FOUR SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE EXETER BOOK RIDDLES

Difficult as it is to determine with certainty what some of them are *about*, the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book seem, without much doubt, to have served at least three important social purposes: the riddle game provided a structure for the competitive exercise of verbal skills;[1] and within that structure some riddles permitted performers to play aggressive roles sanctioned by the culture of which the game itself was a part,[2] while others presented well thought out responses to destructive forces of the natural world. In addition, some riddles, as my discussion of two riddles that have been solved as "Fire" and "Ice" will show, also expressed insights concerning the human power to destroy.

Exeter Book riddles often end with the formulaic challenges *Frige hwæt ic hatte* (I ask what I am called) and *Saga hwæt ic hatte* (Say what I am called). The two formulas, since they require riddle-solvers to *name* what has been described, function as requests for the display of verbal skill. There is, to be sure, no Exeter Book riddle closing that equals the challenging quality of the closing of Aldhelm's Latin "Creatura," in which a schoolteacherish speaker demands attention; claims a degree of intellectual challenge, along with some importance, for his question; then, insinuating his own intention to deflate the puffed-up philosophers he addresses, orders them to tell him what his name is;[3] but some riddle closings, in addition to their demand that their subjects be named, also make more pointed reference to the skill being challenged.

Riddle 30(32), "Ship," specifically directs its challenge to those who are wise with words with *these* words:

> Rece, gif þu cunne,
> wis worda gleaw, hwæt sio wiht sie (13b-14)
>
> (Tell, if you can
> wise one learned in words, what the creature is),

and Riddle 37(39), which has been solved as "Day," "Moon," "Time," "Creature Death," "Cloud," "Revenant," "Speech," and "Dream,"[4] directs its challenge to those who can speak *soþum wordum* (29a, with true words), while Riddle 41(43), "Mind and Body" or "Soul and Body," requires that players of the game respond with *cynewordum* (15a, fitting words).

Riddle 71(73) has a "say what" closing that reads

> Wiga se þe mine
> wisan cunne, cyðe hwæt ic hatte. (28b-29)
>
> (Warrior, you who
> know my ways, say what I am called.)

These words carry a challenge that can be paraphrased "Prove you are smart enough to guess the answer and say the right word." At the same time, *Wiga*, the word that precedes this challenge, may suggest a metaphoric role to be played by the would-be riddle-solver, who is presumably to accept the challenge with a certain verbal aggressiveness. In addition, considering now the subject of Riddle 71(73), *Wiga* may suggest a role the riddle *performer* plays. The "Spear" claims to be able to thrust himself with *þeofes cræfte under brægnlocan* (23a-24b, with the skill of a thief under the brain-locker). Perhaps as the performer of Riddle 71(73) spoke the words of his self-describing riddle subject he found an opportunity to present himself as a man in full possession of the masculine virtues prescribed by his culture.

The Exeter Book collection provided a number of safe equivalents for roles men were often required to play in the "game" called *guðplega* (war play). The "Ballista" of Riddle 15(17), for example (whose identity, according to Williams, is still "Uncertain"), speaks of spitting forth spear-terror, and of war-darts that fly from his belly. He swallows dark/bright battle-weapons, terrible, deadly battle-spears with sharp points. He boasts of his splendid, precious womb hoard, the reward, we can assume, he earns as a valued warrior. The "Bow" of Riddle 21(23), though he asserts that he "will not, unbound, obey anyone," also describes himself as playing a proper warrior's role. He presents himself as *being* bound, shooting arrows, and loyally serving in the bonds of comitatus. And the "Sword" of Riddle 18(20) tells how he often *gæstberend cwelle compwæpnum* (8b-9a, kills life-bearers with battle-weapons).

The "Spear," performing its own riddle function, thrusts itself into the brain; the "Ballista" spits forth its weapons; the "Bow" shoots arrows; the "Sword," also acting as it should act, kills people. Performers of these first-person descriptions of weapon subjects had to challenge their listeners in deliberately instrusive ways. Perhaps they experienced a certain vicarious enjoyment in dramatizing aggressive actions as they did so. But there is another side to this story of aggressive behavior. Riddles like Riddle 3(5), which presents its subject as an *anhaga, iserne wund* (1, lone-dweller, wounded by iron), seem to have provided opportunities for the performance of a different role. They allowed performers to present themselves as heroic defenders. Riddle 33(35), "Coat of Mail," even presents its subject as having been born to play this equally important, and equally valued, role.

Riddle 33(35)

Mec se wæta wong, wundrum freorig,
of his innaþe ærist cende.
Ne wat ic mec beworhtne wulle flysum,
hærum þurh heahcræft, hygeþoncum min:
wundene me ne beoð wefle, ne ic wearp hafu,
ne þurh þreata geþræcu þræd me ne hlimmeð,
ne æt me hrutende hrisil scriþeð,
ne mec ohwonan sceal am cnyssan.

Wyrmas mec ne awæfan wyrda cræftum,
þa þe geolo godwebb geatwum frætwað.
Wile mec mon hwæþre seþeah wide ofer eorþan
hatan for hæleþum hyhtlic gewæde.
Saga soðcwidum, searoðoncum gleaw,
wordum wisfæst, hwæt þis gewæde sy.

(The wet earth wondrously cold first brought me forth from its womb. I know myself in my mind that I am not made with high skill from wool fleece, from hairs. I am not twisted by the woof, nor do I have a warp, nor does thread sound in me with the onrush of hosts, nor do sounding shuttles shake me, nor does the slay of the loom strike me from anywhere. Worms who adorn the fine yellow cloth with ornaments, with the skills of destinies, do not weave me. Yet nevertheless people widely over the earth will call me a joyful garment before men. Say with true-words, wise one in artifice, learned in words, what this garment is.)

The subject of Riddle 33(35) claims a paradoxical origin. Living creatures return to the earth at the end of life, but this riddle subject is born from the earth – from a womb that is wondrously cold. "Coat of Mail's" opening claim of coldly inanimate birth is followed by a double denial of natural origin. The riddle subject is not woven from wool, a material from which garments are commonly made, nor is he made of more exotic silk. He is not made from any part of, nor through the effort of, any living creature. His life is generated from not-life.

The paradox grows as the riddle convention of first person self description confers human consciousness upon the inanimate subject. The subject of Riddle 33(35) *knows* his origins. This riddle speaker has a mind, which means, if we read the Old English terms for cloth manufacture in the double senses in which they ask to be read, that he also has a sense of his own vulnerability. If his origins had been different, the subject of this riddle might have been host to a *þreata geþræcu* (onrush of hosts). He might have been struck by the *am* (slay) of the loom. He could have been *wundene* (the word is "twisted," but its sound suggests "wounded") by the woof. He is *not*, of course. All these possibilities are negated by his account of paradoxical origin. But even as they are negated the secondary meanings suggest the heroic role this riddle speaker was born to play. The subject of Exeter Book Riddle 33(35) does not need to be protected from injury; he is himself a protector of others. But his account of his origin shows that he is as surely *on gewin sceapen* (shaped for struggle) as the "Bow" of Riddle 21(23) or the "Sword" of Riddle 18(20) in whose descriptions this formula appears.

So far I have attempted to show (1) how riddles performed their primary social function of providing opportunity for verbal challenge and response and (2) how they sometimes provided their performers with opportunities to present themselves as warriors. The subject of Riddle 48(50), the first of my two concluding riddles, is introduced as a *Wiga* (warrior), but I propose to discuss Riddle 48(50) not as a poem about a warrior (which would be quite silly, since a genuine riddle would never be this open about the identity of its subject), but as a poem that deals with a threatening aspect of the natural world.

Riddle 48(50)

Wiga is on eorþan wundrum acenned
drythum to nytte, of dumbum twam
torht atythed, þone on teon wigeð
feond his feonde. Forstrange oft
wif hine wrið; he him wel hereð,
þeowað him geþwære, gif him pegniað
mægeð ond mægas mid gemete ryhte,
fedaþ hine fægre; he him fremum stepeð
life on lissum. Leanaþ grimme
þam þe hine wloncne weorþan læteð.

(A warrior useful to men, one that foe carries against foe for his hurt, is wondrously brought forth on earth, created gleaming from two dumb creatures. A woman often binds the very strong one; he obeys maids and men well, serves them quietly. If they tend him in right measure, feed him fairly, he exalts them in comfort, with joys in life. He grimly rewards the one who allows him to become proud.)

Here, as in "Coat of Mail," the riddler plays with the idea of animate origins as he combines *acenned*, a verb often associated with human engendering, with an apparent reference to his subject's parents. The "two dumb creatures" must be flint and steel. The first "usefulness" ascribed to the subject is a usefulness of war, as men are said to "fight with fire," but an apparent contradiction follows when the strong subject is said to be bound by a woman. This suggestion of weakness is followed by implications of docility and obedience. Then the riddler develops a double *if*. The first *if* is explicit. If women and men are temperate in their feeding of fire, the subject (which, it begins to seem, could be more than fire) will benefit them. *If* (this second *if* is not given explicit realization, but the opposition is nevertheless clear) they provide their servant with too much fuel, he may rage out of control. Either way, controlled or uncontrolled, his actions take on additional associations with human behavior.

I am in agreement with the general acceptance of "Fire" as the answer to the question of identity posed by Riddle 48(50), but I think this riddle may also have a second solution – "Anger." Martin Puhvel points out that though it could of course "grimly reward" those who lose control, anger had a very real survival value when men were faced with threats to life,[5] and during the Anglo-Saxon period such threats must have been almost omnipresent. According to Dorothy Whitelock, there was no time during the whole period that life could not suddenly be endangered by the obligation to revenge an injury.[6] The "Fire" creator, then, even as he followed the general rules prescribed by the riddle game by providing a challenge to his listeners' verbal skills, may also have been making an astute observation about human aggression. Anger is good if it helps you stay alive, but, uncontrolled, anger becomes a destroyer.

Riddle 48(50) is quite unexceptional in the way it follows the rules for riddle composition. Riddle 31(33), which can be solved as "Iceberg" or "Ice," and, if we again admit the possibility of double solution, also as "Hatred," bends them a bit. One of the unwritten rules that seems to have

governed riddle composition said that subjects could be described from the point of view of an observer (as they are in riddles that use *ic seah* [I saw] formulas) *or* from the point of view of the riddle subject (as they are in the *ic eom* [I am] riddles), but not from both points of view. The structure of Riddle 31(33) is thus quite unusual.[7] This riddle consists of an eight line introduction, presented in the third person, followed by a first-person, self-identifying speech that is attributed to the riddle subject.

Riddle 31(33)

Wiht cwom æfter wege wrætlicu liþan
cymlic from ceolan cleopode to londe,
hlinsade hlude – hleahtor wæs gryrelic,
egesful on earde. Ecge wæron scearpe;
wæs hio hetegrim, hilde to sæne,
biter beadoweorca. Bordweallas grof
heardhiþende. Heterune bond!
Sægde searocræftig ymb hyre sylfre gesceaft:
"Is min modor mægða cynnes
þæs deorestan þæt is dohtor min
eacen uploden; swa þæt is ældum cuþ,
firum on folce, þæt seo on foldan sceal
on ealra londa gehwam lissum stondan."

(A magnificent creature came to move along the way; beautiful, she called from her throat to the land, sounded loudly – her laughter was terrible, awe inspiring on earth. Her edges were sharp; she was hate-fierce, slow in battle, fierce battle-work. The hard-plundering one dug into shield-walls. She was bound in hate-runes! The cunning one said of her own origin: "My mother that is [the same as] my daughter grown large is of the most valued kind of woman; thus it is known to men, to people on earth, that she shall stand on earth in every land, joyfully.")

I have translated the *ceolan* of line 2a as "throat" rather than "keel," both for the sound grammatical and common sense reasons Williamson presents, and because "throat" participates in the development of the inanimate-animate metaphor that provides the basic structure of the poem. My choice of "hate-runes" rather than the "hateful mystery" Williamson prefers for the *Heterune* of 7b is also the result of interpretive intention. *Heterune* expresses the idea of the iceberg's fierce hostility; it is part of a semantic pattern that includes *gryrelic* (terrible), *egesful* (awe inspiring), *hetegrim* (hate-fierce), *hilde to sæne* (slow in battle), and *biter beadoweorca* (fierce battle-work). Williamson's paraphrase, "being locked like the rage of a warrior whose passion is steeled for the coming battle," for *Heterune bond*, however, seems precisely right for the hostility communicated by the opening lines of the poem. Indeed, the paraphrase suggests a possibility for solving the "Iceberg" riddle on two levels. Just as "Fire" may be about anger, "Ice" may be about another, perhaps even more fearful, human power to destroy.

The rules for riddle composition that had to do with metaphor provided a possibility that we have just seen exploited. Metaphor made it possible to describe forces of nature as if they were human beings. Metaphor made it possible to describe fire as an obedient servant or a proud warrior, and water as a beautiful woman or a fiercely antagonistic virago. And the ways

we have seen the metaphor rule exploited in Riddle 48(50) and Riddle 31(33) suggest that the creators of these two riddles realized that they could also turn their inanimate-animate subjects inside out. They could make their inanimate subjects take on human form as they presented descriptions calculated to lead to solutions like "Fire" and "Ice"; and at the same time, if we accept the possibility of double understanding, they could make their "Fire" and "Ice" descriptions stand for destructive human potentiality. The "Fire" and "Ice" poets seem to have used their "say what it is called" game not just to make observations about the world they lived in, but also to say something about the life of human beings in the world.

Like the natural elements of fire and water, human aggression can take different forms. Aggression is not necessarily destructive. Verbal competition is fun, and defense against the attacks of enemies is necessary and commendable. But two aggressive behaviors singled out for attention in "Fire" and "Ice" have no redeeming purpose. Proud anger raging out of control is a force to be feared; and cold hatred, with its inexorable ability to grind down the helpless creatures who fall into its path, can indeed strike terror into the hearts of those who witness its effects, or hear them described. Some aggressive roles were roles that ought to be played, both in game and for real. Others were not. The Old English riddlers knew this serious truth, and thus their game served a fourth function. It enabled them to say some of the things they knew about themselves.

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Notes

1. Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Sex Differences in Language* (London and New York: Longman, 1986) 10-11, notes that men, unlike women, typically adopt a competitive style in conversation. We have no direct knowledge of the conversation of Anglo-Saxon men *or* women. Nevertheless, in both the flyting game, as it is presented in *Beowulf*, and the game represented by the riddles of the Exeter Book we can see the competitive nature of two formalized types of male conversation.

2. Alexander Alland, Jr., *The Human Imperative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972) 88, defining the broad, general function of play, says that it provides a non-punitive way to learn the rules of a culture. The Exeter Book riddles can be seen as examples of "playful aggression," which Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973) 188, defines by reference to its intention – "the exercise of skill." Several of these examples of "playful aggression," in turn, present aggressive behaviors that are clearly in accord with the value system that determined the reciprocal responsibilities of the Anglo-Saxon warrior and his lord.

3. See Craig Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977) 266-68, for the Latin "Creation" riddle. Citations of Old English riddles will be to this edition. First numbers for riddles will be those assigned by Williamson; second numbers (in parentheses) those assigned by George Phillip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, ASPR 3 (N.Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 1936).

4. See Williamson 483-84 for riddle solutions; also Donald K. Fry, "Exeter Book Riddle Solutions," *Old English Newsletter*, 15 (1981): 22-23.

5. See Puhvel, *Beowulf and Celtic Tradition* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1979) for discussion of the positive values of "battle rage."

6. *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951) 17.

7. Only two other riddles, 36(38), "Young Ox" or "Bull Calf," and 46(48), "Chalice" or "Paten" enclose quoted speeches.