when everyone knows that the solution is obscene. There is therefore no aggressive intent and no one is shamed. According to Freud, “the joke form provides a framework for inappropriate and sexual material which would otherwise not be allowed, and in the transmutation from unacceptable smut to obscene joke, the elements of sexuality are re-ordered and camouflaged. In order to be enjoyed, references to sex must be transformed, or at the very least disguised” (Freud, 1960, 118). This is indeed true of the double-entendre riddles. The smutty images are transformed by the use of language (discussed later in the chapter) which disguises the sexual solution. The riddle itself is a form that is culturally acceptable both to the lay community (who know the answer) and to the monastic community (who want to keep the sexual solution disguised).

Maybe the double entendre riddles are like the fabliaux from the later Middle Ages. The fabliaux were short, comic, bawdy stories that contain stock characters and usually centre round a trick. They are usually in a low style and feature a lot of euphemisms. Over the years people have wondered for whom the fabliaux were written. Were they written for the lower classes or were they for middle classes laughing at the lower class? Whoever they were written for, like the double entendre riddles they were a culturally acceptable genre that people enjoyed.

Many have discussed whether fabliaux are actually pornography. Cooke has said of pornography, “it is a branch of art that represents or reflects aggressive male sexuality, concerned wholly with the physical aspects of sexual experience and reducing the women to the status of objects of sexual actions (Cooke, 1974, 137-62). Hine says that an alternative conventional definition of pornography is that it is art designed to excite and to some degree to satisfy sexual arousal (Hine, 1993, 36).

Pornography however is not a cultural acceptable form of artistic expression and kept from away from mainstream consciousness. The fabliaux however, like the double entendre riddles, were mainstream so cannot be regarded as pornography. Their popularity of both genres probably came from the playful use of language and the disguise of the sexual imagery with words that have a range of meanings (see later in the chapter). Smith said the language of the double-entendre riddles, “offers a kind of implicit deniability, which paradoxically provides the very means and proof of sexual imagination” (Smith, 2000, 93) and this quote could also be applied to the fabliaux. That is why the double-entendre riddles could be viewed as the fabliaux of their day. *Riddle 54* in particular is fabliaux like with its lusty bachelor and eager servant girl,

Hyse cwom gangan,	þær he hie wisse
stondan in wincsele,	stop feorran to,
hror hægstealdmon,	hof his agen
hrægl hondum up,	hrand under gyrdels
hyre stondendre	stipes nathwæt,
worhte his willan;	wagedan buta.

þegn onnette, wæs þragum nyt
tillic esne, teorode hwæpre
æt stunda gehwam strong ær þon hio,
werig þæs weorces. Hyre weaxan ongon
under gyrdelse þæt oft gode men
ferðpum freogað ond mid feo bicgað.

(Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, 207-08).

Translation

There came a young man, where he knew her to be
standing in a corner. The lusty bachelor
went up to her from a distance, lifted up
his own garment with his hands, and thrust something
stiff
under her girdle where she stood,
wrought his will; both of them shook.
The thane hurried; his good servant
was sometimes useful; nevertheless, though strong,
he always became tired, and weary of the work,
sooner than she. There began to grow

under her girdle what good men often
love in their hearts and buy with money.

(Mackie, 1934, 147).

I think the double-entendre riddles were included in the Exeter Book because the Anglo-Saxons had a realistic good-humoured attitude towards sex. It could be said that as long as you were not indulging in any unnatural acts or committing adultery, then the Anglo-Saxons viewed sex as a normal part of human life. People of the twenty first century find sexual innuendo funny and the inclusion of the double-entendre riddles in the Exeter Book proves that the Anglo-Saxons also found this humour funny. A joke can be funny in any period of history especially if it concerns something as universal as sex. Sexual humour does not have to be, as Freud says, aggressive. While the solution to a double-entendre riddle is officially innocent the humour comes from thinking about the obscene solution. As everyone is aware the purpose of a double entendre riddle is to provide both innocent and sexual solutions but joke is not aimed with cruelty at anyone in particular.

The double entendre riddles may have been included the Exeter Book simply because they were popular. It can be assumed that the Anglo-Saxons recited the poems to each other and so the monks thought they were important to preserve. Tupper may have dismissed them as simply folk riddles and were puzzles of double meaning and coarse suggestion (Tupper, 1910, l.i) but if they were recited often by the Anglo-Saxons they were most definitely worth preserving. Even if they are folk riddles as Tupper suggests, “a genuine folk-riddle is a spontaneous expression, coming from the depths of the soul, of a people or race” (Kelso, 1918, 767). They could be seen as important cultural markers and as will be seen later on in this

chapter the language is complex with key words encompassing a large semantic field. Also if the riddles were part of a hundred riddle collection, like Aldhelm's riddle collection, then omitting them would have been out of the question. All of this is conjecture and we may never know why the double-entendre riddles were included in the Exeter Book but I think it can be shown that the Anglo Saxons had a healthy attitude to sexuality and would not have been offended by the riddles' inclusion in the Exeter Book.

The Double-Entendre Riddles

The double-entendre riddles have instability of meaning and "the language of these sexual riddles offer a kind of implicit deniability which paradoxically provides the very means and proof of sexual imagination" (Smith, 2000, 93). I discuss this instability of meaning by studying aspects of vocabulary of two riddles, *Riddle 44* and *Riddle 45* and I endeavour to provide an alternative solution to *Riddle 44*. Following this I discuss vocabulary that may have been sexual markers for the Anglo-Saxons.

Riddle 44

As is the norm with the double entendre riddles, *Riddle 44* is a mixture of low and high language and imagery.

Wrætlic hongað	bi weres þeo,
frean under sceate.	Foran is þyrel.
Bið stiþ ond heard,	stede hafað godne;
þonne se esne	his agen hrægl

ofer cneo hefeð, wile þæt cuþe hol

mid his hangellan heafde gretan

þæt he efenlang ær oft gefylde.

(Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, 204-205).

The obscene solution is ‘penis’ and most previous scholars have innocently solved the riddle by the following solutions:

Dietrich: key or dagger sheath (1859)

Tupper: key (1910)

Wyatt: key (1912)

Trautmann: key (1915)

Krapp and Dobbie: key or dagger sheath (1936)

Mackie: key (1934)

Crossley-Holland: key (1978)

Williamson: key (1982)

Niles: key and lock (2006)

Similarly to *Riddle 8* but in contrast to *Riddle 4*, it appears that most scholars have accepted the early solution first suggested by Dietrich. Is there however enough evidence in the riddle to support this solution ‘key’? The creature of the riddle has a ‘hole in its head,’ *foran is þyrel*. Williamson points out “that some Anglo-Saxon keys have been discovered with holes in the flat part of their tongues. The holes were

presumably functional in certain kinds of locks.” (Williamson, 1977, 281). This however is a very unusual key design and it would probably not be the design of the average Anglo-Saxon key. The hole of the average key would not be at the end that enters the lock but would be on the part which is held. While such keys may have existed it is not enough to prove that the solution is ‘key’.

Efenlang has been glossed by all scholars as ‘equally long’ or ‘just as long’. It is an ambiguous word that fits the double-entendre, penis. *Efenlang* is found three times in the Old English Corpus, once in *Riddle 44* and twice in the homilies along with *efanbrad*, ‘as broad as long’. Williamson asked, “Is the creature of matched length (as fits the literal solution) or whether one of the creatures periodically attains the requisite length for matching?” (Williamson, 1977, 281-282). Whatever the case *efanlang* could refer to the ‘key’ as the lock it enters is of equal length to the key. By following Trautmann’s example that *efanlang* is accusative singular neuter and it modifies the neuter *hol* in line 5 and *pæt* in line 7, “the hanging thing is said to “seek out the equally long hole that it has often filled before” (Williamson, 1977, 281). The key will often have filled the lock so this part of the text could support key as the solution.

Niles has said that there are a number of solutions to the riddles of the Exeter Book that are solved by alliterative couplets. He believes *Riddle 44* is an alliterative coupling, solved by *caeg ond cluster*, ‘key’ and ‘lock’ (Niles, 2006, 122-123). He says, “since this double-entendre makes prominent reference both to a hard object that hangs by a man’s thigh and a familiar hole of equal length into which the object is often put an ideal solution would refer both to the male and female parts of a coupling. The alliterative doublet *caeg ond cluster* is a judicious answer on the innocent side” (Niles, 2006, 123.) While Williamson believes the solution is ‘key’ he

says that Riddle 44 is “certainly the earliest English example of the sexual lock and key symbolism noted by Freud in his chapter on the dream work in *The Interpretations of Dreams*” (Williamson, 1982, 191). While this is an interesting theory it is a presumptuous one as *Riddle 44* cannot be definitively solved as ‘key’. Also it is unlikely that the riddle has a secret meaning of unlocking sexual desire when the purpose of a double entendre is to have a sexual solution as well as an innocent one.

As well as the reason stated above there is evidence to suggest that key is not the solution. Evidence would suggest that women were the primary key holders within Anglo-Saxon households. Christine Fell found that there is archaeological evidence to support this theory. The graves of Anglo-Saxon women contain both keys and key-shaped objects known as girdle hangers. The function of these girdle hangers is not known but it is believed that they have a status function. They may have signified economic control over the household (Fell, 1984, 60). Fell also makes the point that in Cnut Law 76, a woman cannot be accused of theft from the household unless the stolen item is found in one of the three places to which she holds the key. These are *hordaern* ‘a store cupboard’, *cyste* ‘a largish chest’ and *teag* ‘a little box’ used for money or jewellery (Fell, 1984, 59). Fell believes that one of the laws of Æðelbert states that women hold the keys within the household. Æðelbert 73 reads: “*Gif friwif locbore leswæs hwæt gedeð. xxx scill' gebete.*” Fell believes that *locbore* means ‘lock-bearing,’ instead of the more common translation ‘having long hair.’ For Fell *locbore* means that the woman of the house is ‘in charge of locked places’ and if she abuses her responsibility she will be punished, (Fell, 1984, 61).

Another source of evidence against the solution ‘key’ is *Riddle 91* which quite obviously is a ‘key’.

Riddle 91

Min heafod is homere geþuren,
searopila wund, sworfen feole.
Oft ic begine þæt me ongean sticað,
þonne ic hnitān sceal, hringum gyrded,
hearde wið heardum hindan þyrel,
forð ascufan þæt mines frean
mod. wynne. freoþað middelnihum.
Hwilum ic under bæc bregde nebbe,
hyrde þæs hordes, þonne min hlaford wile
lafe þicgan þara þe he of life het
wælcraefte awrecan willum sinum.

(Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, 241).

Translation

My head was hammered into shape, scarred
by sharp chisels, scoured by a file.
I often gape at what faces me
when wearing rings, I thrust firmly
against a hard object; hollowed out

from behind, I strain at what stands between

my lord and his heart's desire at midnight.

Sometimes I pull back my nose,

guardian of gold, when my murderous lord

plans to steal treasures from those whom he

has had disposed of, just as he pleases.

(Crossley-Holland, 2008, 81).

This riddle actually makes reference to the manufacture of the key, the ring that attaches the key to the owner's belt and its purpose of guarding gold. From this riddle the solution key can clearly be surmised while in *Riddle 44* the solution is unclear. It would appear that the creature of the riddle cannot be a dagger sheath as the creature fills the thing of equal length. The dagger sheath can be filled by something of equal length but cannot fill something. For this reason alone the solution dagger sheath can be ruled out.

Crossley Holland says it is while, "the first lines are promisingly suggestive, and overall this riddle is not sufficiently ambiguous to avoid crudity." I disagree as the riddle can be translated to be completely innocent and void of double-entendre.

Rulon-Miller made two translations of *Riddle 12* as she argued that *Riddle 12* was a double-entendre riddle. To prove her argument she provided an innocent translation and then an obscene solution with sustained double-entendre (to be classed as a double-entendre riddle the double-entendre must be sustained throughout).

Riddle 12

Fotum ic fere, foldan slite,
grene wongas, þenden ic gæst bere.
Gif me feorh losað, fæste binde
swearte Wealas, hwilum sellan men.
Hwilum ic deorum drincan selle
beorne of bosme, hwilum mec bryd triedeð
felawlonc fotum, hwilum feorran broht
wonfeax Wale wegeð ond þyð,
dol druncmennen deorcum nihtum,
wæteð in wætre, wyrmeð hwilum
fægre to fyre; me on fæðme sticap
hygegalan hond, hwyrfeð geneahhe,
swifeð me geond sweartne. Saga hwæt ic hatte,
þe ic lifgende lond reafige
ond æfter deaþe dryhtum þeowige.

(Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, 186).

Rulon-Miller innocent translation of Riddle 12

I go on foot, I plow the soil

the green fields, when I am alive.

If life departs from me, I tightly bind

dark Welsh men, sometimes better men.

Sometimes I give drink to a noble man, to

a Lord

from my interior; sometimes a stately

woman

steps on me with her feet. Sometimes, brought

from afar, a dark-haired Welsh woman, a

foolish,

drunken maid, on dark nights lifts and presses me,

moistens me with water; at times she heats

me,

carefully, over a fire; she pierces my surface

with her skilful hand; she turns me often,

rotates me through a black substance.

Say what I am called, I, who living

break up the soil, and after death serve men.

The solution is obviously ox-leather.

(Rulon-Miller, 2000, 125).

Rulon-Miller Obscene Version of *Riddle 12*

I strut on my feet, I slit the earth,

the virgin fields, while I have life.

If life is loosened from me, I fetter fast

dark Welsh slaves, sometimes better.

Sometimes I offer drink to a beloved man, to

a warrior

from my depths; at other times an ardent bride

treads me with her feet. Now carried off from

far-away,

a dark-haired Welsh slave-woman shakes and squeezes me,

stupid, drunken slave, in the dark of night

she becomes moist with wetness, now gets

nicely hot

by the fire; with her wanton hand she thrusts me

into her womb; she writhes excessively,

she swivels me all around her blackness.

Say what I am called, I, who living

violate the land, and after death, serve men.

The obscene solution is a leather dildo.

(Rulon-Miller, 2000, 125).

Rulon-Miller showed sustained double-entendre so proving that *Riddle 12* is a full double-entendre riddle. Despite what Crossley-Holland has said *Riddle 44* is sufficiently ambiguous to avoid crudery. To prove this I will use the same method at Rulon-Miller and translate two version one innocent, where I minimise the sexual innuendo and one obscene in which I emphasise the innuendo.

My translations of *Riddle 44*

Innocent Version

An ornamental thing suspended by a man's thigh,
under its master's cloak.

It is pierced in front, is cruel and violent and has a good steadfastness.

When the retainer lifts his armour above the knee, he wants to visit with the head of this hanging object, the familiar hollow place, which is of equal length, it has often filled before.

Obscene Version

A curious thing hang's by man's thigh under its master's garment.
it is pierced in front, is stiff and hard and has a good firmness.

When the man lifts his clothing above the knee he wants to visit with the hanging object, the familiar hole, which is of equal length, it has often filled before.

I have provided two versions of the riddle, as the language within the riddles has what Tanke describes as an “artificial semantic hierarchy” (Tanke, 1994, 28). It may appear that a word or phrase has a specific meaning but further study shows that certain words have multiple meanings, all as valid as the other. The multiple meanings and wide semantic range are essential for the success of the double-entendre riddles. The riddles are a game and the poet has been very clever with his word choice.

Wrætlic is a word that has multiple meanings. Previous scholars have translated it as ‘wondrous,’ (Williamson, 1977, 463) and ‘strange’ (Mackie, 1934, 141). Each are valid readings but to this list can also be included, ‘beautiful’, ‘admirable’, ‘wonderful,’ ‘artistic’, ‘ornamental’, ‘curious’ and ‘rare’ (BT). I preferred to read *wrætlic* as ornamental as the noun *wraette* is an ‘ornament’, ‘work of art’ or ‘jewel’, (BT), however curious works in the obscene translation. *Sceate* does not just meaning ‘garment’ but also, ‘corner’, ‘angle’, ‘edge’, ‘point’, ‘sheet’, ‘covering’ and ‘cloak’ (BT). These multiple meanings allow the reader to play with the double entendre. *Hongað* can mean either ‘hang’ or ‘suspend’ and each work well in the innocent/obscene interpretations. This word is found only twice in the corpus, in *Riddle 44* and in the Rushworth Gospels at 22.40 (DOE Corpus). *Stiþ* can mean many things as well as ‘stiff’. It can mean ‘thick’, ‘rigid’, ‘hard’, ‘firm’, ‘strong’, ‘resolute’, ‘brave’, ‘stubborn’, ‘unrelenting’, ‘strict’, ‘fierce’, ‘harsh’ and ‘cruel’ (BT). *Heard* as well as meaning ‘hard’, can mean ‘harsh’, ‘severe’, ‘stern’, ‘cruel’, ‘strong’, ‘intense’, ‘vigorous’ and ‘violent’ (BT) and is found throughout the Old English corpus. *Esne* means ‘man’, ‘labourer’, ‘slave’, ‘servant’, ‘retainer’ and ‘youth’(BT). Any of them could be used when translating the riddle but ‘retainer’ is particularly good to elevate the meaning in the innocent version. *Hrægl* means

‘clothing’, ‘dress’, ‘cloth sheet’, ‘sail’ but also ‘vestment’ and ‘armour’ (DOE). Again ‘armour’ can be used to raise the tone in the innocent version. *Hol* can be translated as ‘hole’ which works well in the obscene version but it also means ‘hollow’, ‘concave’, ‘cave’, ‘den’, ‘perforation’ and ‘hollow place’ (DOE). The poet was clever in his word choice as the riddle can be obviously crude but can also be read free from innuendo.

As I said above I do not think that ‘key’ is the solution. I think the solution to the riddle is a *seax*, a single-edged knife. All Anglo-Saxon free men and would carry this item though it ranged in size, from 10cm to 1 metre. Depending on the status of the owner the knife would either be a simple tool, a hunting knife or an ornamental weapon. When producing the blade, the blacksmith would incorporate patterning, which as well as being an artistic feature made it stronger. The wealthier owner’s *seax* would have decorative fittings and gildings as well as the patterning on the blade (Underwood, 1999, 68-72). When it was not in use the *seax* was kept in a leather sheath which was suspended from the owner’s belt. These sheaths were usually embossed and sometimes were fitted with silver or bronze (Underwood, 1999, 70).

By studying the vocabulary of riddle it is clear that *Riddle 44* can be solved as *seax*. The *seax* was an ornamental object *wrætlic*, and was suspended, *hongað* by the man’s thigh. It has a piercing tip and can be viewed as ‘stiff and hard’ or ‘cruel and violent’ *stip ond heard*. It does indeed have a good steadfastness. After it has been used a man would have lifted his armour or garment to return the *seax* into the sheath. The sheath is ‘the hollow place’, *þæt cuþe hol*, the ‘thing of equal length’, *efenlang ær*, ‘that the *seax* has often filled before’ *gefylde*. The solution is not a ‘key’ but a *seax*, the knife from which the Saxons received their name.

Riddle 45

Ic on wincle gefrægn weaxan nathwæt,
þindan ond þunian, þecene hebban;
on þæt banlease bryd grapode,
hygewlonc hondum, hrægle þeahte
þrindende þing þeodnes dohtor.

(Krapp and Dobbie, 1936, 205).

Riddle 45 is another example of a double-entendre riddle. Like *Riddle 8* and *Riddle 44* most scholars have accepted the early solution ‘dough’. Trautmann first suggested this solution in 1887 and all later editors and critics have agreed. I also accept the solution ‘dough’ as I have not found any evidence to suggest another solution. While ‘dough’ is the innocent solution the obscene solution for this double entendre riddle is ‘penis’. *Riddle 45* is an excellent example of double-entendre and Williamson says, “The poet is playing with the words as the Old English word for lord means guardian of the bread and the Old English word for lady, *hlaefdige* means ‘kneader of the dough’ and the lady in question is presumably making more than cakes” (Williamson, 1982, 191.) While I do not have a new solution for *Riddle 45* it is worth noting the ways the poet plays with language and how certain aspects of vocabulary may be sexual markers. Before I discuss the interesting aspects of the language used I will translate *Riddle 45*. Like *Riddle 44* I have translated an innocent version and an obscene version of *Riddle 45*.

Riddle 45-Innocent Version

I have heard of something growing in the corner,
swelling and standing up, raising its covering.

A proud bride grasped that boneless thing with her hands. The ruler's daughter
covered that swollen thing with cloth.

Obscene version

I have heard of something growing in the corner,
swelling and standing up, raising its covering.

A licentious bride grasped that boneless thing with her hands.

The daughter of a king swallowed up that swollen thing with clothing.

It might be the case that there are words specific to double-entendre riddles.

Nathwæt and the parallels appear five times in surviving Old English literature and apart from one appearance in *Riddle 93*, the word is only found in double-entendre riddles, (Williamson, 1977, 283). *Riddle 45* (line 1), "*Ic on wincle gefrægn weaxan nathwæt*". *Riddle 54* (line 5), "*hrand under gyrdels,hyre stondendre stiþes nathwæt*". *Riddle 61* (line7- 9), "*Gif þæs ondfengan ellen dohte, mec frætwedne fyllan sceolde ruwes nathwæt*".

All of these *nathwæt* can be translated as a coy, 'I don't know what' or 'a certain something'. Rissanen says that the poet "pretends that he does not know what the thing referred to is; at the same time, both the referential quality of the pronoun and the discourse setting the presenting of a riddle, imply that he knows exactly what he is talking about" (Rissanen, 1986, 118). The poet of the riddle is teasing the reader.

This is different in *Riddle 93* (line 23b-26), “*Nu ic blace swelge wuda ond wætre, w... ..b... befæðme Pæt mec on fealleð ufan þær ic stonde, eorpes nathwæt;*”

There is no coyness of *nathwæt* in *Riddle 93* and it simply means ‘something’.

These examples compellingly suggest that *nathwæt* was used to suggest something sexual in the double-entendre riddles. However the example of *Riddle 93* means that we have to say that this may have been only one of the uses of *nathwæt* and other examples may have been lost from the Old English Corpus.

Another word in *Riddle 45* which is of interest is *hygewlonc*. This word is only found in the corpus twice and both times in verse, *Riddle 45* (line 4), “*bryd grapode, hygewlonc hondum*”, and *Riddle 19* (line 2). This word means ‘haughty’/ ‘proud’ but may have sexual connotations. It may be similar to *Riddle 25 modwlonc* (line 7), “*modwlonc meowle, þæt heo on mec gripeð*”, which means ‘proud’, ‘haughty’ but also ‘licentious’. This word is only found twice, *Riddle 25* and line 39 of *The Seafarer*,

Another similar word is *felawlonc* and this is found in the corpus only once in line 7 of *Riddle 12*, “*hwilum mec bryd triedeð felawlonc fotum*”, and again means proud. Considering that these words all appear in double-entendre riddles then it could be suggested that it a word with sexual connotations and means licentious.

Stewart has written about how certain words are used in all of the double-entendre riddles. Her lists includes naming a few *heafod* ‘head’, *stip*, ‘stiff’, *heard*, ‘hard’, *hol*, ‘hole’ (Stewart, 1983, 39-52). Some of these words featured in *Riddle 44* were discussed earlier in this chapter. Another feature specific of the double-entendre riddles is the use of hands and the language that describes the activities of the hands. In the double entendre riddles the hands most often *grapode*, ‘grasp’. The young

bride of Riddle 45 ‘grasps the boneless thing in her hands’, on “*þæt banlease bryd grapode, hygewlonc hondum*”. Hands also grasp in Riddles 54, 61 and 63. Riddle 25 (line 7), *gripeð*, – she ‘grabs’ and Riddle 44 also use hands in their sexual exposition (Davies, 2006, 44-49).

Touching is another action associated with sex and is found throughout the double-entendre riddles. Chance discusses erotic potential in the passage between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother. Chance links warfare and sex as this passage features four words to do with touching *grap*, *gefeng*, *clommum* and *fingrum* (Chance, 1986, 102). Davis also gives the example of a passage of *Genesis B* depicting the fall of man. When Adams gives in to temptation and eats the apple, (line 723-4) “*hit him on innan com, hran aet heortan*”; “it came into his innards, touched him at heart”. Davis suggests that the verb *hran*, ‘touched’ was used as it was a penetrative act. There has not been a sexual act but, “the collocation of the act of penetration, manual symbol, and the evocation of the interior of the human body by mention of its heart, evoke sex just as they did, more obviously in the riddles” (Davis, 2006, 53). There is therefore Old English words that have sexual connotations and they are found in the double-entendre riddles. Maybe *nathwæt* and *hygewlonc* were similar and were sexual markers for the Anglo-Saxons.

It is important to remember that sex was not directly referenced in Anglo-Saxon literature so it is a credible assumption to believe that language was used to sign post sexual references. With further study of the language of the double-entendre riddles the modern reader may glean some clues as to what the sign posts might be.

Conclusion

“Great scholars like other great men, cast long shadows. We pay heavily for their insights. Their thoughts set in a mould which becomes a prison for lesser men” (Bridbury, 1992, 43). I believe this statement can be applied to much of the scholarship of the Exeter Book as most scholarship has relied upon the work and solutions suggested by the scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

J. D. Niles has three principles he follows when he is trying to solve a riddle. These are

- 1) Read the text. He advises to read for yourself and not to just accept what previous scholars have said. It may be that you do agree with the scholars but it is important to come to your own understanding of the text.
- 2) Try to understand the text in relation to its place in period-specific culture and history. That means to read from an Anglo-Saxon perspective.
- 3) Be aware of what your assumptions are and then try and look at the text from another angle

(Niles, 2006, 6-7).

While studying this project I was influenced by Niles’ thinking and challenged my own assumptions and those of earlier scholars. I tried to think from an Anglo-Saxon perspective in order to solve the riddle in its “own tongue”. I was also influenced by the work of C. Biggam who effectively used interdisciplinary semantics in her works on blue and grey in Old English. This project has shown that by reading the riddles from an Anglo-Saxon perspective and by using aspects of interdisciplinary semantics

and reading persuasive new reading and solutions to the riddles can be found. By applying ornithological evidence to the word study of *Riddle 8* I have shown that the riddle can be solved as 'robin'. Applying archaeological and agricultural evidence to the word study of *Riddle 4* has enabled me to contribute further to the plough solution suggested by Ferri-Cochran while sociological and archaeological evidence has provided the new solution of 'seax' to *Riddle 44* and furthered discussion on aspects of sexual vocabulary during the Anglo-Saxon period. As the Old English riddles were written on a variety of themes birds, animals, the weather, agricultural implements etc. they provide us with a unique view of Anglo-Saxon life. As more resources become available scholars can take a fresh look at the riddles and the methods used in this study could be applied to other riddles to find new solutions and gain insights into the language and lifestyle of the Anglo-Saxons.

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