

THE SEXUAL RIDDLES OF THE *EXETER BOOK*

by

Jacky Bolding

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**APPROVAL**

NAME: Jacqueline Bolding  
DEGREE: Master of Arts (English)  
TITLE OF THESIS: The Sexual Riddles of the *Exeter Book*

Examining Committee:

Chair: Chinmoy Banerjee

---

Harvey De Roo  
Senior Supervisor  
Assistant Professor of English

---

Mary-Ann Stouck  
Associate Professor of English

---

John Tucker  
External Examiner  
Professor of English  
University of Victoria

Date Approved:

August 5, 1992

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Author:

(signature)

Jaeky Bolding  
(name)

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(date)

—ABSTRACT—

**The Sexual Riddles of the *Exeter Book***

The *Exeter Book* contains six riddles with explicit sexual content. The consensus of opinion is that these riddles use the language of *double entendre*: that is, they point to two solutions at once, one sexual, the other non-sexual, or *formal*, as it has been called. The sexual solution, and the explicit content which pertains to it, tends to be viewed as secondary to the *formal* solution. However, I argue that there are not in fact two equally supportable solutions to these sexual riddles. Only the sexual solution is *consistently* sustained by the language and the content of the poems.

Following from this argument, I examine the information the sexual content provides. These riddles furnish models of sexual activity, and in so doing reveal attitudes of the Anglo-Saxons toward private life — attitudes rarely found in other Old English poetry. Further, the sexual riddles are valuable in the glimpse they provide of the connection between private and public life in Anglo-Saxon England: in the relations between men and women, the public consequences of those relationships, and the position of women in that society generally.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title	i
Approval	ii
Abstract	iii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Testing the Formal Solutions	15
Riddle 23	16
Riddle 42	20
Riddle 43	24
Riddle 52	28
Riddle 59	32
Riddle 60	36
Chapter Three: Correlating Themes	44
Chapter Four:	
Re-examining the Historical Evidence	79
Conclusions	99
Appendix One:	
Scholarly agreement on the sexual content of the six riddles under consideration	105
Appendix Two:	
Riddle 40 - <i>Cock and Hen</i>	108
Bibliography	109
Index	115

## Chapter One: Introduction

Among the *Exeter Book* riddle collection there is a group of riddles which deals — more or less explicitly — with sex. Though the number of such riddles varies with the individual editor or critic, this group invariably includes 23, 42, 43, 52, 59 and 60. These six are the most explicit, and no reader who acknowledges sexual content has ever had any trouble recognizing it here.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, so-called *formal* solutions have been posited for all of them. These *formal* solutions — "Onion," "Key," "Dough," "Churn," "Helmet/ Shirt," and "Poker/Borer" respectively — are well established in the canon of criticism on this subject.<sup>2</sup>

These particular riddles have been labelled *double entendre*.<sup>3</sup> Their language is said to point to two different solutions: one is the sexual, the other is the *formal*, as noted above. The sexual solution, and the explicit content which pertains to it, is said to function as low or vulgar humor, and is usually given no more serious consideration than a "dirty joke" would deserve. Thus while the *double entendre* offers two dissimilar solutions it also invites a value judgement, placing the importance of one solution, the

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<sup>1</sup> I am using Craig Williamson's numbering and the "solutions" as they appear in *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977). See Appendix One, page 105, for what is considered sexual content and by whom.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Tupper's use of the term "formally stated solution" will be followed here. See quotation from "The Comparative study of riddles," *MLN*, 18 (1903), on page 9, following.

<sup>3</sup> For the origins of the term *double entendre* see page 6, following.

*formal*, over the other, the sexual. My examination of the *Exeter Book* riddles, however, has led me to conclude that the sexual riddles are not *double entendre*. The two different solutions are not in fact equally supportable. The sexual solution is *consistently* sustained by the language and the content of the poems, while the *formal* is not.

The desire to see second, *formal* solutions for the sexual riddles is, I think, likely to be culture-specific. It derives from the attitudes toward sex imbedded in the culture of the *Exeter Book* editors who first examined these riddles. Those editors were Victorian and Edwardian.<sup>4</sup> Frederick Tupper published an edition in 1911,<sup>5</sup> as did Alfred J. Wyatt the same year.<sup>6</sup> The ground-work established

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<sup>4</sup> There were also German editions and commentaries, some of which appeared earlier. Most notably Moritz Trautmann wrote a number of articles on the riddles for the journal *Anglia*, between 1883 and 1919. He produced an edition in 1915, *Die altenglischen Ratsel, die Ratsel des Exeterbuchs* (Heidelberg). Dietrich's remarks on the riddles appear in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 1859 and 1865. The riddles are also included in a collection of Old English poetry edited by Bruno Assman, *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie* [Vol. 3] (Leipzig, 1898). Christian Grein wrote two articles on the riddles for *Germania* in 1865. In 1857-58 he also edited a collection in which the riddles appear, *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie* [2 vols] (Göttingen). As well, Grein co-authored *Sprachschatz der angelsächsischen Dichter* (Heidelberg, 1912), in collaboration with F. Holthausen. Holthausen himself wrote a number of articles for *Anglia* on the riddles between 1884 and 1940. I am using only English-language editions. Throughout this paper references to these German authors are those which appear in the English works.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (New York, 1911).

<sup>6</sup> Alfred J. Wyatt, *Old English Riddles* (Boston, 1911). Since 1911, the riddles have also appeared in W. S. Mackie, *The Exeter Book*, Part 2 [EETS O.S. 194] (London, 1934); George Phillip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Exeter Book* [ASPR., vol. 3] (New York and London, 1936); Paul F. Baum, *Anglo Saxon Riddles of The Exeter Book* (North Carolina, 1963); Craig Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (North Carolina, 1977); Frank H. Whitman, *Old English Riddles* (Ottawa: Canadian Federation for the Humanities, 1982).

by these Victorian/Edwardian scholars is commendable, but their particular treatment of the sexual riddles is less so, since they were clearly disinclined to engage the sexual nature of this group of riddles. The impulse of these early readers was to dismiss these poems, affixing the label "folk products" as a mark of their inferiority to the more "literary" riddles included in the *Exeter Book* collection.<sup>7</sup>

Modern culture still suffers from the same uneasiness with sexuality that affected the Victorian/Edwardian world to which these early editors belonged, especially regarding female sexuality. However, there is an important difference between ourselves and the early readers. Explicit sexual content and its implications are now discussed, lingering problems or not. Assumptions about gender roles in Anglo-Saxon England was first challenged by Betty Bandel in the 1950's.<sup>8</sup> Open discussion of sexual images in these riddles

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<sup>7</sup> Tupper considered the sexual riddles as "puzzles whose smut and smiles point directly to a humble origin." See his article "Originals and Analogues of the Exeter Book Riddles," *MLN*, 18 (1903), p. 97. Wyatt felt similarly: "[the] absence of lubricity in Old English poetry is so remarkable, that the breach of the rule in the *double entendre* riddles . . . leads me to attribute to them a folk origin." *Old English Riddles*, p. xxxi. The *double entendre* category often includes notions of "obscenity" and "pornography" (though the term *double entendre* itself is not synonymous with either) depending on the perspective of the particular reader. The term "obscene" comes from Frederick Tupper (see page 10 following). Baum comments that "[*obscene*] is a troublesome word for both legal and lay minds, but there is nothing uncertain about these few Anglo-Saxon riddles which go under that name." *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 57. The term "pornographic" is Williamson's. He talks about the assumed dual solution to the *double entendre*: "one prim, one pornographic." *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 201.

<sup>8</sup> Betty Bandel, "The English Chronicler's Attitude Toward Women," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 16 (1955), pp. 114-115. Some of Bandel's commentary appears in Chapter Four, below.



was first broached by Edith Whitehurst Williams in the 1970's. She noticed, first of all, the problems of the early editors, ascertaining that "the riddles were first solved in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth and as a consequence of the time were unfortunately labelled 'obscene.' Victorian scholars seem to have stumbled upon them in dismay and were confronted with the task of dealing with them as delicately as possible." More importantly, she also noticed that the sexual images, once examined, brought to light specific, and I think correct, implications regarding female sexuality and Anglo-Saxon women. She declares "sexual pleasure [to be] ...clearly within the province of women" and further, that "there was no sanction against this pleasure." \*

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\* Edith Whitehurst Williams, "What's so New About the Sexual Revolution? Some Comments on Anglo-Saxon Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Women Based on Four Exeter Book Riddles," *Texas Quarterly*, 18 (1975), p. 47. Though accepting the *double entendre* premise, Whitehurst Williams looks at three of the six sexual riddles, 23, 43, and 59, focussing on what they indicate about the female participants in particular. However, she discounts the other sexual riddles, 42, 52, and 61, which I consider to be equally important, maintaining that they add no "insight" into "feminine psychology" (p. 55). Whitehurst Williams adds riddle 87 to the *double entendre* category. See Appendix One, page 105. There are a few other readers who have looked at sexuality in the riddles and have interesting suggestions to offer. Gregory Kirk Jember writes about the sexual riddles in his dissertation, "An Interpretive Translation of the Exeter Book Riddles" (University of Denver: 1975). Like the other critics, he upholds the idea of the *double entendre* but would add more variant subauditions. Jember counts twenty to twenty-one riddles as sexual. See also Appendix One. In Ann Harleman-Stewart's article, "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," *Lore and Language*, 3 (1983), the author talks about riddles 23, 42, and 61, noting mainly the supposed *double entendre* feature, but also "the special lexicon of these riddles; their imagery; and the terms used to designate the participants" (p. 46). I consider some of these ideas below, where they are relevant to my own discussion.

The work of Bandel and, particularly, Whitehurst Williams, has established the groundwork for understanding that the discomfort with issues of sexuality experienced by the early editors of these riddles did not necessarily exist for the Anglo-Saxons. Following from this, I suggest that the sexual riddles were constructed with sexual intercourse primarily and deliberately in mind, and for minds free of uneasiness with the sexual material, *no* second solution suggests itself. The very fact that *double entendre* is not posited for any of the other riddles should give us pause in assuming it here.<sup>10</sup> The language in the sexual riddles is indeed indirect, but this does not necessarily imply a double referent. All of the riddles in the *Exeter Book* collection use indirect language but nonetheless present a single solution. In the sexual riddles, the indirect language provides resonances that serve to expand our understanding of the sexual subject. That is, they do not baffle with a systematic doubleness, sending us chasing after two referents simultaneously, which at the last minute resolve into one at the expense of the other.

Though they are no longer called "folk products" necessarily, the sexual riddles still give pause to modern

<sup>10</sup> In other areas of research the practice of reading "doubles" has been subject to review. Ian Hamnett looks at folk riddles and suggests that "riddles are often 'objectively' susceptible of more than one reasonable and appropriate solution, but in fact only one solution 'counts' as correct. . . . This is no doubt because the author of the riddle perceives the referent first and composes the riddle afterwards." Though Hamnett is discussing ethnic folk riddles, I believe that this observation about them applies to the alleged *double entendre* riddles in the *Exeter Book* as well. "Ambiguity, Classification and Change: the Function of Riddles," *Man*, 2 (1967), p. 385.

readers. Even now, eighty-odd years after Tupper published his edition, their presence in the collection is not fully understood. Ann Harleman-Stewart, for example, asks "what are these poems doing in a collection of otherwise serious poetry — a collection presented by a bishop to his cathedral?"<sup>11</sup> And Frank H. Whitman seems to find it surprising that "side by side" with poems that are acknowledged as serious and lyrical, "are the 'obscene' riddles, a striking contrast to those of more elevated tones."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the sexual riddles are considered as especially troublesome in a body of work that is itself viewed as "difficult."<sup>13</sup>

The convention of defining these sexual riddles as *double entendre* was put forward early on by Tupper who proposed that they were "puzzles of double meaning and coarse suggestion."<sup>14</sup> Though the basic notion of *double*

<sup>11</sup> She continues, "[this] question is finally, unanswerable; but the asking of it suggests that these riddles deserve a closer examination than they have received so far." "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," p. 39. Agop Hacikyan asks a similar question, offering two alternate answers: either this particular riddle form was simply "popular," or "the fact that the coarse details in the riddles in question are so thinly disguised perhaps indicates a frank and honest approach to sex and the sex act among the Anglo-Saxons. From this wonderful variety of riddle themes and subjects . . . a complete panoramic social view reveals itself . . . [to] represent a commentary upon life in Anglo-Saxon Britain." Though Hacikyan does not elaborate on this point, I agree with his suggestion here and take a similar view. See *A Linguistic and Literary Analysis of the Old English Riddles* (Montreal: Mario Casalini, 1966), pp. 40-41.

<sup>12</sup> Frank H. Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> Tupper calls [the riddles] "the most difficult text in Anglo-Saxon". Frank H. Whitman has pointed to "difficulties" such as "the natural obliquity of the form . . . no accompanying solutions," a "corrupt" manuscript and "unreliable" text. *Old English Riddles*, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> Tupper, "Originals and Analogues of the Exeter Book Riddles," p. 103.

*entendre* has not changed, recent scholars have added more detail to this fundamental idea. Harleman-Stewart's point of view is quite clear:

These riddles are constructed so as to satisfy the conditions for two solutions simultaneously: an actual solution, which is not sexual, and an apparent one, which is sexual . . . . the poet cannot for a moment lapse wholly into one or the other of the two worlds; he cannot for a moment take his eye off either of the two solutions. The words and images he chooses reflect this double preoccupation, since they must apply to both solutions, and participate in both contexts, at once. . . . In essence, then, we are dealing with an instance of double vision. The creation of double *entendre* means juggling two different referents, sustaining a description that applies equally to both at once.<sup>15</sup>

This position is widely supported and it is reinforced, in more or less detail, in much of the writing on the subject.<sup>16</sup> I intend to demonstrate in the chapter following that the sexual riddles do not actually sustain the perpetually asserted "two separate solutions at once." There are indeed multiple layers or levels of meaning contained

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<sup>15</sup> Stewart, "Double *entendre* in the Old English Riddles," pp. 39-40.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, James E. Anderson says that "some riddles, notably the obscene ones, are conceived as double-tracked metaphors, with a true and a false spur for simultaneous trains of analytical thought. Thus obscene riddles lead to an innocent solution and to entrapment in an obscenity at the same time." *Two Literary Riddles in the Exeter Book: Riddle 1 and the Easter Riddle* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), pp. 5-7. Similarly, Williamson comments in *A Feast of Creatures* that in *double entendre* riddles "the poet is at pains to keep both solutions before us" p. 201. This comment is about *Riddle 45* specifically, but the sentiment is meant to stand for other *double entendre* riddles as well. He also says that *Riddle 61* has "two solutions" p. 191. Hacıkyan seems to question the validity of this categorical definition applied to the sexual riddles, though he does not press the question very far: "it is necessary to admit that each of the coarse details can also imply ordinary implements found in everyday life; *but to what extent we cannot say*" [italics mine]. *A Linguistic and Literary Analysis of the Old English Riddles*, pp. 40-41.

within any one of the sexual riddles, but these serve to impart and enhance the sexual solution without pointing to a second one, as is necessarily the case for the *double entendre* with its "words and images [reflecting] a double preoccupation."<sup>17</sup>

I believe that the *double entendre* perspective has subordinated the sexual content. It tends to be viewed as secondary to a "real," more utilitarian or domestic solution: household instruments, vegetables, and so forth have been found, imposed, and finally established as authentic meanings.<sup>18</sup> Substantial *bending* of the meaning of specific words often takes place in order to get the poem to fit the non-sexual solution, and the results are questionable. At times, a particular specification *will* support the formal solution. When this does occur, however, the meaning usually has to be restricted to a very limited sense of the word. Fuller connotations either make no sense or must be ignored. Thus something of the signification is forfeited in order for the formal solution to work. On the

<sup>17</sup> Stewart, "D. E.," pp. 39-40.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, Stewart says in "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," p. 49, that "the sexual solution to one of these riddles is not the 'real' solution." Marie Nelson remarks similarly that, "in the double entendre riddles listed by Baum the obscured [official] solutions are readily recognized as the 'real' answers". "Old English Riddle 18 (20): A Description Of Ambivalence," *Neophil*, 66 (1982), p. 291. As well, Richard Hamer has said that "[the] few obscene [riddles] consist of the joke of describing some apparently obscene object which in fact turns out to represent something else." *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 95. Baum, on the other hand, does in fact seem to think that the sexual solution in the case of one riddle at least, is "pretended," though he gives it no import beyond that of a joke. *Anglo Saxon Riddles of The Exeter Book*, p. 57.

other hand, the sexual solution will support the full range of connotative meanings of any given specification.

Sometimes, readers will admit that the solutions they present are not adequate and are even contradictory. Furthermore, this practise of offering explanations acknowledged as deficient is *itself* defended. As Tupper has said, and others follow him, any solution will do where the sexual riddles are concerned, since such solutions are "loosely" applied by the poet himself as an excuse for writing "smut."

In 1908, Tupper declared:

By far the most numerous of all riddles of lapsing or varying solutions are those distinctively popular and unrefined problems, whose sole excuse or lack of excuse for being lies in double meaning and coarse suggestion. And the reason for this uncertainty of answer is at once apparent. The formally stated solution is so overshadowed by the obscene subject, implicitly presented in each limited motive of the riddle, that little attention is paid to the aptness of this. It is after all only a pretence, not the chief concern of the jest. Almost any other answer will serve equally well as a grave and decent anti-climax to the smut and horse laughter of the riddle, so every country, indeed every section, supplies different tags to the same repulsive queries. . . . These instances abundantly prove the absurdity of dogmatizing over the answers to the Anglo-Saxon riddles of this class. It is probable that the collector himself knew and cared little about the original solutions, since any decorous reply would adorn his unseemly tale.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Tupper, "The Comparative Study of Riddles," *MLN*, 18 (1903), p. 6. On this point Tupper has a large following. For instance, Williamson says of riddle 59, that "in terms of the double entendre game being played it makes little difference which 'acceptable' solution is given. The point is to recognize the game or perhaps in the riddler's terms to catch the solver out." *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 320. Likewise, K. S. Kiernan mentions that the accuracy of the "inoffensive" solution may not matter, and that Tupper's point of view (above), whom he also quotes at length, "perhaps provide[s] a useful perspective." Tupper and those who agree with him here are, in a sense, correct in so far as they see the "formally stated solution" as unimportant, but the fact that they still insist on a formal solution fails to give the sexual meaning a legitimate place and

"Smut" and "coarse humor" are intrinsic to the idea of the *double entendre*, and such humor is very often seen as the primary function of the sexual riddles.<sup>20</sup> Tupper was one of the first to settle on terms like "Jest . . . and horse laughter" in reference to them.<sup>21</sup> Later readers have come to accept such designations as true. Paul Baum's declaration that "their interest today is as specimens of primitive humor"<sup>22</sup> seems representative, and other contemporary views uphold this position. Craig Williamson considers them to be "double entendre jokes,"<sup>23</sup> while Ann Harleman-Stewart regards them as poems whose sexual content is designed to trick the reader/hearer and provide a "slapstick" ending,<sup>24</sup> and K. S. Kiernan also talks about the "joke . . . in the case of all obscene riddles".<sup>25</sup> The problem with this approach is that it focuses the experience of the riddle on a supposed punch-line. For instance, a recent commentator, Marie Nelson, puts it that "the solver, having gotten the 'joke', has no reason to think further."<sup>26</sup> This attitude is

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undervalues the purpose of the riddle as a whole. "Kwene: The Old Profession of Riddle 95," *MP*, 72 (1974), p. 388-389.

<sup>20</sup> See Ch. 3, p. 56 for more on "smut" and Freud's use of the idea.

<sup>21</sup> Tupper, "The Comparative Study of Riddles," p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Baum, *Anglo Saxon Riddles of The Exeter Book*, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 323.

<sup>24</sup> Harleman-Stewart, "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Kiernan, "Kwene: The Old Profession of Riddle 95," p. 389.

assumed even where observers have found value in the sexual riddles. The merits they put forward usually have nothing to do with specific content beyond that which pertains directly to the "joke."<sup>27</sup> Thus readers often talk about the clever way a metaphor is sustained, and how deftly the poet leads us to the solution — how the "trick" works.<sup>28</sup> This "joke" theory is itself taken so seriously that any more vital meaning is not generally entertained.<sup>29</sup>

My purpose is to look more closely at the content, and thereby demonstrate an essential purpose to it. I reject the notion that their function is mainly to provoke laughter by "[catching] the solver out."<sup>30</sup> The etymology of the world *riddle* is *rædan* — "to give advice," and this is the perspective from which I view them.<sup>31</sup> The sexual riddles

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<sup>26</sup> "Old English Riddle 18 (20): A Description Of Ambivalence," *Neophil*, 66 (1982), p. 291.

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion concerning the riddle solely in terms of its "answer," see Ch. 4, page 100.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, the main point of Harleman-Stewart's article on the *double entendre* is "how skilfully the composer of Riddle 25 balances the two solutions, actual and apparent." "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> In other areas of research this idea of sexual riddles as comedic does not hold so much weight. In Hamnett's "Ambiguity, Classification and Change: The Function of Riddles," p. 382, the author remarks, "much that can be said of jokes can be said of riddles too. This is not because riddles are necessarily jokes. In modern British culture, riddles tend to be jokes, but this congruence of the two *genres* is ethnographically the exception rather than the rule." I believe that this is also the case with the *Exeter Book* sexual riddles.

<sup>30</sup> Williamson, p. 320.

<sup>31</sup> This is shown to be true of ethnic folk riddles. Hamnett has said that "one of the important social functions that riddles serve is to "[teach] rules of social conduct." "Ambiguity, Classification and Change: The Function of Riddles," p. 381. Elli Kongas-Maranda notes that "advice" in the form of sexual riddles serves a specific purpose: "the functions of riddles, whenever they have been reported



impart information regarding sexuality and sexual behavior, and so they necessarily refer to notions about private life and what shapes it. This is a topic that is not often suggested, much less elaborated upon, in other Anglo-Saxon poetry. It is only in the sexual riddles that we may begin to perceive how sex is placed in Anglo-Saxon society. It is first of all a personal matter and a component of *private* life. As the basis for the union between men and women it bonds individuals together in family relationships, and ultimately connects the individual to the broader *public* context of Anglo-Saxon society as a whole. These riddles imply certain paths of action that are deemed correct in sexual and social matters, reflecting the ties between personal and communal life. Thus the perspective of the sexual riddles is holistic, and by that I mean there is a kind of an overlap, or interconnectedness, between the public and the private, as well as between individuals. In a close-knit society, each person's actions have an effect on someone or something else. Often, this group of riddles will emphasize the result of one's sexual desires and/or behavior upon another. These stated consequences are regarded as *natural*, a part of the act itself, indicating a state of integrity between thought, deed, and outcome.

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. . . have been said to deal with preparation to marriage . . . riddles can be viewed as the perhaps more specialized language in which a group speaks of its most basic social action, the union of a man and a woman." Given this information, it seems appropriate that riddles that deal specifically with sex *would* be included within a collection. See "The Logic of Riddles," *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, Pierre and Elli Kongas-Maranda eds. (Philadelphia, 1971), p. 193.

This same integrity exists in other Anglo-Saxon poetry. *Beowulf* is a case in point.<sup>32</sup> There is no separation of Beowulf's thoughts, or stated intentions, and his actions. Moreover, there is none expected. He therefore exists in a state of personal integrity. This integrity is extended to include the whole of Beowulf's society — relationships within it, rather than an individual's independence, establish the value of any single person, as well as the worth and strength of that entire society. This is as true of the private relationships illustrated in the sexual riddles as it is of the most public ones, such as the affiliation between lord and retainer, in *Beowulf*. In this way, these poems are no less serious than the other riddles in the *Exeter Book*, or than *Beowulf*, which evinces this same interconnectedness.

In the sexual riddles, this overall social/organic view of things is applied to sex in particular. These riddles, then, present no anomaly when compared to the apparently more significant or weighty material preserved in the *Exeter Book*, but are a part of the complete picture of human experience illuminated therein, since sexual relationships are the most fundamental of personal and social ties.

The instructions implied in the sexual riddles are, I think, quite moral, but they are not prohibitive or pro-

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<sup>32</sup> Fr. Klaeber ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburgh*, 3rd ed. (1922; rpt. Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath, 1950).

scriptive. The Victorian scholars found the explicitness of these riddles antithetical to any kind of moral view, and perhaps this still seems a contradiction to modern readers. However, this is a result of interpretation which must be understood in terms of the social and historical context of the reader. Relegating the sexual riddles to nothing more consequential than "secondary," "unexplainable," or "joke" status because the relationships expressed therein are more private than is comfortable for some, may be an action that reveals more of reader bias than of Anglo-Saxon culture. The import of these sexual riddles can be found in their obvious subject, not in spite of it. To ignore this fact is to ignore significant insight into the intricate relationship between self and society that this literature offers.

## Chapter Two: Testing the Formal Solutions

The language used in the sexual riddles of the *Exeter Book* is concrete, and points to, I believe, the sexual rather than the *formal* solution. Connotations of any single word are evocative, offering shades of meaning that augment and extend the sexual implications. If they support the *formal* solution at all, it is only in a superficial way; and often they actually check, rather than enhance, the significance of the *formal* solution. There is, therefore, no need to find a second, *formal*, solution to these riddles, or to exact meaning from them which supposedly relates to it.

In this chapter, each of the sexual riddles will be introduced in turn in order to demonstrate a primarily sexual meaning, and thus establish a basis from which to proceed with further analysis.

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### Riddle 23\*

Ic eom wunderlicu wiht, wifum on hyhte,  
neahbuendum nyt. Nænigum sceððe  
burgsittendra nymthe bonan anum.  
Stathol min is steapheah; stonde ic on bedde,  
neothan ruh nathwær. Netheð hwilum  
ful cyrtenu ceorles dohtor,  
modwlonc meowle, thæt heo on mec gripeð,  
ræseð mec on reodne, reafað min heafod,  
fegeð mec on fæsten. Feleth sona  
mines gemotes seo the mec nearwað,  
wif wundenloc — wæt bið thæt eage.

25.10: see the: MS. sethe.

*I am a wonderful thing, a joy to women, useful to near-dwellers. I do not scathe any of the town-sitters except my slayer alone. My foundation is steeply high; I stand in bed, I am hairy "somewhere" beneath. At times a very beautiful countryman's daughter ventures, a proud-minded woman, so that she grips on me, attacks [me] on [my] red [part], takes my head, binds me in a fastness. She who confines me feels my meeting immediately, wife with wound locks — that eye is wet.*<sup>34</sup>

The *formal* solution to this riddle is "Onion."<sup>35</sup> Of all the *formal* solutions for the sexual riddles this one provides the most plausible correspondence between the particulars of the language and of its posited referent. Nonetheless, readings of some of the details seem bent to accommodate this solution, whereas the same cannot be said of the sexual reading.

The undisclosed object in Riddle 23 is *wunderlicu wiht, wifum on hyhte*, "a wonderful thing, a joy to women."<sup>36</sup> This

\* Notes to variant numbers, the *formal* solutions, and the notes on manuscript alterations, are taken from Williamson's edition. Variant numbers for this riddle are: Williamson, 23; Trautmann, 23; Tupper, 26; Mackie, 25; Krapp and Dobbie, 25.

<sup>34</sup> The translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>35</sup> Solutions: all editors agree with Dietrich's answer, "onion."

<sup>36</sup> The full connotation includes "hope, joyous expectation" rather than simply "joy" alone. See Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1898; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1972). Whitehurst Williams has also pointed out that the word means more than "joy": "the phrase *wifum on hyhte* "joy to women" is self explanatory; the nature of the joy is expanded when

establishes a connection with women and their enjoyment. The poet elaborates on specific characteristics of the object that cause women to expect this pleasure: it is said to have a *stathol* which is *steapheah*; it is *neothan ruh nathwær* and *stonde on bedde*. The word *stathol* expresses firmness, referring literally to a "pillar." *Steap* means "lofty, high, towering," also "standing out, or up, prominent;" *neothan* and *ruh* indicate that some part "lower down, beneath," is "hairy, untrimmed," and "undressed."<sup>37</sup> And so, this *wundor* with a firm "base," which stands up while "in bed" is hardly obscure. The specifications given here, and the attenuations of each, correspond well to the appearance of an erect penis and the scrotum.

These specifications applied to an onion are less apt. *Steapheah* must be rendered something like "upright" in order for the description to suit the vegetable. The meaning of *ruh* as "shaggy," could possibly refer to the onion's roots. However, the other meanings of this word, especially "hairy," and "undressed," are lost in relation to the *formal* solution. Trautmann takes *stathol* to mean the onion "stalk," and Swaen feels that since the word "has the sense of *trunk*" there could "be no objection to rendering the word in this particular case by bulb."<sup>38</sup> Williamson sees a problem with

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we recognize that *hyhte* is used to mean "expectation," "desire," and "comfort."  
"What's so new about the Sexual Revolution?" pp. 48-49.

<sup>37</sup> Definitions from Bosworth and Toller. Further instances where *ruh* is used this way include: *Ombra rues cornes*, and *ambru meowles*, Chart Th. 40, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Swaen, "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," *Neophil*, 31 (1947), p. 12.

this, rightly pointing out that "most onions do not have shafts that could be called *steapheah*," and so he translates *stathol* as the "loose ground raised high into mounds or rows" into which the onion is planted.<sup>39</sup> But planting-rows are not particularly "lofty" and are certainly not "erect."

The woman is said to "join" or "fix" the object in a "fastness" which "narrows" it. *Fæsten* indicates an "enclosed place," and *nearwæð* means "confines [me]."<sup>40</sup> Thus, the woman "takes" the penis "head" and puts it into the "enclosed place" of her vagina. Some translators call this place the "larder,"<sup>41</sup> or the "pantry."<sup>42</sup> This suggests well enough the location a cook might place onions, but it is not what the woman in this poem actually does.

The "wet eye" of the last line is often presented as the final confirmation of the "Onion" solution. Dietrich first attempted to fit this reference to the *formal* solution when he argued that the "eye" is in fact meant to represent a "mouth." Later, Tupper asserted that "eye" could be left as it is, because "everywhere, in literature and in life,

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<sup>39</sup> Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, pp. 210-211.

<sup>40</sup> Bosworth and Toller. Other meanings of *fæsten* are: "stronghold, fortress, cloister . . . enclosure, prison, fastener."

<sup>41</sup> Michael Alexander, *Old English Riddles from the Exeter Book* (London: Anvil Press, 1980), p. 27.

<sup>42</sup> Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (Suufolk: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1982), p. 216.

onions cause the eye to water."<sup>43</sup> The problem with Dietrich's interpretation is that there is no visual correlation between a figurative "eye" and the literal "mouth" to which it supposedly refers. Tupper's suggestion is not without its problems either. He assumes that the poet is talking about a real eye, but such a depiction is out of keeping with the preceding language. Thus far, the poet has identified body parts without actually naming them. For example, *fæsten* indicates "vagina." *Stathol*, *nathwær*, *reodne*, and *heafod*, all indicate the penis quite obviously. Therefore, a direct naming of the "eye" is inconsistent with the preceding language. Its use, therefore, would appear to be metaphorical: the shape of the "eye" corresponds to the shape of the vagina or the aperture at the tip of the penis. The poet draws further on the erotic connotations of "wetness" to describe the specific results of sexual activity.

It is the connection which the poet made in the first line, between the object and the pleasure of women, that facilitates a sexual solution. Moving through the details, one makes logical sense of them in terms of that pleasure, rather than the "stalks," "bulbs," "roots,"<sup>44</sup> and vegetable

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<sup>43</sup> Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 126.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander, *Old English Riddles from the Exeter Book*, p. 27. Some other translations with a similarly vegetable theme include the following: "My bulb is very high" A. E. H. Swaen, "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," *Neophil*, 31 (1947), p. 12. "Rooted I stand on a high bed," Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs*, p. 83. "My stem is straight up," James E. Anderson, *Two Literary Riddles in the Exeter Book: Riddle 1 and the Easter Riddle*, pp. 6-7.



gardens suggested by readers and translators in order for the "object" to correspond more closely with the *formal* solution.

#### Riddle 42\*

Wrætlic hongað bi weres theo  
freaan under sceate: foran is thyrel  
Bið stith and heard; stede hafað godne.  
Thonne se esne his agen hrægl  
ofer cneo hefeð, wile thæt cuthe hol  
mid his hangellan heafde gretan  
thæt he efenlang ær oft gefylde.

44.1: efenlang. MS. efe lang.

*Something excellent hangs by a man's thigh, under the lord's lap: in the front is a hole. It is stiff and hard; it has a good position. When the servant lifts up his own garments over his knee, he desires to greet that known hole with the head of his hanging-thing that he — just as long — before often filled.*

The formally stated solution to this riddle is "Key."<sup>46</sup> However, the sexual identity of the object becomes clear through the way in which it is placed in relation to the man who possesses it. This placement weakens the formal solution. The *wrætlic* object in question "hangs by a man's thigh" and is said to be "stiff and hard" with a "hole" in front. It is beneath the man's clothes, next to his body, since the poet specifies that it is *under* his "lap" and *bi*, "near," his "thigh."<sup>47</sup> To expose the object, the man must

\* Variant numbers: Williamson, 42; Grien, 45; Trautmann, 42; Tupper, 45; Wyatt, 44; Mackie, 44; Krapp and Dobbie, 44.

<sup>46</sup> Solutions: Dietrich suggested "key" or "dagger sheath," preferring the second solution (see page 22, following. Tupper, Wyatt, Trautmann, and Mackie, Williamson all endorse the "key" solution.

lift his clothing, *hrægl*, over his knee.<sup>47</sup> A penis has all of these characteristics: the location is exact and the object's qualities correspond to the erect condition of the penis prior to sex.

Though the description and placement is accurate for the penis, this location is problematic when applied to the *formal* solution. Keys were worn on a rather large, wide belt such as the weight of the keys would require. For practical purposes, this sort of a belt was worn *over* the tunic, not *bi weres theo . . . under sceate*.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, a "key"

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<sup>47</sup> Bosworth and Toller note at least one instance where this word *sceate* is used in connection with marriage — *hio oprum man in sceat bewyddod si* "if she be betrothed to another man, L. Ethb. 83; Th. i. 24, 5." Thus the reference may be more sexual than we can gather from the definition alone. Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, p. 826.

<sup>48</sup> Since *hrægl* does not refer to a specific item and needs no inflection to be plural, I translate this word as "clothing." In *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1986), Gale R. Owen-Crocker remarks that *hræl* "is one of the most common and loosest of Old English garment names. . . . in most of its documented occurrences *hrægl* simply means 'a garment' or 'clothing' rather than any specific cloak or tunic" (p. 23). Bosworth and Toller note the singular "garment, dress, robe, rail," but some of the examples of usage suggest the plural, "vestments," or a suit of clothes. For example *mid mete and mid hræl*, "with food and clothing," Blickl. Homil. 41. 29; *on mednyclum hræl gehealdene*, "moderate in dress," 185. 17; *man hins forbearnath mid his wapnum and hræl*, "he is burnt with his weapons and clothing," Ors. 1, 1; Swt. 21, 8. For other examples of this kind see Bosworth and Toller, p. 555.

<sup>49</sup> It seems that Anglo-Saxon men wore a belted tunic perhaps as early as the fifth century, and almost definitely in the later Anglo-Saxon period: Owen-Crocker remarks in *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* that "textile fragments" have been found on the backs of the pieces of men's belt's from the fifth and sixth centuries, suggesting that the belt was worn over a tunic or trousers (p. 72). She surmises that "probably the elaborate belts which are evidenced from the pagan period would be worn where they could be seen, and where any attached articles would be readily accessible. Perhaps, then, if the owners wore tunics, the belt would be worn outside them, although a second belt, girdle or string may have secured the trousers beneath" (p. 80). From the eighth century onwards the evidence is more conclusive: "In Anglo-Saxon art of the Christian period the majority of male figures wear girdled tunics" (p. 121), and "the belt, sometimes buckled, continued to be an important part of the male costume" (p. 125). But by the ninth century,

would *not* be worn in the place that is specified in this riddle. In addition, the object hangs by *weres* thigh, and so it is certain that it is the man who possesses it. This is in itself irregular. Dietrich suggested at least eighty years ago that keys are not commonly associated with men. He was inclined to reject the "key" solution for this reason.<sup>90</sup> Modern archaeological evidence supports Dietrich's observation. In the fifth and sixth centuries, it was fashionable to carry accessories on the belt, of which a key is certainly one — but this was the custom of women, not men. In the seventh and eighth centuries this practise became less popular, even among women, fading almost completely in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>91</sup> But, as a reference to the man's penis, then the proximity of the object to the *theo* . . . *under sceate* is perfectly apt.

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"the waisted shape of all tunics suggests that they were regularly fastened by a girdle or belt" (p. 161).

<sup>90</sup> Frederick Tupper explains, "[as] the Anglo-Saxon key is associated with women . . . Dietrich inclines to the second solution." Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 176.

<sup>91</sup> In *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, Owen-Crocker maintains that in the fifth and sixth centuries, "[w]omen wore a greater number and variety of appendages than men. Keys have been found at the hips of women in most regions at this early period (p. 4). And further, "men, like women, usually carried a knife at the waist, and other things such as tweezers and shears were also carried at the belt; but the keys, toilet articles and suspension rings which are often found at women's waists are less frequently associated with men" (p. 80). In the seventh century, Owen-Crocker notes what she terms the "decline of the popularity of the buckled belt" (p. 100), suggesting that for women "there are never any pendant girdle ends or any signs of a buckle, nor are there any tools or personal ornaments hanging from the girdle or sash" (p. 140); and for men "the ubiquitous knives of the pagan period are absent and appendages of any kind are rare" (p. 162).

Beginning at line 5b, we are told what the man does with this "hanging thing": *wile thæt cuth hole mid his hangellan heafde gretan*. *Willan* indicates "desire," and *gretan* is more than a greeting: definitions include "visit, touch, attack," and also specifically "know carnally." *Cuthe* is not only "known," but also, "well known," and "familiar, intimate, related."<sup>52</sup> Thus, the already clearly described penis "desires" to "touch" or "know carnally" the vagina — *hol* — an "intimate" place.

In the last line, there is a suggestion of occasionally attained length and customary action, which accommodates a sexual interpretation. This "hanging-thing" acquires length during sex as "he" did "before" in order to "fill" the "known hole" — *thæt he efenlang oft gefylde*.<sup>53</sup> This particular image applies to the sexual solution very well; it has little meaning in relation to a key and a lock.

Verse translations are often undertaken with the surmised "key" correlation in mind. The "hanging thing" is said to "[swivel] about,"<sup>54</sup> or be "bold, brassy."<sup>55</sup> But while a key is indeed "brassy," and it does "swivel" in the lock, these are *not* details that we are actually given.

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<sup>52</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>53</sup> I take *efenlang* to modify *he*, with Tupper. *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 177.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander, *Old English Riddles from the Exeter Book*, p. 44.

<sup>55</sup> Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs*, p. 104.

### Riddle 43\*

Ic on wincle gefrægn weax[an] nathwæt  
thindan ond thunian, thecene hebban.  
On thæt banleasne bryd grapode,  
hygewlonc hondum; hrægle theahte  
thrindende thing theodnes dohtor.

45.1: weaxan: MS. weax.

*I heard of a [wax] "something" [to grow] in a corner, to swell up and to stand up, to raise its cover. On that boneless (thing) a bride grasped, the proud-minded one with her hands; The prince's daughter covered the swelling thing with [her] garment.*

The formal solution to this riddle is "Dough."<sup>57</sup> The poet informs us in the first line that he has — *gefrægn weaxan nathwæt* — "heard of" something, an "I-don't-know-what", that is said either to be "wax" or to "grow" in a "corner." Because a *wincle* is not needed to make dough, Swaen calls this a "crux," explaining that "one cannot say that dough must necessarily be prepared in a corner."<sup>58</sup> However, a "corner" does not present any particular difficulty in a sexual interpretation since it implies the seclusion that such an encounter requires.

Whether the *nathwæt* is "wax" or it "grows" depends on whether one emends the ms. *weax* to *weaxan*. The ms. reading and the emendation are the subject of some confusion and debate as to what each means, exactly, in relation to the solution. Tupper prefers *weaxan*, saying that "weaxan . . .

\* Variant Numbers: Williamson, 43; Grien, 46; Trautmann, 43; Tupper, 46; Wyatt, 45; Mackie, 45; Krapp and Dobbie, 45.

<sup>57</sup> Solutions: Dietrich first offered "Bee" as the solution to this riddle. Trautmann proposed "Dough", as also did Herzfield. This is the established solution.

<sup>58</sup> Swaen, "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," p. 12.

accords with both the grammar and the sense of the passage, as well as with the metrical demands of 46 1b."<sup>59</sup> Swaen finds a problem with *weaxan*: "[this] introduces a new comparison: the matter, perhaps dough, is described as wax, a plastic substance. The comparison is not inappropriate for, owing to its softness, wax is often used in figurative language, and a reference to it would lead the reader off the track. . . . Taking all in all a miswritten *waces* suits the context best and appears to me the safest conjecture."<sup>60</sup>

The only real "problem," though, is in trying to fit the significance of this detail to the "Dough" solution. Left alone, it is *à propos* to a sexual interpretation. Whatever word is chosen, *weax* or *weaxan*, the close semblance between the two words causes one to imply the other — possibly an intentional ambiguity. In its original manuscript form the word *weax* has the same meaning as in modern English: *wax*, a substance that has a *plastic* mutable quality, a property suitable to the male sexual apparatus. It also sometimes stands as a replacement noun for "candle" in Old English, the shape of which suggests the sexual "object."<sup>61</sup> *Weaxan*, to increase, denotes expansion.<sup>62</sup> And

<sup>59</sup> Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>60</sup> Swaen, "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," p. 148. Swaen is referring here to a suggestion of Dietrich's that *weax* should read *weax=weacs=waces*, gen. sing. of *wac*, "weak, soft." See Williamson, *Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, note to Rid. 43, p. 282. As well, Baum (though he seems somewhat disdainful of it) does notice here what he calls a "a primitive pun. . . . the scribe wrote *weax*, the noun, 'wax,' for *weaxan*, the infinitive, 'to increase.'" Baum, *Anglo Saxon Riddles of The Exeter Book*, p. 58.

so, there is a three-fold value evident here: the mutable quality of the wax, the shape of a candle — like an erect penis — and the verb meaning "grow" or "increase", which is what the *nathwæt* certainly does.

The attributes given to this *nathwæt* indicate that it does two things: *thindan*, "to swell up," and *thunian*, "to stand out, be prominent, be lifted up."<sup>63</sup> But while these specifications correctly describe an erect penis, they do not correspond well to the *formal* solution. Although "dough" does "swell," it cannot really be said to "stand." Moreover, this *nathwæt* is a "boneless" thing. Certainly, "dough" has no bones and, in a sense, it is correct to point out that this fits the *formal* solution; but the suggestion of "boneless" associated with "dough" is so arbitrary that it means almost nothing in relation to the qualities of that substance. However, unconfined to a *formal* solution, the suggestion is more relevant. The word *ban*, by itself, means simply "bone," but it can indicate the bone of a limb specifically as is indicated in some of the compounds which use *ban*.<sup>64</sup> The penis is *banleas*, but it acts as a limb when

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<sup>61</sup> I am thinking of such compounds as *weaxberende* = "candlebearer" in *DR*. See Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>62</sup> *Weaxan*: grow, be fruitful, increase, become powerful, flourish. Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>63</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>64</sup> For example, *banriht* and *banbeorge* both mean leg armour. *Banece* is a pain in the thigh. See Bosworth and Toller.

it is erect, as if it had a bone. Thus, *both* senses of the word are, by implication, very apt.

In the last line, the woman covers the "swelling thing" with her garments. This describes well enough the sexual act, in which the penis is so covered. It is also evocative of pregnancy, and the image is appropriate since it is the natural outcome of sexual intercourse. This is a difficult detail to reconcile with "dough" or the making of bread, and so translations often make the woman's garments seem like a tea-towel instead, even though it is "clothes" that are specifically mentioned. For example, Williamson translates, "the prince's daughter covered that swelling thing with a swirl of cloth;"<sup>65</sup> and Crossley-Holland, "the daughter of a king covered that swollen thing with a cloth."<sup>66</sup> Other translators allow "clothes" to stand, but fail to explain what it could mean in relation to "dough."<sup>67</sup>

Craig Williamson offers a possible correlation between this riddle and its proposed solution: "It is an elaborate conceit based upon the role of the Anglo-Saxon wife as hlæfdige, 'lady, mistress of the house' (B.T., p. 539),

<sup>65</sup> Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs*, p. 105.

<sup>66</sup> Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World*, p. 221.

<sup>67</sup> Examples of translators who keep the original "dress," or "garments": Baum, "A proud-minded woman seized with her hands/ that boneless thing, a prince's daughter;/ covered with her dress the swelling thing," *Anglo Saxon Riddles of The Exeter Book*, p. 58; Alexander, "A bride grabbed at that boneless thing,/ Handled it proudly: a prince's daughter/ Covered that swelling creature with her robe," *Old English Riddles from the Exeter Book*, p. 45; Whitman, "A proud woman seized that boneless thing with her hands; the lord's daughter covered that swelling thing with her dress," *Old English Riddles*, p. 198.



literally, 'kneader of the dough'.<sup>66</sup> But the particular designation, *hlæfdige*, does not appear here. There is nothing in the poem, therefore, which would indicate that the poet had this specifically in mind. The action itself suggests a sexual solution. The actual references to the woman — *bryd* and *theodnes dohtor* — have nothing to do with preparing bread; rather, *bryd* suggests the marital relationship directly, and this befits the *sexual* content of the poem. Further, women are not normally connected with this kind of work in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>67</sup> If it is not usually the duty of a serving woman to do baking, then it is certainly not the chore of an aristocratic woman.

#### Riddle 52<sup>a</sup>

Hyse cwom gangan thær he hie wisse  
 stondan in wincle; stop feorran to  
 hror hægstealdmon, hof his agen  
 hrægl hondum up, hrand under gyrdels  
 hyre stondendre stithes nathwæt,  
 worhte his willan: wagedan buta.  
 Thegn onnette; wæs thragum nyt

<sup>66</sup> Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 282.

<sup>67</sup> Christine Fell explains, "Old English has both masculine and feminine nouns for bakers. . . . Again in an area which we might have expected to be female dominated this is not the case, and the *bacere* of *Elfric's Colloquy* is clearly describing a secular not merely a monastic situation when he says without his craft every table would look empty, and that his products are not only strengthening for men, nor do the little ones, *litlingas*, despise them. The woman who in one of the riddles of the *Exeter Book* is apparently making dough is the only indication we have of a woman specifically involved in this range of domestic work, though we have already noted the grammatically feminine *bacestre* used of a man in an Exeter manumission." Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 49.

<sup>a</sup> The variant numbers of this riddle are: Williamson, 52; Grien, 55; Trautmann, 52; Tupper, 55; Wyatt, 54; Mackie, 54; Krapp and Dobbie, 54.

tillic esne; teorode hwæthre  
æt stunda gehwam strong ær thonne hio,  
werig thæs weorces. Hyre weaxan ongon  
under gyrdelse thæt oft gode men  
ferðthum freogað ond mid feo bicgað.

54.2: *wincle*: MS. *winc sele*.

54.4: *brand*: MS. *rand*.

54.9: *tonne hio*: MS. *ton hie &*  
followed by a MS. point.

*A young man came to where he knew her to stand in a corner; the strong bachelor-warrior stepped from far up to her, lifted up his own garment with hands, pushed a stiff "something" under the girdle of the one standing, worked his will: both moved. The thane hastened; (he) was at times useful, the goodly servant; [he] grew tired, however, at a certain time, the strong one, before she did, weary from the work. There began to grow under her girdle that which often good men love and acquire with a fee.*

The *formal* solution to this riddle is "Churn."<sup>71</sup> The poet uses a feminine pronoun throughout the poem which is supposed to refer equally to the woman and the "churn." Williamson asserts that "*hio* refers to the churn, or in terms of the double entendre, to the woman in the corner."<sup>72</sup> Even though in Old English pronouns take their gender from their (antecedent) nouns, and "churn" is a feminine noun, repetition of the feminine pronoun (*hie wisse . . . hyre stondendre . . . thonne hio . . . hyre weaxan*) causes a "she" to become more easily imagined than a churn. Thus interaction between a man and a woman can be more readily imagined than contact between a man and a piece of machinery.

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<sup>71</sup> Solutions: Dietrich solved this riddle as "baker's boy and oven," Trautmann as "churn", and this answer is accepted by all later editors.

<sup>72</sup> Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 300.

The verbs describing the young man's activity are consonant with sexual intercourse, since the specific maneuver that the young man employs is described as *pushing* or *thrusting*. The apparatus he uses, a *nathwæt* that is "firm, strong," and "hard,"<sup>73</sup> and the direction taken, beneath her "belt" — all accord to sexual activity. Furthermore, the youth must "[lift] up his own clothes with his hands" before he *hrand under gyrdles* to achieve the desired effect, so he is at least partly exposed when he does this. The performance is curious if it is applied to a "churn." The action seems inappropriate since the plunger of a churn is presumably put *into* the top of the device rather than "under" some component of it. More importantly, there is no reason for the young man to uncover himself in order to operate such a device. The poet tells us, *wagedan buta*, "they both moved" as a result of the young man's advance. *Wagian* means to move "backwards and forwards."<sup>74</sup> Thus, the particular physical action or movement needed for sexual contact is expressed directly in the language the poet uses.

As a consequence of this act, something "grows" under the woman's "girdle." Tupper and Williamson both indicate this to be the "butter": Tupper explains that "the last lines (10-12) well describe the 'growing' of the butter;"<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>74</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>75</sup> Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 188.

Williamson agrees, noting here that "[the] creature described in the last lines of the riddle is the O.E. *butere*, the child of the churn."<sup>76</sup> While the allusion to pregnancy is clear, the reference to "butter" is not. It is true that men may buy butter, but to say that men "love" it suggests emotion and regard that is out of keeping with the procurement of a dairy product. Also, men do not need to be particularly "good" in order to arrange such a transaction. But the purchase specified here, the man's qualities, and his sentiments concerning it, are not ill suited if the *feo* alludes to the marriage fee, or "bride-price" required in order to arrange a marriage.<sup>77</sup> Of this arrangement, it would be accurate to say that *oft gode men ferðthum freogað ond mid feo bicgað*. It is not only relevant to the situation, but also fundamental that the man in question be "good," and that he should "honor" and "love" the woman he wishes to marry, with his "spirit" or "mind."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 299.

<sup>77</sup> It seems that the prospective bride-groom customarily paid a fee in order to become betrothed. Early on this was given to the woman's guardians, but later, at least by Alfred's time, the price was paid to the bride. This existence of this fee has been discussed among readers for at least a hundred years. See Ernest Young, "Anglo-Saxon Family Law," in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon Law* (Macmillan and Company: Boston and London, 1876), pp. 165 and 170. Examples of such payments can be found in A. J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (Cambridge: University Press, 1956). For example, in a Kentish marriage agreement, dated between 1016 and 1020, a man named Godwine gave his intended, *anes pundes gewihta goldes with thonne the heo his spæce underfenge*, a pound's weight of gold to receive his suit. In addition he promised her an estate, *æt Stræte mid eallan thon the thearto herd* (p. 150). For discussion of the implications of this marriage "fee," see Ch. 4, page 83.

<sup>78</sup> The definition of *fer(h)th* according to Bosworth and Toller.

The *formal* solution is particularly difficult to impose on this riddle because the sexuality is seen as prominent, even by readers who subscribe to the *double entendre* theory. As a result, the idea of sexual content as a secondary, "shadow" solution is often put aside at this point. For example, Craig Williamson tries to account for the "overt" sexuality by explaining that "the love play seems center stage and one might speculate that the original game consisted of inducing the riddle-solver to guess the 'wrong' solution, that is the anatomical one, in order to offer him the 'plain' solution as proof of his salacious imagination."<sup>79</sup> Even though Williamson interprets the "overt" sexuality here in terms of its supposed "joke" value, it is nevertheless an admission that the sex is indeed the principal concern. It is, as Williamson puts it, "center stage."

#### Riddle 59\*

Oft mec fæste bileac freolicu mæowle,  
ides in earce; hwilum up ateah  
fulmum sinum ond frean sealde,  
holdum theodne, swa hio haten wæs.  
Siððan me on hrethre heafod sticade,  
niathan upweardne on nearo fegde.  
Gif thæs ondfengan ellen dohte,  
the mec fræt Wade, fyllan sceolde,  
ruwes nathwæt. Ræd hwæt ic mæne.

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<sup>79</sup> Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 299.

\* Variant numbers: Williamson, 59; Grien, 55; Trautmann, 59; Tupper, 62; Wyatt, 61; Mackie, 61; Krapp and Dobbie, 61.

*Often a free-woman locked me fast, a noble woman in a chest; at times drew me up with her hands and gave me to her lord, the faithful prince, as she was bidden to do. Afterwards a head stuck in my insides, from beneath upwards, fixed in a narrow place. If the receiver's strength availed, who adorned me/covered me over, a rough "something" had to fill me. Understand what I mean.*

The formal solution to this riddle is either "Shirt" or "Helmet."<sup>81</sup> For Tupper, the sexual content debases the whole poem; he is derisive of its alleged "dirt," and dismisses Trautmann's impulse to take it more seriously.<sup>82</sup> The sexuality, as it is usually interpreted, only comes into play at the end. For instance, Swaen suggests that "the poem consists of three divisions. In 1. the girl gives the shirt to her master; in 2. the master gets entangled in the shirt or kirtle, and an obscene meaning is added; 3. is an obscene episode meant to lead the reader astray."<sup>83</sup> However, the sexual subject *is* the poet's principal focus, it is not a mere "obscene" episode "added on" to a story about a man and his sartorial problems.

The object is locked away in a "chest," *on earce*.

Tupper states that "this is a reference to the *hræl-cyst*,

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<sup>81</sup> Solutions: the standard solution for this riddle is either "helmet" or "shirt". Dietrich proposed "shirt". Trautmann and Tupper favor this answer. Wyatt prefers "helmet" and Williamson contends that, "it seems best to list both solutions as equally possible." Williamson, *Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 320.

<sup>82</sup> He says that "Trautmann is perhaps attracted by the picture of the early Englishwoman arming her lord for battle, but the tone of this poem, despite the blending of dignity with its dirt, hardly seems to warrant such a conception." *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 201.

<sup>83</sup> Swaen does not give the exact line numbers at which these divisions are supposed to occur. Swaen, "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," p. 11.

'clothes-chest.'"<sup>84</sup> But, this reference may not be a literal one. It belongs to the woman and may or may not actually refer to her body. Whitehurst Williams says that it is "undoubtedly a metaphoric statement for the Lady's great modesty which is set aside only in the proper circumstance — when her lord commands."<sup>85</sup> But it is uncertain whether Whitehurst Williams is correct about the lady's "modesty," since this quality is not actually mentioned in the poem, and there is no direct indication that this is even considered to be a virtue. I agree, however, that the "confinement" may be metaphorical, since the idea of a box does make sense here. In these riddles, sexuality is often presented as something that is normally confined or kept secret and then revealed when the participants choose to do so.<sup>86</sup> Because the box is referred to here as a concealment from which "something" is given when the Lord requests it, the metaphor is well-suited.

After the lord makes this request, we are told what happens to the object: *sibðan me on hrethre heafod sticade, neothan upwardne*, "a head stuck in my insides, . . . fixed in a narrow place upwards from below." The "head" correlates to the "head" of the penis, and the "narrow place" is the

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<sup>84</sup> Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 201.

<sup>85</sup> Whitehurst Williams, "What's so new about the Sexual Revolution?" pp. 50-51.

<sup>86</sup> For more on the subject of containment and disclosure, see Ch. 3, pages 65 and 73.

vagina. The direction from which the "something" will be entered into is described: "from beneath upwards." This is a precise direction from which to attain sexual contact.

*Hrethre* seems to indicate "insides" more than it does an outside surface, such as "breast," or "bosom." It can also refer specifically to the "womb."<sup>87</sup> Wyatt tries to account for the direction and location of the action by saying that "l. 6 appears to describe accurately the action of putting on a helmet: the helmet is held *upside down* in the hands before being placed on the head . . . the wearer's head may be said to stick fast in the breast of a helmet."<sup>88</sup> But Swaen disagrees, noting the problem here that "the position of the helmet . . . appears to me to be impracticable . . . [*sticade*] is graphic, and each of us at one time or another have got entangled in his shirt, like Hercules."<sup>89</sup> Swaen is correct in noting that *sticade* is indeed graphic, but the gesture does not well suggest getting snarled in a shirt or putting on head-wear. One does not "stick, stab, pierce," or "prick"<sup>90</sup> into either a helmet or the neck of a shirt. Nor does one become 'fixed' in a 'confinement' in them. Helmets and shirts are

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<sup>87</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>88</sup> Wyatt, *Old English Riddles*, p. 110.

<sup>89</sup> Swaen, "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," p. 11.

<sup>90</sup> Bosworth and Toller.



"[carried] appendant to the body,"<sup>91</sup> rather than being in a state of "unity" with it.

These expressions better accord with sexual intercourse. The meanings of *sticade* suggest the motion of the penis; the confinement expressed by *nearo*<sup>92</sup> indicates the vagina. *Fegan*, meaning "to join," with the connotation "bind, unite, or fix,"<sup>93</sup> suggests mutual sexual action.

The rest of the language works better with a sexual meaning than with that of shirt or helmet. *Ruh* as a reference to the head of hair does not accord with either of the proposed *formal* solutions, since the word implies "untrimmed, undressed" hair, whereas Anglo-Saxon men wore their hair trimmed short.<sup>94</sup> However, "hairy," "untrimmed," and "undressed" well suits the sexual solution.

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<sup>91</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "to wear."

<sup>92</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>93</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>94</sup> In *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, Owen-Crocker suggests that there is evidence of this practice from the fifth and sixth centuries. She says that "the many combs found in Anglo-Saxon contexts . . . settlement cites . . . cremations . . . suggest that care of the hair was important . . . probably the Anglo-Saxons cut their hair short, as the Franks did; by the sixth century long hair seems to have been a style confined to the Merovingian kings in Frankia" (p. 81). During the seventh and eighth centuries Owen-Crocker finds that "the Anglo-Saxon converts seemed to have obeyed Saint Paul's dictum that men should have short hair" (p. 128). By the tenth and eleventh centuries, she remarks that "men's hair is generally depicted cut short," and suggests further that, "Anglo-Saxon men were commonly clean-shaven or cropped their beards very closely" (pp. 168-169).

## Riddle 60\*

Ic eom heard ond scearp, ingonges strong,  
forsiothes from, frean unforcuð;  
wade under wambe ond me weg sylfa  
ryhtne geryme. Rinc bið on ofeste  
se mec on thyð æftanweardne,  
hæleð mid hrægle: hwilum ut tyhð  
of hole hatne, hwilum eft fereð  
on nearo nathwær; nydeð swithe  
sutherne secg. Saga hwæt ic hatte.

62.7: *fereth*: MS. *fareth*.

*I am hard and sharp, strong at going in, brave at journeys-forth, honorable to my lord; I go under a womb and extend the right way for myself. The warrior is in haste, who covers me up afterwards, the hero with clothing: at times [he] draws me hot out of the hole, at times again puts [me] in a narrow I-don't-know-where. The Southern man urges me strongly. Say what I am called.*

The *formal* solution to this riddle is either a "Boring tool," or a "Poker."<sup>96</sup> The subject of this riddle *wade[ð] under wambe ond [him] weg sylfa ryhtne geryme[ð]*, "[goes] under the womb/middle and [opens] up the right way for [himself]." The proponents of the first solution construe this action as that of a "boring tool" that "clears for itself a path."<sup>97</sup> However, it is not clear what the "womb/middle" actually is if a "boring tool" goes *underneath* it. Tupper points out this problem, stating:

Dietrich's first solution 'Borer' (XI, 478), fits the query at every point save one . . . how to explain *wædo under*

\* Variant numbers: Williamson, 60; Grien, 63; Trautmann, 60; Tupper, 63; Wyatt, 62; Mackie, 62; Krapp and Dobbie, 62.

<sup>96</sup> Solutions: Tupper, solves the riddle as "poker," Swaen agrees, saying "perhaps the best answer would be *ofen-raca* . . . the modern English would be : an oven-rake or poker." Swaen, "Riddle 63 (60, 62)," *Neophil*, 31 (1947), p. 220. Mackie and Krapp and Dobbie also accept "poker." Other editors, including Dietrich, Wyatt and Williamson accept a "boring tool."

<sup>97</sup> Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 322.

*wambe* (3 a), which hardly seems suited to 'Borer' or 'Gimlet,' unless the tapping of a cask or like work be described? . . . Better than either of these is Trautmann's 'Brandpfeil'. . . if by this he means the ordinary 'Poker' or 'Fire-rod.' This 'fares under the belly (of the oven)."<sup>98</sup>

Williamson disagrees, noting here that "a poker might be *heard* but not necessarily *scearp*. There is no reason why a poker should be described as clearing for itself a path . . . through a narrow place . . . these descriptions are more suitable to a boring tool of some kind."<sup>99</sup> Williamson's contention is defensible here. The details in Tupper's argument do not correlate with his proposed solution. But Williamson fails to address the essential and equally justifiable difficulty which caused Tupper to reject "Borer" in the first place: precisely what *wade under wambe* refers to remains unexplained.

There is no dilemma if the riddle is understood as a sexual poem. The attributes given to the object and the direction that it takes indicate that it is a penis. In the first line we are told that it is "hard and sharp." These adjectives suit the condition of the penis during sex. Further, the specification *scearp* describes its attributes correctly since *scearp* also means, "keen, active," and "effectual," or "penetrating."<sup>100</sup> We are also told that the

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<sup>98</sup> Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 202-203.

<sup>99</sup> Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 322.

<sup>100</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

object is "strong" when it comes to "in-goings."<sup>101</sup> The direction that the object takes, "under the womb/middle," is logical and precise in the situation of sexual intercourse. Last, *ryman* implies not so much that the object "clears a path" as that it "extend, spreads, or enlarges" something that already exists.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the procedure, the "extending," and the course "under the womb to the *nearo nathwær* itself, not only are amenable to a sexual interpretation, but demands it.

The male actor in this riddle, the *sutherne secg*, is also the subject of debate. As Williamson states, "it is not clear why the wielder of the boring tool (or in terms of Tupper's solution, the poker) should be a 'southern man'."<sup>103</sup> Williamson offers the possibility that "*sutherne* . . . [indicates] somewhat obliquely the direction of the thrust."<sup>104</sup> However, the use of "southern" to imply *lower*, or a downward direction, or movement from below is very vague. On the other hand, there is a more apparent connection between

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<sup>101</sup> This word is commonly altered to *hingonges*, which means simply "departure." The alteration is made for metrical reasons but, in so doing, the particular signification — a journey or movement *into* something — is effectively obscured. Tupper notes that "[the] MS. *ingonges* seems better suited to the sense of the passage, but *hingonges* is demanded by the alliteration. It is thus equated with *forthsithes* from (l. 2)." *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 203. Wyatt also notes here that "the *h* is required for the alliteration; and *hingonges* is a much better parallel than *ingonges* to *forthsithes*." *Old English Riddles*, p. 110. Thus the "ingoing" travel of this "hard" and "penetrating" object takes on the appearance of a rather non-specific excursion, and the sexual implication is rendered much less effective.

<sup>102</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>103</sup> For more on Tupper's interpretation see Ch. 3, page 50 following.

<sup>104</sup> Williamson, *Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 323.

southern geography, warmth, and sexual libido.<sup>105</sup> In any case, it is clear that this reference applied to the operation of mechanical equipment is somewhat tenuous and implausible; it is only in relation to the sexual content of the poem it has a direct and obvious function.

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In examining the sexual content of these six riddles it is important to note the common characteristics they share, which support only the sexual solution. For example, the motivation of the participants herein is always intense. In Riddle 23 the woman's approach to the man and the "object" he possesses is decisive: she, *nethed*, "has a mind to" or "dares" to make the advance; she "rushes," *ræsan*, this "red" object, and "takes," *reafian*, the penis "head."<sup>106</sup> The

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Claudius Ptolemy who says that people in "India, Ariana, Gedrosia, Parthia, Media, Persia, Babylonia, Mesopotamia and Assyria, which are situated in the south-east of the whole inhabited world . . . are governed by Venus . . . they are ardent, concupiscent, and inclined to the pleasures of love." *Tetrabiblos* II. 3rd ed., trans. F. E. Robbins (1940; rpt. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press and William Hinemann, 1971), pp. 139-141. Drawing from such classical sources, Bede views the body as a "microcosmos" which reflects the same qualities of the physical world in human passions, "imitating the nature of the seasons in which they are most powerful. Thus, blood, which increases in spring, is moist and hot; red cholers, which increase in summer, are hot and dry," making a direct connection between the warmth of the seasons — and by implication, geographical climate — and individual's bodily humor. Bede, *De Temporum Ratione*, Chap. xxxv; ed. C.W. Jones, *Bede Opera de Temporibus* (Cambridge, Mass., 1943) in J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), Appendix: *Loci Classici*, p. 202.

<sup>106</sup> *Neped*: other shades of this meaning are to "venture," "to have the courage to do, to dare to do, to be bold, to strive, have a mind to." *Ræsan*: "to rush, move violently or impetuously," or "to assault, attack," "to rush (into anything)." Also, "to plunder, rifle, spoil, waste, rob," or "to seize, take as a robber takes." Bosworth and Toller.

activity itself, its vigor and determination, is difficult to reconcile with the *formal* solution: such energy does not readily apply to the anticipation of preparing an onion for dinner.

In riddle 43, it is hard to imagine "the most vivid description of the woman's work of kneading," that Tupper suggests.<sup>107</sup> The image is "vivid" but does not relate to the preparation of bread. When the *bryd grapode* "touch[es]" the *nathwæt* we are told that she is *hygewlonc*.<sup>108</sup> Being "elated in mind," is not pertinent to baking. The way the young man of Riddle 52 reacts to his situation relates to sex better than any other endeavor, if for no other reason than his earnestness. We are told that this man *worhte his willan*. The activity described is thus intense enough to be explained as a process that involves "having one's pleasure" or "fulfilling one's desire."<sup>109</sup> Churning involves no such purpose. And, in Riddle 60, the fact that the *rinc bið on ofeste* to act indicates a matter more involving than boring a hole in something. Such extreme desire to act is inappropriate to the *formal* solutions.

Another common characteristic is the tactile presentation of experience. The way someone touches, or is touched,

<sup>107</sup> Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 177.

<sup>108</sup> For further discussion of *wlonc* compounds, see Ch. 3, page 46.

<sup>109</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

is frequently emphasized.<sup>110</sup> Also, the "hot" or "narrow" sensation of entering, the "feeling" of the meeting, are more appropriate to the sexual experience than to the *formal* solutions.

In general, then, the suggestions imparted through the language of these riddles is sexual, at times evocative. This language does not support the notion of *double entendre* because it does not "apply equally" to the *formal* solution. Nonetheless, the formal solutions are so well established that they are allowed to stand as fact. In his book, *The Warrior's Way*, Stephen Pollington talks about Anglo-Saxon habits of dress. At one point in the discussion he comes to the hesitant conclusion that "keys were worn attached to the ties of the *bræs*, [under-wear] it seems, since one riddle [42] refers to the lifting of the tunic to bring out the key."<sup>111</sup> Hence the *formal* solution is so unquestioningly accepted that it takes the place of archaeological evidence.

The imposition of a secondary, *formal* solution is probably the result of the displacement of meaning which follows from the dismissal of a sexual interpretation. In the absence of a sexual meaning, another must be created which loosely coincides with the suggested imagery. Thus the

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<sup>110</sup> Hands, "grasping" or otherwise, are emphasized in four out of six: 25, 45 "hygewlonc hondum", 54, 61.

<sup>111</sup> Pollington explains that *bræs* were "loose woolen drawers, tied at the waist and legs by draw-strings . . . all classes seem to have worn this garment." *The Warrior's Way: England in the Viking Age* (London: Blandford Press, 1989), p. 94. Owen-Crocker also mentions underwear. See *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 54, 123, and 157.

*formal* object — onion, key, dough etc. — replaces the obvious sexual apparatus to which these images refer, and the solving of the riddle actually opposes the predominant details of its content. In the process the riddles become trivialized and their importance significantly damaged. Moreover, their content — which I have found to be essentially serious, corresponding more closely to the substance and themes of proverbs and parables than to jokes — is removed from the canon of Anglo-Saxon literature, closing the door to a whole body of knowledge to which the modern reader has no other access.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> In other areas of research on riddles, the *genre* has been better identified as being closer to *proverbs* than to "jokes." Kongas-Miranda states that "a riddle is an overt question with a covert answer, a proverb is an overt answer to a covert question," in "The Logic of Riddles," *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, ed. Pierre and Elli Kongas-Maranda (Philadelphia, 1971), p. 130. Also, riddles have been recently distinguished as "art," primarily. This is the view of W. J. Pepicello and Thomas A. Green: "In comprehending riddles . . . we encounter a larger sphere of art. Although riddles utilize an intentional overlap of referential frames to derive artful utterances, we discover that they are not unique in this regard. . . . a similar principle operates in proverbs and in metaphor. . . . it seems clear that riddles, far from being no more than an amusing bit of entertainment, are inextricably bound to those most sophisticated of human systems: language, culture, and art." *The Language of Riddles: New Perspectives* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), p. 144. Something of this poetic sensibility has been attributed to those of the *Exeter Book* riddles deemed "lyrical," such as "Swan" and "Storm." As John F. Adams notes in "The Anglo-Saxon Riddle as Lyric Mode," *Criticism*, 7 (1965): "in the Anglo-Saxon riddle the object is not simply discovered . . . but the knowledge of the object has been expanded. . . . Something has been changed, enlarged, in the reader's understanding. Or simply, the ultimate response to the riddle is, like the response to any poem, an esthetic one" (p. 336-7). But this "artistic" sensibility has yet to be bestowed upon the sexual riddles.



### Chapter Three: Correlating Themes

The half-dozen sexual riddles share characteristic images and ideas that present variations of a recognizable attitude towards sex and sexual conduct. Far from being "smut," or simply prescribing the bounds of morality, these riddles suggest an appropriate context for sanctioned sex. There is, first of all, no censure of sexual behavior in itself. Furthermore, the portrayal of the characters who act in the sexual riddles is positive, and they are models of correct deportment in an unconstrained and exemplary sense. But, while sexual desire is considered natural, it must both serve the needs of the individual and conform to the demands of society. Sex in these riddles involves more than an act in isolation; although the act itself is private, there are consequences involving both personal and public responsibilities which the riddles describe. It is the integration of these two elements — the private aspect centered on the physical act of sex, and the public aspect centered on the consequences of that act — which is the focus of these riddles.

The poet portrays sex as a natural physical act, but at the same time the point of view is orthodox since sex seems to involve marriage as a necessary public component of sanctioned sexual behavior. Thus, the predictable consequence of sex — pregnancy, and the relationships which form as a result — forges a bridge between private and public life in its creation of the basic societal unit, the family.

The act of sex has two integrated components: the physical and the psychological. Although the presentation of sex in these riddles is distinctly physical, the psychological process nonetheless plays a significant role in establishing the bonds which tie individuals to one another and form their place in society. The wishes or desires of the participants are important in two ways: firstly they are both natural and mutual, and secondly they are expressed by man and women alike. Thus the basis of the sexual act is that of a natural desire in both male and female participants. In Riddle 23, for example, the woman's *hyhte* is referred to, and also her state of mind as *modwlonc*. And similarly, in Riddle 43, the woman is *hygewlonc*. In Riddle 42 and 52 attention is focused on the male state of mind and his actions as the result of his *willan*. The act of sex in Riddle 59 occurs because the *frea*n makes a deliberate request for it: the woman does *swa hio haten wæs*. In these instances, the poet is pointing out that initial inclination, *willan*, "to will, purpose, think, intend,"<sup>113</sup> is an important part of the process leading up to the act of sex.

The psychological state of the participants as it is indicated by these designations seems to be ennobled rather than "lowered" in any way. For example, as well as "hope, joyous expectation," the word *hyhte* means literally "height."<sup>114</sup> *Hygewlanc* is "proud, elated in mind," thus

<sup>113</sup> *Willan*, Bosworth and Toller.

indicating an elevated state of being. *Modwlanc*, too, is clearly dignified, indicating "[pride], high courage."<sup>114</sup> To interpret this as "licentiousness" simply because the context is sexual is unwarranted because it is not directly indicated in the specifications.<sup>115</sup> And even though the action moves quickly sometimes, it seems clear that *thinking* is important. The *decision* to exercise the will is a necessary part of the act and precedes it. That this determination is shown in women as well as men rules out the idea that it is only the man's desire that is important in sexual matters, or that the woman's collaboration is either simply expected or exacted from her.

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<sup>114</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>115</sup> Bosworth and Toller. Also, Tupper notes the frequency of *wlanc* compounds. He says, "[*sol*], under the same circumstances, the woman in 26 7 is *modwlanc*, and in 43 4 *wlanc*." No conclusions are drawn, however. *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 173.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Williamson's interpretation of the use of *wlanc* compounds in Riddle 23 and 43. He gives a "possible" sexual meaning of "licentious" in these instances. *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, note to Riddle 23.7, p. 211. Whitehurst Williams notes here that "*wlanc* is often glossed as 'proud' or 'haughty,' but in combination with *hyge* 'mind' or 'disposition' it seems particularly appropriate to read it to mean 'elated' or 'exultant'. . . . the narrative content of these two poems demonstrates a completely unselfconscious approach to a sexual situation on the part of the woman." Whitehurst Williams, "What's so new about the Sexual Revolution?" p. 49. The reference to *wlanc* in this instance might have to do with the woman's high social position as well. According to M. R. Godden, "*wlanc* = 'proud, bold, rich.'" He adds further that "it has indeed been argued that the 'wealthy' sense of *wlanc* is also a late development in Old English." As an example, he notes "a Latin legend of the martyrdom of SS Peter and Paul, in which St. Paul gives an account of his own preaching: "The Latin legend has nothing on kings and bishops but begins with St. Paul's account of what he taught the 'sublimes et devites,' 'mediocres' and 'paupres,' that is, the high-ranking and the rich, the middling classes, and the poor. The legend was translated into English in the Bickling homily on SS Peter and Paul, and there 'sublimes et divites' is rendered 'wlance and heahpungene,' probably meaning 'rich and high-ranking.'" In "Money, Power and Morality in Late Anglo-Saxon England," in *Anglo-Saxon England IXX*, ed. Peter Clemoes, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 54-56.

The basis for the critical view of these participants as "low" or, more nicely, "down to earth" was established by Tupper, but the reason is not in itself clear since there is nothing negative about the designations given to any of the actors in the sexual riddles.<sup>117</sup> In fact, many of the specifications of the actors are positive ones. Most of the figures in these riddles are of the nobility, and the aristocratic language in reference to them has been noted before. As Harleman-Stewart points out, "there are significantly more upper-class epithets than lower."<sup>118</sup> Though Harleman-Stewart draws other conclusions from this fact, it is fair to assume, I think, that use of this kind of language implies some measure of assent of the characters and approval of their actions.<sup>119</sup>

Direct references to men are few, but they are telling. In Riddle 23 the only man who is mentioned is the father of the woman who performs the action in the poem, the *ceorl*, an appellation that is said to indicate "low class," but most often just means "man" without any pejorative connotation.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>117</sup> It was Tupper who first thought they were all "low." There have been variations on this theme since, as in Williamson's interpretation of *wlonc* compounds in footnote 116 above.

<sup>118</sup> Harleman-Stewart, "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," p. 48.

<sup>119</sup> See her comment below, page 54.

<sup>120</sup> The *ceorl* is, according to Tupper, a "[man] of humble rank, probably to [a freeman] of the lowest class." As he explains, it "is employed in our riddle as a synonym for *esne* [servant] (28 8, 16)." *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 124-125. However, Bosworth and Toller give the definition "a freeman of the lowest class, freeman, countryman," which is non-pejorative, without the direct connection to "servant" that Tupper makes. According to *The Oxford English*

The male actor of Riddle 42 is a *wer*, a "man" simply. Because of its neutrality, this term cannot carry any censure. The other specification of the male person in this riddle is *esne*, and even this is not derogatory as it is used here.<sup>121</sup>

Unfavorable notice is often given to the impatient *hyse* of Riddle 52. This word means "a young man, a youth."<sup>122</sup> The other name given to him, *hægstealdmon*, indicates his "unmarried" state,<sup>123</sup> and perhaps also his "virginity."<sup>124</sup> The adjective *hror* identifies him as "active," "vigorous," or, as Bosworth and Toller suggest, "a stout fellow." There is nothing in this characterization of the man that devalues him, or diminishes his status in any way. The poet merely indicates his state of being: young and male. But, because of his actions he is often viewed by readers as automatic and even antagonistic in his actions.<sup>125</sup> As a result, this

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*Dictionary*, before 1300 the meaning of "churl" is "a male human being, a man; esp. *man* as correlative to *wife*." There are citations of this word "used as a term of disparagement or contempt; base fellow, villain," but not until 1300. There is also a similar citation for the use of "churl" in 1875, "in modern times usually: rude low-bred fellow." Thus Tupper applies a modern, and irrelevant, sense of the word *ceorl* to the male figure in this riddle.

<sup>121</sup> See discussion of the term *esne*, as it is used specifically in these riddles, pages 61-63 below.

<sup>122</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>123</sup> Marriage here seems to be viewed as the legitimizing context for sex in this instance as well since conception and a marriage "fee" are both mentioned at the end of the poem.

<sup>124</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>125</sup> For example, Nelson says that this riddle is among those that "[present] sexual intercourse in terms of aggressive action." "Old English Riddle 18 (20): A

riddle is often cited as evidence that it (and the other sexual riddles under discussion here) are only concerned with the simplest kind of boorish, male sexual bravado.<sup>126</sup> However, the young man in question is behaving quite naturally for a person of his age in whom a certain degree of haste and impatience may be considered typical. The poet is providing what might have been considered a realistic portrayal of young men and their demeanor.<sup>127</sup> It does not necessarily follow, then, that this is intended as criticism of the young man. He is described in this way because of his age, not because of any generalized and callous view of sex.

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Description Of Ambivalence," p. 298. See her further comments on page 58, following.

<sup>126</sup> Whitehurst Williams says of this riddle, as well as 42 and 60, that "they deal predominantly, as their titles suggest, with male prowess and do not add any notable insights into feminine [sic] psychology." "What's so New About the Sexual Revolution?" p. 55.

<sup>127</sup> Bede, for instance, said, in his *De Temporum Ratione*, that "red cholers [prevail] . . . in young people . . . [they] make people lean (even though they eat heartily), swift-footed, bold, irritable, and active." Bede was not revealing anything particularly new.

Aristotle also noted, regarding "the nature of the characters of men," that "the young . . . are ready to desire and to carry out what they desire. Of the bodily desires they chiefly obey those of sensual pleasure and these they are unable to control." *Rhetoric* II. xi 12. *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. by John Henry Freese (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947), p. 247.

Claudius Ptolemy similarly mentions that "[Venus], taking in charge the third age, that of youth . . . begins, as is natural, to inspire . . . an activity of the seminal passages and to implant an impulse towards the embrace of love. At this time particularly a kind of frenzy enters the soul, incontinence, desire for any chance sexual gratification, burning passion, guile, and the blindness of the impetuous lover." *Tetrabiblos*, pp. 443-445. This exonerates the young man in the riddle because his actions are the result of a *natural* state, that is, his youth.

Note: Some excerpts from Bede's *De Temporum Ratione*, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* are translated in the *Appendix: Loci Classici* of J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

The names given to the man in Riddle 60 are not unfavorable either. He is called the woman's *holdum theodne*, identifying him as "a great man, a lord."<sup>128</sup> He is also described by the adjective *hold*, for which Bosworth and Toller list "faithful, loyal," and "devoted" as possible meanings. This term denotes his connection to the woman, indicating ties of loyalty as well as affection. By these accounts, then, this *theoden* is estimable in a general way because of his position as a "lord" and, more particularly, he is well regarded because of his "loyal" relationship with his wife.

The male figure in Riddle 61 is the *sutherne secg* whom Tupper derides as "the actor in one of the obscene riddles, 'the southern man' [who is] obviously in the same class as the 'dark-haired Welsh,' the churls and esnas, often people of un-English origin, who figure in these folk products."<sup>129</sup> But, in fact, the man is given a designation of honor, since he is called the object's *frea*, "lord."<sup>130</sup> He is also called a *rinc* and *hæled*, both of which are approving references to men.<sup>131</sup> Esteemed warriors are often given the appellation *rinc*, and the heroic figure Beowulf is called a *hæled*.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>129</sup> Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 203. See footnote 105 regarding the connection between *southern* and sexual libido.

<sup>130</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>131</sup> *Rinc* is a "poetical term" according to Bosworth and Toller, and *hæled* means "a man, warrior, hero."

Taken together, these specifications suggest a character worthy of respect, not mockery. Thus, while Tupper would like to make the *sutherne secg* less than he is because of what he does — even, and perhaps especially, "un-English" — there is no textual basis for doing so.

Critics often feel that the references to female characters in these riddles lack seriousness and depth of treatment.<sup>133</sup> In fact, the poet evinces a particularly well-focussed and observant perspective of women. But readers and critics have, for their own reasons, not always favored the female characters in the sexual riddles with the same approval shown by the poet, often applying censure where none is warranted. The woman of Riddle 23 is called *wif* twice, once at the beginning, and again in the last line.

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<sup>132</sup> The retainers in Hrothgar's hall are called *rinc* at lines 741 and 745. *Hæled* is applied to Beowulf at lines 1646 and 1816. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*.

<sup>133</sup> See for instance, JoAnn McNamara who says that "'The Wife's Lament' and 'Wulf and Eadwacer' are the only extant Old English poems which focus centrally on sexual love and treat the theme with depth and seriousness". The author finds that "female characters which are merely cursory and mechanical" are exemplified in "those in the riddles and the two gnomic poems." See "Female Characterization in Old English Poetry and the Growth of Psychological Realism: Genesis B and Christ 1". *Neophilologus*, 63 (1979), p. 596. See also Anne Lingard Klinck, who mentions "the cursorily type-cast woman of the riddles and *Maxims*." Klinck finds that the women in the sexual riddles are treated as "objects" in "mechanical" sex: "there is no more real characterization here than in any other of the riddles. The obscene riddles give a fairly mechanical account of sexual union . . . the figures of aristocratic women lend grace to the life of the hall. On a coarser level, women described by similar epithets are found as sexual objects in the obscene riddles." "Female Characterization in Old English Poetry" Diss. University of British Columbia, 1976, p. 240 and 99-100, respectively. Richard Shrader observes that the "the drunken maid of Riddle 10 [12] is perhaps to be understood as loose, but otherwise the women of the riddles are depicted good-naturedly as beings no less sexual than men." He adds, however, that "strong roles such as these are never ideal." *God's Handiwork: Images of Women in Old English Literature* (Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 29.



Since nothing can be found wrong with the designation *wif*, readers have been reproachful of *cyrtenu . . . ceorles dohtor*, the presumed low status of the *ceorl* necessarily reflecting badly on the *dohtor* who performs the action.<sup>134</sup> The fact that she is the daughter of a *ceorl* need not reflect badly upon her, since there is nothing inherently offensive about the classification *ceorl*. Such an interpretation ignores the positive reference to the woman herself in the adjective *cyrtenu*, which means "beautiful" or "elegant," showing her as esteemed, not ridiculed.<sup>135</sup> The final specification given to this woman is *wif wundenlocc*. Such observation of the woman's hair seems to compliment her physical attractiveness. In reference to this riddle Tupper notes that "the twisted hairs of the fair Judith are twice mentioned in the Old English poetic version."<sup>136</sup> However, Tupper does not elaborate, or perhaps even notice, the implicit connection between *this* woman and the unquestionably admirable Judith that is drawn here.

The woman in Riddle 43 also is deemed admirable by the poet. She is called a *bryd*, therefore young and married; she is also a "prince's daughter." These references to youth, marital relationship, and advantageous social

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<sup>134</sup> Tupper directs us to the "bondi's daughter" who "appears in the Icelandic riddles (I.G.49)." Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 125

<sup>135</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>136</sup> *Wundenlocc*, *Jud.* lines 77, 103. Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 125.

position cannot be construed as even mildly deprecating. Even at its most obvious level of meaning, *theodnes dohtor* is an approving reference, since it identifies this woman as a member of the nobility.

The two references to the woman in Riddle 60 are also affirmative ones. She is stipulated first as a *freolicu* woman, an adjective which attests both to her dignity and her attractiveness since *freolic* signifies both "noble" and "comely."<sup>137</sup> Secondly, she is called *ides*, a word that means "woman," and also indicates some elevation of the person to whom it is applied.<sup>138</sup>

It has been said that women in Old English poetry are reproached for their role as "sexual beings" by the poets themselves.<sup>139</sup> This view is supported by the observation that in exactly half of these sexual riddles, 23, 43, and 59, the woman instigates the encounter.<sup>140</sup> In the past, the suitability of positive references to women who play a sexually active part has been seen as a "problem" or a

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<sup>137</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>138</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>139</sup> Pat Belanoff has found that within Old English poetry in general "criticism is directed almost solely to women as sexual beings." "The Fall(?) of the Old English Poetic Image," *PMLA* 104:5 (October 1989), p. 826. For more on the woman's role in sex, see page 75.

<sup>140</sup> In these three, it is the woman who "rushes" (Riddle 23), who "grips" the "boneless" thing (Riddle 43), and who performs the necessary action when she "[takes] up" the object (Riddle 59). This active role in sex has noted as positive by Whitehurst Williams, for instance, who remarks that "the woman is indeed portrayed as a lively participant." This author sees no censure in the portrayal of these women characters. "What's so new about the Sexual Revolution?" p. 48.

paradox, often resolved by interpreting a "contrast" between "noble" specifications of the individuals and the "low" nature of their pursuit. For instance, Harleman-Stewart declares that:

The co-occurrence of sexual slang and bawdily direct imagery with references to upper-class participants is curious, and hard to interpret. Does it signify a sense of the dailiness of life on every social level? Or is it intended as a humorous incongruity, perhaps a satirical jab at the pretensions of the upper classes?<sup>141</sup>

But, the poems indicate no such sense of incongruity or impropriety. We may feel a certain paradox because of our conceptions of females and how they must conduct themselves, reading conflict into a situation where a person, proclaimed "lady" by the poet himself, is behaving in a way that is blatantly sexual. The poet, however, is simply showing woman who are both estimable *and* who act of their own volition in sexual matters. The references and the context are simply in accord.

Readers, both Victorian and modern, seem to have found female sexuality difficult to accept. It has, it seems become "normal" for female sexuality to be viewed as wrong, unnatural, and sometimes even dangerous; and critics have tried unsuccessfully to say that such conduct was unacceptable to the Anglo-Saxons as well. For instance, Swaen tries to alter the specification *freolicu meowle*, "free" or "noble-woman," to something less exalted. He

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<sup>141</sup> Harleman-Stewart, "Double Entendre in Old English Riddles," p. 49.

explains that the phrase should read "'goodly damsel'" because "it is in accordance with the girl's behavior."<sup>142</sup> While "goodly" is not in itself negative, it is a title conspicuously less esteemed than the original "noble." Clearly, Swaen's own sense of propriety determines his interpretation of an Anglo-Saxon poem. There is no confirmation that this kind of devaluation is at all warranted. If the point of view in these riddles can provide any indication, quite the opposite may be true. The "conflict," if there is one, may thus be the reader's, not the poet's.

The action of these riddles also has been subjected to both Edwardian and modern explication. On the whole, its function is seen to be in the creation of humor. This humor is seen in two ways. The first equates it with "joy." For instance, Harleman-Stewart remarks that these riddles show sex as "a joyful business," which evinces "a fine disregard for romance and an eye for its humorous aspects."<sup>143</sup> Although this point of view is tantamount to the notion that they are "primarily intended to amuse," at least it acknowledges some positive aspect of the poetic viewpoint.<sup>144</sup>

However, the more "serious" critical perceptions of sex and sexual humor in this group of riddles are negative. This

<sup>142</sup> Swaen, "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," p. 11.

<sup>143</sup> Harleman-Stewart, "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," p. 49.

<sup>144</sup> Matti Rissanen, "Nathwæt in the Exeter Book Riddles" (*American Notes and Queries*, 24 (1985-86), p. 119.

point of view is represented by Tupper, who characterizes them as "smut."<sup>145</sup> It is useful here to note Sigmund Freud's definition for this term:

We know what is meant by 'smut': the intentional bringing into prominence of sexual facts and relations by speech . . . smut is directed to a particular person, by whom one is sexually excited and who, on hearing it, is expected to become aware of the speaker's excitement and as a result to become sexually excited in turn. Instead of excitement the other person may be led to feel shame or embarrassment, which is only a reaction against excitement and, in a round-about way, is an admission of it. Smut is thus originally directed towards women and may be equated with attempts at seduction. If a man in the company of men enjoys telling or listening to smut, the original situation, which owing to social inhibitions cannot be realized, is at the same time imagined. A person who laughs at smut that he hears is laughing as though he were the spectator of an act of sexual aggression.<sup>146</sup>

Thus, the function of "smut," according to Freud, is based upon an assumed male sexual prerogative. Because Freud "[equates] this with "seduction" specifically, he implies that there is violation or aggressive action inherent in such "humor." What he describes is an essentially indecent act. Freud's definition gives point to Tupper's vague references to "dirt" and "smut." Tupper may well have been aware of *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, and if so then his use of this categorical definition for the sexual riddles implies more about his perception of them than he is willing to state directly.

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<sup>145</sup> Quotation from Tupper's "The Comparative Study of Riddles," containing this reference to the sexual riddles as "smut" appears in Chapter One, p. 7.

<sup>146</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Subconscious*, James Strachy ed. (1905; rpt. New York: W.W. Norton, 1960), p. 97.

This sense of "smut" is implied still in the reading of sexual riddles from all cultures, and has affected and shaped the interpretation of them. For instance, Stanley Brandes quotes Freud, as above, when he attempts to explain the function and existence of sexual riddles in modern Andalusia. Basing his analysis on Freud, as above, he says that "pretended obscene riddles enable men, in essence, to expose their genitals verbally. . . . in its mild form, it is a means of flirtation, when carried to excess, a form of verbal rape."<sup>147</sup> Hence, from this critical perspective, sexual riddles are essentially an expression of male aggression. Whether "mild" or "excessive," it has become part of their very definition that they are perpetrated on women, and have to do with exhibitionism, sexual domination, and violence.

This idea seems to inform much of the serious consideration of sex in the *Exeter Book* riddles as well. It seems that Freud's precepts, and Tupper's implicit acceptance of them, are hard to dislodge. This perception often shows itself in the way that readers construct the sexual action to reflect issues of domination and power struggle, active against passive. This idea of passive female figures is in itself a curious assumption to make, since women in these sexual riddles are certainly not submissive or suffering. Yet sex in these riddles is sometimes rendered as something

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<sup>147</sup> Stanley Brandes, *Metaphors of Masculinity: Sex and Status in Andalusian Folklore*. Publications of the American Folklore Society, N.S., Vol. 1, ed. Marta Weigle (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), p. 135.

very close to assault upon them. Where it is discussed by critics, very peculiar comparisons are made, particularly between male aggression and sex, on a basis which seems to render them one and the same. Marie Nelson's comments express this view. She makes note of "riddles that [present] sexual intercourse in terms of aggressive action" and she lists the following riddles as belonging to that category:

The Riddle 60 speaker, for example, a 'borer' or 'boring tool' describes himself in terms of hardness and strength in *ingong*; the young man of Riddle 52 (54) who approaches the 'churn' (woman) is stronger than she, but he tires and grows weary of a 'work' that is presented in terms of struggle; and the 'onion' speaker of Riddle 23 tells about a woman who 'robs [his] head' and 'joins/fixes [him] in confinement.'<sup>148</sup>

Williamson takes a similar view of the expression of sexuality in these riddles. He says that Riddle 52, for instance, is "slightly surreal in its ravishing treatment of the passive woman in the corner. . . . The young man returns in line 7, not to power but as object in a female fantasy . . . . the man is a servant."<sup>149</sup> From this perspective, sex is equated with conflict. When one participant is in control, the other is not; when the first shows weakness, the other dominates.

This point of view, however, is a distortion of the sexual riddles of the *Exeter Book* and cannot be applied to them. Sex as it is presented here is not a simple interplay of active and passive, nor is it a manifestation of the

<sup>148</sup> Nelson, "Old English Riddle 18 (20): A Description Of Ambivalence," p. 298.

<sup>149</sup> Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs*, p. 178.

misuse of male power. Similarities, correspondences, and that which is shared between men and women define the sexual relationship. In sex, the separation between male and female is not magnified, but rather, it becomes less definite. From the natural and balanced participation of both parties, there emerges an *equity* of power rather than a polarization of it. Male and female roles become indistinct during sex. This is evident both in the way that sex is described, and in the way the participants themselves are defined.

In describing the act of sex, the poet necessarily makes frequent reference to the human body. The language applied here is suggestive rather than strictly anatomic, and it is generally *not* differentiated by gender. That is, men and women are defined by the same images and, in some cases, the same language. For instance, the last line of *Riddle 25* contains the very suggestive "wet eye," and we are not told to which participant, male or female, the image applies. It is entirely possible to read it either way.<sup>150</sup> The reference to a "hole" in *Riddle 42* functions similarly: at the beginning of the poem, it is applied to the male

150 This line is translated as both "her eye," "his eye," and "that eye," because the text allows for *either* male or female referent or is simply meant to be ambiguous. Baum translates it as "that eye" in *Anglo Saxon Riddles of The Exeter Book*, p. 57; and Swaen translates it as "the eye," in "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," p. 12; as does James E. Anderson, in *Two Literary Riddles in the Exeter Book: Riddle 1 and the Easter Riddle*, pp. 6-7; and Frank H. Whitman, in *Old English Riddles*, p. 180-1. The following readers all translate it as "her eye": Alexander, in *Old English Riddles from the Exeter Book*, p. 27; Williamson, in *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs*, p. 83; Crossley-Holland, in *The Anglo-Saxon World*, p. 216; and Whitehurst Williams, in "What's so new about the Sexual Revolution?" p. 48. However Harleman-Stewart reads it as a reference to the man. She explains that "it is a pun on the 'eye' of the phallus and the woman's eye." "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," p. 46.



actor, used to describe his "hanging-thing," which has a *thyrel* or "hole" in front. Later, *hole* refers to the female: it is the "known hole" that the man will "greet" with his "hanging thing." In Riddle 43, the *nathwæt* that the woman "grips on" is the penis, as is also the "stiff" *nathwæt* of Riddle 52, with which the man "pushes under [the] girdle." But in Riddle 60, the very similar term *nathwær* is used to indicate the vagina. Thus a *nathwæt/nathwær* can refer to a woman's vagina or a man's penis; these terms are not restricted to either the male or the female.

These words operate as sexual slang in the riddles, since they constitute a vocabulary which is not strictly anatomical, but which is understood to pertain directly to sex. There is no comparison between these words and modern sexual slang. References to sexual anatomy have become, in our time, exclusive to one gender or the other. Moreover, exclusion has become divisiveness. Modern sexual slang which refers to the human body — especially the female body — is now equivalent to abuse. This indicates, among other things, that our own attitudes towards sexual relationships may well involve aggression, and render the opposite sex (particularly women) as "other" — that is, alienated and different especially in matters of sex.<sup>151</sup> The language in the *Exeter*

151 Casey Miller and Kate Swift, in *Words and Women*, note modern "other" words for sexual body parts differ from the O.E. in two ways: it seems that modern sexual slang is divisive as well as insulting. They refer to Ruth Todasco's book, *An Intelligent Woman's Guide to Dirty Words*, which, they say, "lists terms for parts of the body which become, by transference, words for women themselves" (p. 115), and go on to state, "[w]ords used to insult men differ in several ways from those

*Book Riddles*, however, has the opposite effect: *hol* and *nathwæt/nathwær* can apply to men or women, and are clearly not insulting references to the persons who possess them.

The designations of the male figure may at first seem paradoxical. The male actor is sometimes given the designation "lord," a specification which implies control and a measure of power. However, in two of these sexual riddles, this *same man* is also called *esne*, a "servant."<sup>152</sup> In Riddle 42, the *freaan's* penis is concealed under his lap, yet an *esne* reveals it. This contrast occurs also in Riddle 52, where the "young man" is called a "useful thane" in the action he performs, a term that denotes some rank and position, but in the next line he is *esne*. This apparent paradox is sometimes resolved either by diluting the meaning of *esne* to *the less specific man*, or by deciding that the poet must actually be talking about two different people. For instance, in Riddle 42, Tupper restricts the meaning of *esne*, remarking that "'*esne*' has here not the meaning of 'servant,' but the more general sense of 'man.' It . . .

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used to insult women. In the first place, there are not as many. . . . Slang terms for the testes are sometimes used as negative or disapproving exclamations, but one such term is a common synonym for courage and toughness, as in the bumper sticker slogan, 'It takes leather balls to play soccer.' No such positive connotations attach to prick, but even this word does not convey the absolute scorn of slit, slot, snatch, and gash. Cunt, when used contemptuously of either a woman or a man, is consummate abuse" (p. 117). Miller and Swift also make note of Ruth Hartley's comments in *Sex Role Pressures* (p. 462) on divisiveness between the sexes: "One remembers psychologist Ruth Hartley's observation that for many boys growing up in America, 'the scramble' to escape the 'womanly' things they must not be 'takes on all the aspects of panic, and the outward semblance of non-femininity is achieved at a tremendous cost of anxiety and self-alienation" (p. 118). *Words and Women* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976).

152 Bosworth and Toller.

refers simply to man or youth in the coarse riddles."<sup>153</sup> Swaen comments similarly that it "is not necessary to attach a particular meaning to *esne* . . . it is simply a repetition of *wer* . . . the word is often used as a translation of Latin *juvenis*, a young man, a sense which suits the context."<sup>154</sup> Of Riddle 52, specifically, Tupper explains the *tillic esne* "is here the servant of *thegn* (1.7)."<sup>155</sup> Both of these explanations are problematic: there is no reason to assume that the poet is talking about two separate men. In Riddle 52, the sudden appearance of a servant at a critical moment in the action is highly unlikely. The same thing happens in Riddle 42, but no one suggests that the "lord" has a "servant" lift his skirts for him prior to sex.

Contrary to Swaen's point of view, there may be further reason to "attach a particular meaning to *esne*." The point at which the designation *esne* appears is the same in both of these riddles. The male actor of Riddle 42 is *frea*n before his intent is made known, and before any action takes place, yet as soon as he reveals his intent, he is called "servant." In Riddle 52, when the young man has "worked his will," he is in the position of "good servant" rather than *thegn*, as he was prior to the act. The position of the female participant, on the other hand, remains fairly

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<sup>153</sup> Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 176.

<sup>154</sup> Swaen, "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," p. 148.

<sup>155</sup> Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 188.

constant. The woman of Riddle 25 is called *wif* in the first line and also in the last. The designations *bryd* and *theodnes dohtor* which occur in Riddle 43 do not indicate any shift in the view of the woman, nor do the specifications *freolicu meowle* and *ides* in Riddle 59. This may be an indication that the man must concede something to the woman in a sexual relationship.

The contrast between *lord* and *esne* seems to be an intended juxtaposition, perhaps explaining something of the nature of passion, its fulfillment, and the relative position of the man who cares to exercise it. Before any sexual action occurs, the man is in control because thoughts, sexual or not, are completely private and involve no one else. The designations of the male figure as *frea* reflect this state. Once committed to the act, however, it is evident in the specification *esne* that he is no longer entirely in charge. In as much as this juxtaposition indicates a *loss* of control to another force or person it also implies a lack of domination, a balancing of control. This indication of an imperative shift in position is inherent in sexual behavior, a shift where one forgoes, and indeed cannot have, complete control because one has involved someone else. This involvement necessarily allows females control as well, since their "will" also comes into play.

Instead of showing sex as consolidation of an established power structure, the sex act in these poems

evinces a kind of dissolution of such hegemony. Through the specifications of the participants and the actions they perform, divisions between men and women become less distinct, not more pronounced. It may be difficult for modern readers to recognize this process of equalization and dissolution of self, since a modern view of "romantic" love and marriage tends to assume an entrenchment of the already unequal power structure.<sup>156</sup> Our own position has thus engendered a somewhat slanted interpretation of these poems, one that is largely self-reflective, illuminating aspects of our own concerns very well, but adding little to our understanding of these poems or of the people who wrote them.

The morality evident in the sexual riddles does not place the same kind of censure or stricture upon sexuality which exists today, partly because its basis seems to have been regarded as natural.<sup>157</sup> While "earthy" language in the

<sup>156</sup> See, for example, Michele Barale's perspective on modern "romantic" relationships; she makes this point very clearly: "What is achieved is a gendered power and importance. The institutions where love has primary power and value — marriage and the family — are gendered and therefore inherently unequal. Thus the very goal of romantic love cannot be attained because the structures in which it is to be achieved and enacted are built upon male dominance and female submission . . . within a patriarchal structure, the bearer of the phallus — whether real or symbolic — is the dominator." *Daughters and Lovers: The Life and Writing of Mary Webb* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), pp. 10-11.

<sup>157</sup> References to nature often reveal themselves in indirect names for sexual body parts. In Riddle 23, the speaker describes his attributes with references that could apply equally well to the landscape as to a man: a *stathol* is often something in the earth, or refers to some part of it, such as "the base of a pillar" or "trunk of a tree" (Bosworth and Toller). In Riddle 42, the designation *sceate* or "lap" is often given to ground cover (for example, *eorthan sceatan*, Exon. Th. 359, 26; Pa. 68., in Bosworth and Toller), as are also the terms *stede*, which can refer to a geographical place (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Anno. 449: *He*

sexual riddles does not indicate one-to-one correlations between humans and specific objects from nature, it does suggest a generalized connection, which indicates that sex pertains to nature, and to natural impulses.

Although acting on these impulses may be natural, it does not constitute moral behavior. In the sexual riddles, the poet shows that natural sexual impulse becomes moral by being taken up into the civilized world. As a mark of this, the sexual riddles all appear to be set indoors, and there are no direct references to the out-of-doors in relation to sexual activity. Where setting is mentioned, the location is *in wincle*, which is "a corner." This may also suggest the containment of the civilized world in the perimeters of towns and villages since "the word is found in place-names."<sup>158</sup> This idea of containment is most clearly illustrated in Riddle 23. The location of the action is in the *town*, because we are told specifically of *neahbuendum* and *burgsittendra*. Although the characters in this riddle are engaging in a natural act, they do so inside the perimeters of civilized life, literally within the walls of human society. Thus, although these riddles evoke the world of nature, they also strongly suggest confines of the

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*cwomon to Brytene on tham stede the is genemned Heopwines fleet*), and *hol*, "hole," which may refer to the earth (*foxas habbath holu*, Mt. Kimbl. 8 20: Lk. Skt. 9, 58). In Riddle 60, the penis is described as "hard" and "sharp", and thus somewhat elemental, and the *hol* where he ventures is suggestive of earth. And, the reference to direction in the specification *sutherne secg* suggests travel over a landscape.

<sup>158</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

civilized world where nature is encompassed and refined by human precepts. Images of civilized life, of appropriate containment, give the context in which sanctioned sex takes place.

Anglo-Saxon society — and so, too, these riddles — did concern itself with the concept of "proper" or "moral" sex, but this notion clearly encompassed more than the narrow avenue of behavior which comes out of the Victorian age, and with which we are familiar. There is no censure of sex itself as an immoral act, for a woman or a man. This does not mean that there is no propriety to follow in matters sexual: the frequent images of secrecy, of hiding and revealing, show just what these precepts are. The act of sex itself seems to be regarded as a fundamentally *private* matter. When it is described specifically, the setting indicates seclusion.<sup>159</sup> Even where the location is not mentioned directly, there is never any indication of a less private context for sex.

Though the act of sex itself is private, and none of the six sexual riddles show it otherwise, there is an instance where privacy *is* breached in a riddle that is about a pair of animals, not about sex *per se*. The *Cock and Hen* poem<sup>160</sup> presents a significant contrast to the sexual riddles because it illustrates imprudent and unsanctioned sexual

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<sup>159</sup> In Riddle 43 and 52, the action takes place in *wincle*, a "corner."

<sup>160</sup> Riddle 42 — The *Cock and Hen* poem is given in full in Appendix Two, page 108.

behavior: here, the actors are derided, and the two animals are rebuked not because of what they are doing but rather because they are doing it in a manner that violates the essentially private nature of the act. In the opening lines the poet tells us exactly what is taking place: two birds are having sex in the open. Seth Lerer, a recent examiner of this poem, suggests that this "barnyard" activity has little to do with the real subject of the riddle. He maintains that:

Its primary interest . . . is interpretation itself, as its structure and meaning redirect the reader's attention away from the ostensible barnyard solution towards the process of reading and writing which mark the literate understanding of the world. . . . Riddle 42 invites its reader to appreciate its own 'verbal dexterity,' to attend less to its mundane solution and more to its literary artistry.<sup>161</sup>

Thus, according to Lerer, the meaning of the poem concerns "interpretation itself," and the *sexual* significance has been effectively interpreted out. However, this poem *is* primarily about sexual behavior. It shows wrong action in sexual matters in which the participants flaunt civilized conventions. This immorality is made obvious by contrast to the positive examples of behavior in the sexual riddles.

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<sup>161</sup> Seth Lerer, "The Riddle and the Book: Exeter Book Riddle 42 and its Contexts," in *Papers on Language and Literature*, 25:1 (Winter 1989), pp. 4 & 16. He says further that "For all its apparent focus on the barnyard, Riddle 42 remains a poem of the school, and in its witty display of literary tropes and literate conventions, it demonstrated the possibility for written, vernacular poetry to entertain and instruct. Within its brief compass lies an education in the arts of reading and a model for its potential, playful subversion" p. 18.



The *Cock and the Hen* are described as if they might in fact be people instead of animals. They engage in *hæmedlac*, a term reserved for sexual interaction between human beings.<sup>162</sup> And, the female has "clothes" and "locks" instead of feathers. In his study on "animal" language applied to humans, Edmund Leach points out that "the fact that birds and beasts are warm-blooded and that they engage in sexual intercourse in a 'normal' way makes them to some extent akin to man."<sup>163</sup> Thus, it may be that these participants are described as if they might be human so that the poet can comment indirectly on sexual mores among people. Their presentation as *not human* is important as well, because it shows sex in nature without the tempering effects of civilization as obviously inappropriate, and literally animalistic.

The two birds evince an improper lack of consideration for privacy and concealment. Their exposure is complete and therefore indecent. It violates the civilized ideas about when and where sex should take place. The *cock and hen* engage in sexual activity out of doors as a mark of their impropriety, unlike the human actors in the sexual riddles, who are never placed in this way. The term *undearnunga*, "unsecret," which the poet uses to describe the action, is in

<sup>162</sup> With the exception of this riddle and a personified sword in Riddle 20, all of the definitions for *hæmed* in Bosworth and Toller indicate human referents.

<sup>163</sup> Edmund Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," in *New Directions in the Study of Language* (Boston, Mass: MIT Press, 1964), p. 37, 42.

itself significant. The image of secrecy is implied also in the poet's explanation of the whole poem as an exposition and "unlocking [of] bonds" of something that is usually *heortan bewrigene* "covered up," now openly displayed *mid us*. The theme of secrecy is reiterated when the poet again deems the whole scenario *undyrne*, "un-secret." This indiscretion is reason enough for the poet's judgement of the participants in the final line: they are *heanmode twa*, "low-minded." Sex is not condemned in the sexual riddles, even when it is much more explicit than this. It seems, therefore, that it is this open display, *undyrne*, that is finally deemed "low minded."

The poet is also able to relate ideas about sexual propriety through images of clothing in the sexual riddles. The poet uses clothes to mark the progression or process of moving from the private towards the public, which is evident in reading these poems. In four out of the half-dozen sexual riddles, reference to *hrægl* occurs. It is used of the Lord in Riddle 42; of the *theodnes dohtor*, in Riddle 43; of the young man in Riddle 52; and of the *sutherne secg*, in Riddle 60. The specification of clothing has been observed before, but its function has been underrated. It was noticed by Tupper, though he drew no conclusions from it.<sup>164</sup> More

<sup>164</sup> Perhaps he found it too commonplace an item to discuss in any detail. He comments on Trautmann's observation of the man's *hrægl* in Riddle 44, remarking that "Trautmann makes the rather obvious comment . . . that it must have been very customary for men in Anglo-Saxon times to wear long garments (see Rid. 55, 3-4). The fashion is illustrated by scores of pictures in every illuminated manuscript." Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 176.

recently, Stewart has suggested that *hrægl* is "a signal of the imminence of intercourse, the lifting of the garments constituting a prelude to the act."<sup>165</sup> While this is no doubt true, this image has other functions as well, having to do with the aristocratic nature of the characters themselves, and with the inevitable process of disclosure that is involved in sex.

Whitehurst Williams notes a correspondence between the poet's use of *hrægl* and the status of the wearers as "royal." *Hrægl*, she says, is "regularly used in connection with ecclesiastical vestments and royal raiment, very often in association with jewels and ornamentation. . . [It] maintains a tone of dignity and charm."<sup>166</sup> Though *hrægl* is not reserved for very fine clothes exclusively,<sup>167</sup> Whitehurst Williams may be correct here in making a connection between the characters' clothing and their class.<sup>168</sup> Perhaps more

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<sup>165</sup> Stewart, "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," p. 47.

<sup>166</sup> Whitehurst Williams, "What's so new about the Sexual Revolution?" p. 50.

<sup>167</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

<sup>168</sup> In these riddles it appears that the participants wear layers of clothing. The word *hrægl* itself is often used to denote an entire set of clothes as opposed to a single item, which was, in fact, the custom of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy (Bosworth and Toller, and also Owen-Crocker). As Owen-Crocker points out, "In some cases it appears that the wide sleeved garment was worn beneath the draped one, while close fitting inner sleeves indicate yet another garment beneath" (p. 139). Further, in artistic rendering, this was sometimes exaggerated if the artist wanted to suggest luxurious garb, and thus enhance the status of the wearer: "An artist wishing to suggest elaborate dress was more likely to do so by adding an extra layer to the women's garments" (p. 147). The author also points out, though, that this proliferation of garments may not have been realistic. Hence, the layers of clothing function in part as an expression of aristocratic standing.

importantly, however, dress is also used to imply disclosure. In connection with men especially, clothes, and what happens "under clothes," evokes the idea of sexual desire as something which is usually kept covered, but which may be revealed, if the person in question cares to do so. In Riddle 42, the man lifts *his agen hrægl* prior to sex. In Riddle 60, the man "covers" the *nathwæt* up "afterwards" with *hrægl*, which is *hwillum* revealed and concealed by turns. For the male figures in these riddles, it indicates a point of commitment to the sexual act that comes between thinking and doing.<sup>169</sup>

The association of the image of clothing with women is different. Here, it indicates the particularly female consequences of sex. It is used to evoke the public revelation of pregnancy. For example, in Riddle 43 the poet tells us that the woman has something under *hrægl* that will grow, suggesting conception. Thus, through reference to her clothes, the woman's sexual involvement is revealed; since conception is always made plain sooner or later, what has

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<sup>169</sup> Tupper explains the clothes in Riddle 52, thus: the fire-rod, "held by the man's garment (on account of the heat), is pushed violently into the fire, and is drawn out 'hot from the hole.'" *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 202. Williamson rather thinks that it is not a reference to a garment at all, stating that the *hrægl* could "just as easily refer to a piece of cloth used to handle the hot bit or end of the boring tool." He does admit, however, that the word is most appropriate to the sexual meaning of the poem. *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 322. Swaen considers the solution of this riddle to be "Baker's Boy and Oven," and he rightly wonders at the presence of such a reference to the man's clothing: "*hæled mid hrægle* is less clear: why should his wearing a dress be stressed? Does it denote the baker's or the cook's professional dress?" "Riddle 63 (60, 62)," p. 220. Even though all three of these readers have different "solutions" for this same riddle, the reference to *hrægl* cannot be accounted for in relation to the *formal* solution in an entirely convincing manner in each case.

been secret or private will ultimately become known or public. In Riddle 52, we are told that something "grows" under the woman's *gyrdels* after the sex act. And so, this image marks the division between private and public, also indicating the close association of the two. What is conceived in secret must, at some point, become a public concern; and what might be considered *exclusively* private has partially to do with societal interests. Even the very public act of making a poem out of what we may regard as purely private experience indicates that sexuality is, at least in part, a public matter.

Even though both actors are free to express sexual desire, they are not at liberty to do exactly as they please. There are limitations, responsibilities, and consequences which are made evident in the sexual poems. These limitations are different for men and women: for men, the restriction is the obligation to *restrict* sexual passions; for women, the consequence is determined more by biology, having to do with the fact of conception and birth. Indication of constraint for women manifests itself in the various representations of conception that are either hinted at, or made quite plain. These constraints are inherent for women, and they are the only restrictions that the poet mentions in relation to them.

The image of confinement is common to the sexual riddles and applies only to men — women never appear to be literally "restricted." In Riddle 23, the male object tells

us that the woman *nearwað*, or "confines" him. In Riddle 59, the penis is confined to a *nearo* place. And in Riddle 60, the object ventures into a *nearo nathwhær*. Clearly this implies intercourse, the vagina narrowing and confining the penis. But the confinement may also be figurative, referring to societal restraint in relation to the proper restriction of male sexual passion. Because the poet usually indicates that he is talking about *marital* relationships, it may be that marriage is seen as a necessary limitation upon men: since the male has no biological constraints put upon him by nature as do women in pregnancy, an imposed societal one affords a measure of equality in a sexual relationship. The restrictions for both actors represent public influence in essentially private matters. Though the act itself is private the results are not, entailing responsibility that is perforce biological or compelled by society. Thus a link is forged between private action and public life by the formal disclosure of a sexual relationship in marriage.

The sexual riddles show that civilizing, or proper, context for sexual expression involves marriage which is, by its nature, the public disclosure of a private bond. Marriage is implied in four of the six sexual riddles. In Riddle 42 the notion of marriage is brought to mind in the reference at the end of the poem which states that the speaker-penis *wile pæt cupe hol*, "desires to greet that known hole" that he has "often filled" before.<sup>170</sup> The sugges-

tion is one of action that is repeated and perhaps regular, and so may imply familiar marital relations. The woman in Riddle 43 is called *bryd*, and so she too is married. And in Riddle 52, even though the young man is noticeably unattached at the beginning of the poem, a marriage "fee" is noted at the end.<sup>171</sup> The "free-woman" of Riddle 59 does the bidding of her "lord," who is further specified as "dear prince," which suggests a marital relationship in this riddle as well. Riddle 60 is ambiguous in this respect, not because of uncertainty in its reference to the relationship between the woman and man, but because the designations "lord" and "warrior" do not necessarily refer to a married person.

Readers have noticed before that the participants in the sexual riddles are most probably married.<sup>172</sup> The marital union is usually interpreted in terms of the *comitatus* relationship between lord (husband) and retainer (wife). Tupper himself does not comment on this but quotes Roeder, who says that in Riddle 60, "dass man die eheliche Gemeinschaft als Komitats-verhaltniss ansieht."<sup>173</sup> Referring to the

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<sup>170</sup> The fact that the man in this riddle is called *wer* may be an indication that he is married. Anita Riedinger notes instances of this word as it is used in the late Anglo-Saxon period which clearly indicate that a "married man" is being specified. See "I Now Pronounce You *Wer* and Wife: Towards Etymological Equity in Marriage," a paper presented at *Session 163: "Philology Old and New, as Applied to Medieval Texts II,"* Kalamazoo, 1990, p. 1. (This paper is part of a larger article in progress.)

<sup>171</sup> For further discussion of marriage "fees," see page 82 following.

<sup>172</sup> Tupper himself says that "[other] evidence of this conception of the marriage relation is not wanting." *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 201.

same riddle, Edith Whitehurst Williams offers a similar view:

The situation is analogous to the lord-thane relationship. The implied subjugation is not based on the principle of male-female status but on the high position of a lord or prince in relation to all his retainers — a relationship by no means resented in the heroic culture, but one adhered to with great loyalty to the mutual benefit of all parties. That the pattern is extended into the marriage relationship is reflected throughout Old English poetry and prose.<sup>174</sup>

However, this analogy does not accurately reflect the situation presented in the sexual riddles as a whole. Marriage as *comitatus relationship* may be an instance where the "heroic" ethic has been over-employed to describe facets of Anglo-Saxon culture not directly related to the concerns of war and defence. In Riddle 59, the woman certainly does as her husband requests, but this does not indicate a general perspective of female service, because it does not occur uniformly in all of these riddles. That is, the woman is not found consistently doing her husband's bidding. As previously mentioned, in half of the sexual riddles, it is the woman, by instigating the action, who in effect makes the "request" for sex.<sup>175</sup> The lord is himself called *esne* on

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<sup>173</sup> Tupper is citing Fritz Roeder in "Die Familie bei den Angelsachsen, Eine Kultur- und Litterarhistorische Studie auf Grund Gleichzeitigen Quellen, Erster Hauptteil: Mann und Frau." *Studien zur englischen Philologie*, 4 (1899), p. 110.

<sup>174</sup> Whitehurst Williams, "What's so new about the Sexual Revolution?" pp. 50-51. See also Klinck, who is of the same opinion. She notes that "in poetry, as in the historical sources, the relationship of woman to man is presented as paralleling that of thane to lord." "Female Characterization in Old English Poetry." (Diss. University of British Columbia, 1976), p. 235.

<sup>175</sup> See discussion of the woman's active role in sex above, page 53.



two occasions, which suggests at least a degree of "service" on his part as well.<sup>176</sup> There are also the prevalent images of equality in the sexual act, which strongly imply that the man and the woman share *the same* status in a sexual relationship.<sup>177</sup> The situation is thus a partnership rather than a contract of service in exchange for protection.<sup>178</sup>

Because these riddles involve sex *and* marriage, their point of view is actually quite orthodox and conventional. But the poet is not intolerant. For instance, the young man and woman in Riddle 52 are not married when sex takes place. Marriage comes *after* the event, not before. Though marriage is here a consequence of sexual behavior, it is not made a necessary prerequisite. Because sex is placed realistically rather than "ideally," the point of view in the sexual riddles is unlike romances of the later middle ages which deified sexual love and rendered it "romantic" by isolating it and making it exceed other earthly matters. These riddles place sexual love *in* the world as it exists, a part of a larger framework in which sex is not removed from such other practical concerns as conception and pregnancy, and the consequent responsibilities and public declarations. God is not replaced, as in courtly love romances, with the "object"

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<sup>176</sup> See discussion of *esne* above, page 61.

<sup>177</sup> See discussion above, beginning page 59.

<sup>178</sup> For further discussion of the subject of marriage, see Ch.4, page 82.

of the hero's affections.<sup>179</sup> Sexual relationships operate within the world, neither transcending it nor replacing it outright.

The relationships pictured in the sexual riddles resist definition by modern standards having to do with female exclusion, male power and aggression, or by Victorian attitudes of prudery and seemly behavior, both of which have, in effect, turned these riddles into pornography. The connection between sex and aggression seems integral to this concept. There are important differences between the poet's attitude towards sex and the approach to it that we have inherited from the Victorians. In the sexual riddles, the poet regards the characters as persons worthy of respect — both the women and the men. Women are not subordinated in sexual and marital relationships, or hampered by restrictive models of proper behavior. The psychology of desire is both natural and mutual, the participation equal.

This is not to say the Anglo-Saxons had no standards of sexual morality. Their concern is expressed in the existence of such concepts as *unrightlust*, *unrighthæmed* and *wohhæmed*.<sup>180</sup> Thus, the Anglo Saxons had specific designations for sexual conduct that they considered to be immoral. The

<sup>179</sup> See, for instance, *The Olde Daunce: Love, Friendship, Sex and Marriage in the Medieval World*, Robert R. Edwards and Stephen Spector eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). In the introduction they discuss "studies like Denis De Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* [which] developed and refined the view that a secret and illicit form of love represented an ideal within Medieval culture," p. 5.

<sup>180</sup> Bosworth and Toller.

*Laws of Wihtræd*, Kent (690-725), involve a surprising number of laws that have to do with "illicit cohabitation."<sup>181</sup> As well, there were general exhortations to *forlet hordomes* "leave-off whoredom."<sup>182</sup> The Anglo-Saxons also spoke out directly, and specifically, against immoral behavior: in Wulf's *Sermon to the English* he mentions that his country had become "corrupted" by "sins." The *misdæda* that he lists include *sibgelegeru*, "incest;" *mistliche forlegeru*, "various fornications;" and *wedbrycas*, "breakers of the marriage pledge."<sup>183</sup> The sexual riddles come from the same tradition that produced Wulf's admonitions. It is simply that sex in itself, in the proper context, is *not* immoral at all. The fact that there are such concepts as *unrightlust* and *unrighthæmed* suggest the existence of their opposite, that is, "rightful" lust, and "rightful" intercourse.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> See *Laws of Wihtræd*, dated 695-6, 3-6.

F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen* (1903-1916; rpt. Unveränderter Neudruck der Ausgabe, Scientia Aalen, 1960), p. 12.

<sup>182</sup> From the Homily for "First Sunday in Lent," in *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises*, ed. and trans. Richard Morris, *EETS*, first Series (London: N. Trübner, 1938), p. 33.

<sup>183</sup> *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* in *The Homilies of Wulfstan*. Dorothy Bethurum, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), lines 129-139, pp. 264-265.

<sup>184</sup> Given the riddles under consideration, the Anglo-Saxons appear to have had no qualms over the explicit portrayal of the sexual act in literature.

## Chapter Four: Re-examining the Historical Evidence

Anita Riedinger declares that "in an era known to some as the *Dark Ages*, men and women were very nearly equal. This was true in life, language, and literature."<sup>185</sup> Though Riedinger is not talking about the riddles specifically, her statement is nonetheless applicable here. The sexual riddles of the *Exeter Book* make little difference between men and women. Anglo-Saxon society at large drew no serious divisions either. Women acted in much the same way as men, and references to them in historical documents show that they were regarded, and did regard themselves, as equal to men of their own class.<sup>186</sup>

<sup>185</sup> Anita Riedinger, "I Now Pronounce You *Wer* and Wife: Towards Etymological Equity in Marriage. On this point, Riedinger also reminds us of Fell's assertion that "though the 'literary image' of women at this time is a 'heightened sense of reality . . . it is not divorced from it.'" *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (Bloomington, Ill.: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 14.

<sup>186</sup> There is nothing new in this idea. There are many other writers who, having examined the existent evidence, come to the same conclusions. See especially Riedinger and Fell, noted above. See also the earlier work of Frederick Pollock and Frederick William Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I* (University press: Cambridge, 1923). Pollock and Maitland detected equality in the law as it applies to women, noting, "the woman can hold land, even by military tenure, can own chattels, make a will, make a contract, She can sue and be sued" (p. 482). Thirty years later, Betty Bandel wrote about the "acceptance on the part of the Saxon chroniclers of an unlimited range of interests and abilities on the part of women." "The English Chronicler's Attitude Toward Women," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 16 (1955), pp. 114-115. More of her commentary appears below. Some readers have drawn different conclusions, however. Burton Raffel, for example, gives this general impression of Anglo-Saxon women: "the lower classes who tended the fields and milked the cattle simply were not mentioned. Nor were women, for the most part, though the lord's wife was a kind of cup-bearing hostess, and highborn women's names come down to us along with men's. The precise status of women is obscure." He does admit, however, "one factor which resists orderly explanation is the existence of such heady love songs as *The Husband's message* and *A Woman's Message*. They would not seem to fit into a

The view of Anglo-Saxon women as "peace-weavers" has undermined our understanding of women's relationships with each other, with men, and with their society. The term is often loosely applied to aristocratic Anglo-Saxon women in general.<sup>187</sup> It is a role *sometimes* evinced in the literature but is problematic when assumed to be historically accurate.<sup>188</sup> Historical "peace-weavers," when they weave peace at all, seem to have been doing so in order to achieve their own political ends.<sup>189</sup> History suggests that even those

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social structure where women were nonentities." The sources of evidence from which Raffel derives these generalizations (historical documents, poetry, or both) are not made entirely clear. *Poems from the Old English* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 3. Klinck has executed perhaps the most extensive treatment of the notion that women's position in Anglo-Saxon society was, in many respects, negative. She examines the portrayal of women in both the literature and in historical documents. Klinck asserts that "at no point in the Anglo-Saxon age were women anything like the equals of men." "Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law," *Journal of Medieval History*, 8 (1982), pp. 118-119, and also Klink's dissertation, "Female Characterization in Old English Poetry" (University of British Columbia, 1976).

<sup>187</sup> However, as Fell points out, "not all times are times of feuds and hostilities, and not all marriages require the bride to take the role of 'peace-weaver'." *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 74.

<sup>188</sup> See Schrader, who says that women in literature assume the "peace-weaver" role, emphasizing that "for all this strength of mind and soul, no image is more vivid than that of women who are victims of misguided virility, sometimes their own." It is interesting to observe that when Schrader comes to recount the lives of actual historical personages, not a single discernable "peace-weaver" emerges. He actually helps to demonstrate that women of the Anglo-Saxon period "had a relatively large role to play in cultural and political affairs," and, "the portraits painted in 'non-literary' sources confirm that while women had good reason to fear the instability of society, they were secure in their customary roles and were well served by those who wrote about them." *God's Handiwork: Images of Women in Old English Literature*, pp. x and 42-43. See Helen T. Bennett's critique of Schrader, "From Peace Weaver to Text Weaver: Feminist Approaches to Old English Studies," in "Twenty Years of The Year's Work in Old English Studies", *OEN Subsidia*, 15 (1989), edited with a forward by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, pp. 30-31.

<sup>189</sup> Eleanor Searle suggests, "peace-weaving was of necessity an active political role," and further, "this weaving was never automatic. The weavers had to know their business." The author draws this conclusion from an examination of the life

women whose "duty" it most clearly seems to be to "weave peace," sometimes had other ideas. There are, for instance, rumors of assassination arranged by aristocratic Anglo-Saxon women: Ælfreda is implicated in killing Edward the Martyr,<sup>190</sup> Offa's queen is involved in the murder of St. Æthelbert,<sup>191</sup> Cwenthryth is rumored to have arranged the murder of her brother,<sup>192</sup> and Queen Edith, King Edward's wife, is also reputed to have ordered a political assassination.<sup>193</sup> There

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of Emma, Canut's wife. As Searle explains it, Emma's "peace-weaving" was often done to achieve deliberate effects that were of her own choosing. Searle remarks that "Emma had done a remarkable job in being able to persuade her Danish son Harthacnut to associate her English son Edward with him as his successor." Thus, "peace-weaving" might well be more complex a task than was previously thought. "Emma the Conqueror," *Studies in Medieval History (presented to R. Allen Brown)*, Christopher Harper-Bill, Christopher J. Holdsworth, and Janet L. Nelson eds. (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1989), pp. 286-288.

<sup>190</sup> Though Frank M. Stenton, in *Anglo-Saxon England*, is unwilling to blame her, and instead believed Æthelred to be guilty of Edward's murder, JoAnn McNamara and Suzanne Wemple identify Ælfreda as the guilty party: "the mother of Ethelred the Unready (978-1016)" who "secured the crown for her son by the murder of his half-brother, Edward the Martyr." "The Power of Women Through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1100," *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds. (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 373.

<sup>191</sup> D. W. Rollason reports that "his death in 794 at the hands of Offa, king of Mercia, is mentioned by *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*" and that he "came to visit Offa at Sutton, near Hereford, to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage. Offa's suspicions of him were aroused by his queen and he had him murdered." Rollason, "The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Anglo-Saxon England II*, ed. Peter Clemons, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 9.

<sup>192</sup> Though the evidence regarding this incident is not conclusive, it is nonetheless rumored that the victim's name was Kenelm, and "he succeeded the throne as a child on the death of his father, Kenwulf, king of Mercia (821), and he was murdered in the same year at the instigation of his sister, Cwenthryth, who was jealous of his position." Rollason, "The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints in Anglo-Saxon England," p. 10.

<sup>193</sup> Kenneth E. Cutler explains that, "The trouble in 1064 began when Edith's brother Tostig became earl of Northumbria in 1055. Tostig taxed his earldom with such a heavy hand that he outraged some of the local thegns. In 1063 Tostig murdered two of the dissidents, Gamel and Ulf, but failed to stamp out discontent. Queen Edith reportedly lent her support to her threatened brother. At court during

are, as well, reports of maneuverings less drastic, such as the acceptance of bribes in return for political favors.<sup>194</sup>

As far as it can be ascertained, married women appear to have acted in complete partnership with their husbands; moreover, widows and women in monastic life often accomplished a great deal without male partners. Hence, the title of "peace-weaver" defines Anglo-Saxon women too narrowly, and ignores the diversity of the roles which they actually took on, and the relative status with men which they in fact held.

Anglo-Saxon marriage seems to have been essentially a partnership, undertaken as an *agreement* between husband and wife, an arrangement to which both parties assent, and to which accord must be reached even before the marriage takes place. Early in Anglo-Saxon history, money was exchanged between the prospective bride-groom and the bride's kinsmen prior to the actual marriage.<sup>195</sup> This "fee" is often cited as evidence that women were bought and sold in marriage, much as slaves — according to one reader, "as if [the woman] were a chattel, rather more valuable than a cow, but of ap-

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the Christmas celebration in 1064, a Northumbrian thegn named Cospatric was killed by the queen's order." "Edith, Queen of England, 1045-1066," *Medieval Studies*, 35 (1973), p. 230-231.

<sup>194</sup> This is imputed to Queen Edith. Cutler says that "the evidence suggests that Edith preferred power and riches to the king's interests. Power at court is ascribed to her more than once in the *Vita Edwardi*, and there is also the report in the chronicle of Ramsey Abbey that she accepted a bribe from abbot Ælfwine to influence a legal dispute which involved the abbey. Abbot Ælfwine seems to have considered the queen's power real enough to merit securing." "Edith, Queen of England, 1045-1066," p. 229.

<sup>195</sup> See Ch. 2, page 31, for a discussion of the "bride-price" in Riddle 54.

proximately the same kind."<sup>196</sup> The Laws of Æthelbert no. 77,<sup>197</sup> is most often given as evidence that women were treated as property.<sup>198</sup> This particular law reads: *Gif mon mægth gebigeð, ceapi geceapod sy, gif hit unfacne is.*"<sup>199</sup> It is true that this law does translate, "if someone buys a maiden, she is to be bought with for a payment, if it is without deceit." However, this does not seem to have been a *purchase* price, so much as an assurance that his future wife would be treated well. Critics who concentrate on the "buying" of the maiden in 77, do not consider that a considerable portion of the initial "fee" goes to the woman herself.<sup>200</sup> Further, such interpretation ignores stipulations

<sup>196</sup> Rosalind Hill, "Marriage in Seventh Century England," in *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honor of Charles W. Jones, Volume I: The Anglo-Saxon Heritage*, Margot H. King and Wesley M. Stevens eds. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Hill Monastic Manuscript Library Saint John's Abbey & University, 1979), p. 69. Hill is ambivalent as to the position of women in Anglo-Saxon society. She finds that it was in some ways "favorable," but not in this particular instance.

<sup>197</sup> These are the earliest written laws. They are dated between 597 and 616 according to Dorothy Whitelock ed., *English Historical Documents*, Vol. 1, c. 500-1042 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968).

<sup>198</sup> For instance, Hill points out, "the [marriage] transaction is quite specifically described in the Kentish laws as 'buying the maiden.'" "Marriage in seventh century England," p. 69. Margaret Clunies Ross interprets this law similarly: "Æthelbert 77 and 77.1 consider the acquisition of a wife as a contract between two parties, with the man handing over a bride payment to the woman's guardians." "Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England," *Past and Present*, 108 (August 1985), p. 11. Klinck has a comparable perspective: "the view of woman as object . . . is particularly marked in the earliest (written) code of laws . . . a woman [is] merely . . . a rather valuable piece of property. They speak, for instance, of buying a wife." "Female Characterization in Old English Poetry," pp. 26-27.

<sup>199</sup> F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 7. Excerpts from the laws, as well as some charters, letters, wills, and other documents can be found, in translation, in Whitelock's *English Historical Documents*.



in the law which appear directly *following* this statement regarding "payment," which give the supposedly "purchased" woman extensive rights including half of her husband's holdings after his death, if there are children between them. The same half share is also granted to her if she decides to leave her husband with their children. If she leaves alone, she still receives a share.<sup>201</sup>

A later document upholds specific rights of the bride, after the fashion of Æthelbert's early laws 78-80. This item, "Concerning the Betrothal of a Woman,"<sup>202</sup> stipulates that, by *riht*, a man who wants to marry must say what he is prepared to give to the bride herself: *hwæs he hire geunge, wið tham ðet heo his willan geceose, [and] hwæs he hire geunge, gif heo lang sy thonne he.*<sup>203</sup> Moreover, the bride still has recourse to her "friends" and kinsmen even after the marriage takes place. This is so even if she is living away from her own district.<sup>204</sup> As well, care was taken to

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<sup>200</sup> I hesitate to say *all*, since it is not absolutely clear, at least in the early laws, that the bride receives the entire "fee," though this was certainly true later on in the Anglo-Saxon period. However, some readers feel that the "fee" was always paid to the woman herself. Fell says, "there is a vast range of evidence...for the fact that the money the bride-groom had to pay...was payment to the woman herself, intended to guarantee her financial security and independence within marriage." *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 16.

<sup>201</sup> [78] *Gif hio cwic bearn gebyreth, healfne scæt age, gif ceorl ær swylteth.* [79] *Gif mid bearnum bugan wille, healfne scæt age.* [80] *Gif ceorl agan wile: swa an bearn.* F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 8.

<sup>202</sup> *Be Wifmannes Beweddunge* appears in F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 442. Whitelock remarks that "the text bears no indication of date," but places it "late" in the tenth century. *English Historical Documents*, p. 431.

<sup>203</sup> *Be Wifmannes Beweddunge*, F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 442.

ensure that the woman actually consented to and desired marriage with her prospective husband. By Canute's time this was entrenched in law.<sup>205</sup>

In the later Anglo-Saxon period, it became the norm for "fee" to be given entirely to the bride herself.<sup>206</sup> These traditional "morning gifts" were often valuable, affording the married woman security, and a measure of independence if widowed, because, as Riedinger and others point out, it belonged to the bride irrevocably.<sup>207</sup> Two "marriage agree-

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 7: *Gif hy man ðonne ut of lande lædan wille on oðres thegnes land, ðonne bið hire ræd, thæt frynd ða forword habban, ðæt hire man nan woh ne to do, [and] gif heo gylt gewyrce, ðæt hy moton beon bote nyhst, gif heo næfð, of hwam heo bete.*

<sup>205</sup> Laws of Cnut (1016-1035) ii. 74: *na nyde man næðer ne wif ne mæden to tham, the hyre sylfre mislicie, ne wið sceatte ne sylle, butan he hwæt agenes ðances gyfan wylle.* F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 360.

<sup>206</sup> In the collection of wills edited by Dorothy Whitelock, husbands will often mention that their wives are to receive what is theirs in accordance to an "agreement" made between them both, at the time of their marriage. Ealdorman Æthelmar of Hampshire (971-982 or 983), grants his wife an estate at Tidworth. The estate, is granted according to an agreement made between them both, when they were married: *"to tham forewordun the wit mid wedde unc betweonan gefæstnodon."* *Anglo-Saxon Wills* (Cambridge, 1938), p. 25 and 26. Similarly, in "The Will of Thurketel of Palgrave," dated before 1038, Thurketel grants his wife *Lefwen* the holdings received when he married her, as well as "half Roydon" on terms which were mutually agreed upon: *that forworde that we spreken habban.* *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 68. The Danish name of the testator does not indicate that the independent laws of the Danelaw are in operation here. This is an Anglo-Saxon will. It is, first of all, made outside of the Danelaw area. Thurketel's wife appears to be English, and it is possible that Thurketel might have been English as well. Fell explains that, "it is in fact almost impossible to tell to what extent in the first half of the eleventh century Norse names in England were matters of fashion rather than indicative of descent." *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 136.

<sup>207</sup> See Riedinger, *Wex and Wife*, p. 1, and Fell: "the 'morning-gift'. . . could be very substantial amount in money and land, and it is paid not to the father or kin, but to the woman herself. . . . A number of man's wills make it clear that certain property is owned by the wife because it was granted to her as her *morgengifu*." *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 57. Fell's assertion seems to be correct. The Ealdormen who made the wills that appear in the Whitelock collection sometimes make note of this fact in their testaments, often expressing

ments" stipulating such gifts have survived from this period.<sup>200</sup> In the first, Wulfric promises his intended four separate estates, as well as other goods. In the second, Godwine assures Brihtric "a pound's weight of gold" as well as two estates and everything on them, including "cows," "horses," and "slaves."

Married women sometimes acted as co-rulers with their husbands, holding overt positions of power, in the same way as did men. In the years of 672 and 673, a woman named Seaxburh ruled for a year after her husband Cenwalh died in 672,<sup>200</sup> and Ethelburgh razed a town called Taunton, in 722, on whose behalf it is not known.<sup>210</sup> Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæda, assisted her husband in ruling the kingdom of Mercia while he was alive, and was the sole comital ruler of that territory for seven years after his death.<sup>211</sup>

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the wish that their widows will be left to do "as they like" with the property given to them. See, for instance, "The will of Thurketel Heyng," dated sometime after 1014, who leaves his wife and daughter property. Of his wife's inheritance, he says that she is to do as she pleases with it and that her right to it should not be contested: *and mine wiues del euere unbesaken to gyfen and to habben ther hire leuest be. Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 70. Though the testator's name is Danish, this will is Anglo-Saxon. Like Thurketel of Palgrave's testament, it is made outside the Danelaw area. Fell mentions this will, noting that the testator is probably Danish, and that the "nickname" *Heyng* "is perhaps better evidence of Norse connections than a proper name." She also mentions that his daughter's name is *Ælfwynn*, "whose Old English name might imply that her mother was English." Such intermarriages were not unheard of. *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 136-38.

<sup>200</sup> The first of these is "an agreement between Wulfric and Archbishop Wulfstan's sister," dated 1014-1016. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, no. 148. The second marriage document is a "marriage agreement from Kent," dated 1016-1020. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, no. 77.

<sup>209</sup> Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 154.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, p. 159.

Women were active in shaping monastic life as well. Several Anglo-Saxon abbesses headed double houses. These women assumed the same duties and responsibilities as did their male counterparts. As well as the regular obligations relating to charge of the Abbey, the famous Hild of Whitby herself trained several bishops.<sup>212</sup> Furthermore, a woman might also have the option of actively participating in religious *and* secular life, either consecutively, as Hild did, "thirty years in secular life and thirty years in religious life,"<sup>213</sup> or *simultaneously* choosing both, as was the case with Wynflæd.<sup>214</sup> There appears to be little restriction, then, in either religious or secular living, and in the fact that one did not necessarily preclude the other.

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<sup>211</sup> The *Chronicle* lists her battles against invading Danes, Irish, and Norwegians for the years 913, 917, and 918. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, pp. 194-198.

<sup>212</sup> Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People. The Complete Works of the Venerable Bede*, ed. J. A. Giles (London, 1944).

<sup>213</sup> *Sancta Hylde was threo ond thritig geara læwedum hade ond threo ond thritig geara under haligrytte*. From *An Old English Martyrology*, ed. George Herzfeld, *EETS* O. S. (London, 1900), p. 206, lines 23-4. As found in Owen-Crocker's "*Wynflæd's Wardrobe*," *Anglo-Saxon England* viii, ed. Peter Clemoes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 195-222.

<sup>214</sup> Owen-Crocker observes that "[in] Wynflæd herself we find a benefactress, even an associate, of religious houses who kept a firm grip on her secular affairs, including her personal wardrobe." She explains further "Vowesses of this kind were espoused to Christ with veil and ring and yet could retain their secular way of life. They could remain in their own home or reside in a religious house as they chose" and that "[by] Ælfric's time it was evidently common for widows to take vows: in his *Glossary* Latin *nonna* is defined 'arwyrthe wydewe odde nunne,' as Professor Whitelock has pointed out." "*Wynflæd's Wardrobe*," p. 198-199 and 219.

Thirty years ago, Betty Bandel noticed that the chronicler's attitude towards these various activities of Anglo-Saxon women was, in general, rather nonchalant:

The Anglo-Saxon chroniclers speak of outstanding women in a very casual way. . . . There is not . . . the slightest indication of surprise on the part of the chronicler when the woman is learned, devout, or an able administrator, or a brave fighter. . . . Bede tells the story of Hild . . . with never a suggestion that it might be unusual for a woman to 'reduce all things to a regular system. . . .' Bishop Asser describes Alfred the boy being urged on to a life of study by his apparently book-minded stepmother Judith with no implication that learning is a field which would not normally interest women.<sup>215</sup>

The point Bandel makes here is a significant one. The Anglo-Saxon chroniclers seem to have found nothing strange in the accomplishments of these women. The "range" of available options does indeed seem to be wide. In the *Chronicle* they are certainly distinguished in this way: as equal partners in a shared enterprise, or as leaders of diverse endeavors in their own right, or as political schemers, but *not* necessarily or always as the possessions of men, or as the peace-pledges between them.

Under the law, Anglo-Saxon women had particular rights. They could, for instance, bestow grants of land during their lifetimes,<sup>216</sup> and act as witnesses to the grants of others.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Bandel, "The English Chronicler's Attitude Toward Women," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 16 (1955), pp. 114-115.

<sup>216</sup> In the "Grant of Land to Worcester by Leofric, Earl of Mercia, and His Wife," dated between 1052-1057, Leofric and his wife grant two estates to the monastery of St. Mary for godes lufan [and] for hyra saule. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, p. 210.

Women could also bring their own lawsuits to court, and function as testators at such proceedings.<sup>218</sup> Further, they were entitled to make their own wills,<sup>219</sup> witness a will,<sup>220</sup> or serve as an advocate for the will of another person — woman or man.<sup>221</sup>

Many of these historical papers document the exchange of material possessions. The Anglo-Saxons gave things to each other that befit the nature of a warrior society and

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<sup>217</sup> In a document titled "Grant of Land by King Cnut to Christchurch, Canterbury," Queen Emma, Cnut's wife, is named first among the witnesses to it. This document is of uncertain date. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, pp. 168-170.

<sup>218</sup> The "Record of a Lawsuit between Wynflæd and Leofwine," shows that Wynflæd brought suit to Æthelred's court against her son. The argument involved two estates Wynflæd claimed to own, given to her by Leofwine's father Ælfric. Wynflæd produced witnesses to testify on her behalf, both men and women, among whom are a bishop, an archbishop and an earl, also, *Ælfthryth thæs cyninges modor*, Abbot Wulfgar, the famous Wulfstan *priost*, various ealdormen, and two abbesses. In short, as the scribe notes, *both mænig god thegn, god wif*. This document is dated between 990 and 992. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, p. 136.

<sup>219</sup> This is well noted by Fell in her chapter entitled "Sex and Marriage," in *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 56-73. The Whitelock collection of wills shows several examples. Ælfifu leaves her lord several estates: *thæs landæs at Weowungum and at Hlincgeladæ and at Hæfæresham and at Hæðfælda and at Mæssanwyrðæ and at Gyssic*. *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 20. Æthelflæd, second wife of king Edmund, also leaves large estates in her will (dated between 962 and 991). *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, notes to the will, p. 139. Brihtnoth's wife Ælflæd also had a good deal of her own property. (This will is dated around 1002.) Among her numerous estates and holdings which are listed in her will are: "eleven estates of which we do not know the origin. They all lie in the eastern counties, mainly Essex, and probably she inherited them from her husband." *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, Note to will 15, p. 142.

<sup>220</sup> In "The will of the Ealdorman Ælfheah" of Hampshire, 968-971, one of the witnesses to his will (among a Bishop, two ealdormen and an abbot) is *thæs cyninges wif Athelwold*. See also "The Will of Brihtric and Ælfswith," Meopham, Kent, 973-987. It is witnessed by various kin, including a kinswoman, *Byrhtwar[ul]*, *Ælfrices laf*. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 24 and p. 26.

<sup>221</sup> "The Will of Brihtric and Ælfswith" Meopham, Kent, 973-987. Brihtric wills his *hlæfdian* goods so that *the se cwyde standan mote*. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 26. Leofgifu, in her will dated between 1035 and 1044, asks "her lady" not to let anyone alter her will: *And ic bidde mine leuedien for godes louen that thu tholie that ani man mine quide awende*. *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 78.

the aristocratic class to which they belonged. Weapons, horses, gold, and sometimes retainers, are very often exchanged. Though this is indeed a warrior society, the pattern of gift-giving shows that it is not exclusively male. The possessions which are considered valuable and proper to possess *for that class* are not differentiated between men and women. Such items as "rings," "weapons," and "horses," were handed down through generations of men and women, given from father to son, mother to son or daughter, or from lord to retainers of both sexes.<sup>222</sup> In "A Worcester-shire Marriage Agreement," between Wulfric and Archbishop Wulfstan's sister, for example, there are, among the other goods Wulfric promises his wife, "thirty mancuses of gold, thirty men, and thirty horses."<sup>223</sup> Since the gold, the number of men, and the horses are matched, and *mancus* means "man-cost,"<sup>224</sup> it seems that Wulfric might be making a gift of *retainers* as a wedding present to his wife, along with the money to sustain them. In another instance a woman named Ælfgifu gives horses, shields, and spears to her lord. She declares, "*ic ann minæn cinæhlaforde . . . and syx horsa and swa fala scylda and spera.*"<sup>225</sup> It can be seen in Ælfgifu's

<sup>222</sup> The conspicuous gift of warriors, in both literature and life. See for instance, *The Battle of Maldon*.

<sup>223</sup> Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, p. 148.

<sup>224</sup> *Bosworth and Toller*.

<sup>225</sup> "The will of Ælfgifu", d. 975. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 20. There are other instances of women giving and receiving "rings," and "horses," for instance, in "The Will of Elfflæd," d. 1002. As well as eight estates, Elfflæd gives *bæha*,

will that men did not actually expropriate weapons — women were both the givers and the receivers of such gifts.<sup>226</sup>

This bequest compares directly to several in the Ealdormans' wills. For instance, Æthelric, an earl who fought with Bryhtnoth at Maldon, leaves his lord gold, his sword and belt, as well as "two horses, two targes, two frakish spears."<sup>227</sup>

This exchange of gifts implies that horses, weapons, rings, and money, are appropriate for *aristocrats* to possess and to concern themselves with, and that the gender of a particular aristocrat is not an important consideration.

Klinck has stated that "the bulk of the laws suggest an

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"rings," two cups and a silver *fæt* to her *hlaforde*. *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 38. Brihtric and his wife Ælfswith leave "rings" and a stallion to their *hlæfdian*: *anne beah on ðrittigan mancysan goldes; [and] ænne stedan*. *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 26. Also, Wynflæd gives horses both to kinsmen and a kinswomen: *hio bicwið Cynelufe hyre dæl thera wildera horsa . . . [and] hæbbe Eadwold [and] his sweostor hyre taman hors gemæn*." *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 14. Similarly, Æthelflæd grants *feower beagas* "rings", robes, cups, bowels, and *IIII hors*, "four horses," to her *hlæford* so that her will *standan mote*. *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 34.

<sup>226</sup> This may not be an isolated incident. There are the historical examples of Seaxburh, Ethelbert, and Æthelflæda, all three of whom might have possession of, a direct occupational use for, weapons. Though there is no archaeological evidence that links women with weapons conclusively, the problem may lie with the presuppositions of the archaeologists. Fell brings this to light in a discussion of the Viking Age in her book. In particular, the grave of a ninth century woman in Gerdrup, Denmark, who was buried with an "iron knife," a "kneedlecase," and most notably, a "spear." Fell remarks that "we do not know of any other burials of Viking age woman with weapons, but this, as indicated above, is because the presence of a weapon itself has usually been taken to be adequate evidence for the sex of the skeleton it accompanies, and we have therefore no means of knowing if the Gerdrup situation is unique. No parallel instance in England has been noted so far, but the Gerdrup grave is immensely important in changing the pattern of assumptions that can be made from archaeological evidence about the status of women, and though there are several ways in which it could be interpreted it might even be adduced as a reason for paying a little more serious attention to the many traditions that survive in Old Norse literature about warrior-women." *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 130-131.

<sup>227</sup> "The Will of Æthelric," Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 42.



entirely male world of affairs," but the concerns and interests of this class of Anglo-Saxons may not be separated along the lines of gender, as Klinck maintains.<sup>228</sup> The gifts given here, between men and women, show that such "affairs" as might be considered "male" to the modern reader, may actually have been women's concerns as well. Thus, the private relationships in the *Exeter Book* which evince such a clear equality between male and female are reflecting the society that sustained them.

Equality may have been possible in Anglo-Saxon society because it was not strictly patriarchal. Though a form of patriarchy is often assumed or implied, prevalent kinship arrangements preclude it. Ernest Young explains:

The wife, after marriage, remained in her own *mægth*; her husband merely became her guardian. Her children were as much kindred of her kin as of their father's kin . . . "[the] absolute power of the father over wife and children could not exist where the mother's blood-relations were acknowledged as kin. The natural and only inference is, that, where we do find men calling "themselves relatives of their mother's relatives," the *patria potestas*, as known to the Romans, could not have existed. . . . It is certainly not meant that a patriarchal organization, or anything like one, ever existed among the Saxons in England.<sup>229</sup>

Fell also comments on this, stating: "a woman's rights as she moves from one family to another are carefully protected. It is not, as in some societies, that she moves from the 'authority' of a father to that of a husband. On the

<sup>228</sup> Klinck, "Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law," p. 109.

<sup>229</sup> Ernest Young, "The Anglo-Saxon Family Law," *Essays in Anglo-Saxon Law*, pp. 149-151.

contrary, she retains within her marriage the support of the family she was born into."<sup>230</sup> The absence of a fixed patriarchy is in itself an indication of possible flexibility in the roles that men; and women might assume.

The historical evidence seems to suggest a clear equality, whether directly stated or implied. Even the way in which men and women are *named* suggests they were coequal. This balance is present in both the specific and in the non-specific. For instance, Christine Fell reminds us that the noun *man* means either man or woman in Anglo-Saxon, as also the noun *homo* — they are both used interchangeably for either sex.<sup>231</sup> This holds true for specific names as well, both in *kind* of name, and in the manner in which females *are* named. In 1938, Henry Bosley Woolf noticed that, "The most important of [the principles of naming were] alliteration

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<sup>230</sup> Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 74.

<sup>231</sup> Fell remarks on this semantic equality between men and women: "our response to some of the simplest words can blur our understanding of the original. We are, in Modern English, accustomed to read the word *man* as masculine. . . . Old English *mann* however can equally be used of women. Sir Henry Spelman (1564?-1641) produced a study on *The Laws and Antiquities of England*, published posthumously in 1723. In it he notes that a charter of Edward the Confessor uses the word *man* to refer to a woman: 'And King Edward the Confessor granting *duas Mansas* . . . to Thola Widow of the aforesaid Orc, whom in Saxon Charter he calleth his *Man*, that is his *Thane* . . .' The Old English is more clearly unambiguous than Spelman's rendering: *Tole min mann*. It is not an isolated occurrence. A charter of 969 contains a grant of land near Worcester leased for three lives by the bishop to a man called Ælfeard. The main body of the charter is in Latin, the bounds are in English. Then there is a final sentence in English: *Ælfeard was se forma man and nu hit stant his dohtor on handa and heo is se oder man*. . . . Similarly in the Latin of Domesday Book the word *homo* is properly used for women as well as for men. In Hertfordshire Eadgifu *puella*, . . . held an estate. She was Archbishop Stigand's *homo*. It is also observable in the manumission clauses of wills and in inventories that the word *menn* must be used of people in general." *Anglo-Saxon Women*, p. 17.

and variation," and that, contrary to critical opinions of that time, which held that the "naming principles" did not matter in relation to females, these "principles" actually *do* apply equally to male and female children. He says, for example, that "among the descendants of Cerdic are twenty two women . . . eighteen . . . [of whom] bear names that alliterate with those of their fathers." This is true of other Anglo-Saxon royal houses as well. Further, Woolf demonstrates that children of both sexes could be named after their fathers, mothers, or both: "instances of double variation . . . as that of the Deiran princess Hereswith, daughter of Hereric and Beorhtswith, and of the tenth-century bishop of Worcester, Wulfstan, son of Æthelstan and Wulfgifu, show well enough that the mother was hardly a non-entity in the matter of name-giving."<sup>232</sup>

The sexual riddles demonstrate clearly that public and private concerns do, and should, interconnect. Historical evidence shows that this was true of the society as a whole. The family unit itself seems to have been the base of public power for both sexes, and so, what is public and what is private overlap in a fundamental way. This phenomenon may have directly fostered a system in which females could participate equally with men. Jane Tibbetts-Shulenburg puts forward this idea:

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<sup>232</sup> Henry Bosley Woolf, "The Naming of Women in Old English Times," in *Modern Philology*, 36:2 (November 1938), pp. 113-120.

[For] the early middle ages . . . with political and economic power situated within the family, the household became the central locus of power. In the undifferentiated space of the great hall, the distinction between public and private became redundant. The domestic sphere was also the public sphere: it stood at the very center of power and authority. The household served as the noblewoman's powerhouse; it provided nearly limitless opportunities for women whose families were politically and economically powerful.<sup>233</sup>

This base of power in the family was, however, displaced in the later middle ages.<sup>234</sup> During the Anglo-Saxon period, it may well have enabled women to share in, and have considerable influence on, public affairs as well as private.<sup>235</sup>

<sup>233</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Female Sanctity and Private Roles: ca. 500-1100," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski eds. (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 105. McNamara and Wemple make a similar assertion: "by the fifth and sixth centuries, when the Germanic tribes were setting up kingdoms in the western parts of the decaying Roman Empire . . . the smaller family group began to replace the tribe as the basic social unit . . . a woman of that age could expect to share actively in the social role of her family. The Germans drew no distinctions between private and public power, or between public and private rights. As a result, women whose families were economically powerful, or who held extensive property in their own names, occupied the public sphere as well as the private." "The Power of Women Through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1100," pp. 118-119.

<sup>234</sup> McNamara and Wemple explain that, "[with] the growth of feudal monarchies in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, governments ceased to be ruled on a personal basis but rather developed into large, impersonal institutions. Public power which had previously been exercised by great aristocratic families through the household, was recaptured by kings who were assisted in their governance by professional bureaucrats. The loss of public power was especially felt by queens and aristocratic women, for with the removal of the power base from the household, noblewomen essentially lost their formal positions of influence." "The Power of Women Through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1100," p. 119.

<sup>235</sup> This situation changed significantly after the conquest. Cecily Clark and Elizabeth Williams have found that, "those [women] in control of property had the same powers as men of making grants by charter, and had their personal seals. But, because a wife's property passed wholly into her husband's care, virtually the only woman land-holders or taxpayers were widows, and records dealing with such matters usually show them as amounting to under ten percent of the total. A woman could not act independently to sell, give away, or bequeath her 'own' property. Although women could, and did, witness charters, their surviving attestations are rare." *The Impact of 1066*, p. 164. It seems in order for Anglo-Saxon families to withstand 1066, they were obliged to accommodate Norman ways. According to Ann Williams, "[adaptation] to Norman customs of inheritance, tenure, and even names

It would seem, then, that women did have both a private and a public life. That women were active in the former is evinced by the sexual riddles, and that they also took part in the latter is made clear by the historical evidence. Women were not merely *part* of a man's private life, nor were they simply men's public figures as pledges of peace.<sup>236</sup>

This general overlap of private and public also shows itself in matters of law governing the population at large. Public interests are not divorced from what is essentially personal. For instance, the laws governing vendetta indicate an intersection of personal rights and public justice in which a breach of private peace is punishable by the direct action of the victims themselves.<sup>237</sup> As well as compensation for physical injuries, there are laws which dictate reparation for personal insult to an innocent party. Putting the victim into stocks or binding him, or shaving his hair (especially if it is shaved as a priest) warrant heavy fines

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was the key to survival." "A Vice-Comital Family in Pre-Conquest Warwickshire," in *Anglo-Norman Studies XI: Proceedings of the Battle Conference* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), p. 288 and 290.

<sup>236</sup> For an opposite view, see Klinck: "there are no Amazons in Old English poetry: no female counterpart of the male roles in which physical strength is an important constituent." There are no prominent and active roles for them to fulfill, and for this very reason they are available for a different kind of exploration: in the area of suffering and thought rather than action, and of private rather than public experience." "Female Characterization in Old English Poetry," pp. 88-89.

<sup>237</sup> See, for instance, Alfred 42.5 and 6: *Eac we cwedað, that mon mote mid his hlaforde feohtan orwige, gif mon on thone hlaforde fiohte; swa mot se hlaforde mid thy men feohtan. Efter thære ilcan wisan mon mot feohtan mid his geborene mæge, gif hine mon on woh onfeohted, buton wið his hlaforde: that we ne liefað.* These laws are dated by Liebermann 890?-901. *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 76. See also, Ethelred. II. 6: *Gif hit binnan byrig gedon bið, seo friðbræc, fare seo buruhwaru sylf to [and] begyte ða banan.* The set of laws is dated by Liebermann as 991. *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 222.

for the personal humiliation they cause, even though no bodily harm is done.<sup>238</sup> The invasion of private peace, that is, breaking into someone's home and injuring the occupants, entails severe consequences. The perpetrators are at risk of having all belongings confiscated, and of possible execution, at the discretion of the king.<sup>239</sup> Fines for assaulting women begin with five shillings for "grabbing" and go up, according to the extent of the assault.<sup>240</sup> The

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<sup>238</sup> See *Ælfred*, 35 I-6: *Gif mon cierliscne mon gebinde unsynninge, gebete mid X scill. Gif hine mon beswinge, mid XX scill. gebete. Gif he hine on hengenne aleggge, mid XXX scill. gebete. Gif he hine on bismor to homolan biscire, mid X scill. gebete. Gif he hine to preoste bescire unbundenne, mid XXX scill. gebete. Gif he ðone beard ofascire, mid XX scill. gebete. Gif he hine gebinde [and] thone to preoste bescire, mid LX scill. gebete.* F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 68. Pollock and Maitland make this point on these particular laws governing personal insult: "[it] is worthwhile to notice that the contumelious outrage of binding a free man, or shaving his head in derision, or shaving off his beard, was visited with heavier fines than any but the gravest wounds. In the modern common law compensation for insult, as distinct from actual bodily hurt, is arrived at only in a somewhat indirect fashion, by giving juries a free hand in the measure of damages." *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, p. 53.

<sup>239</sup> This law is Eadmund II, 6: *Eac we cwædon be mundbrice [and] hamsocnum: se ðe hit ofer ðis do, ðæt he tholige ealles ðæs he age, [and] si on cyninges dome, hwæder he lif age.* Eadmund's laws are dated by Liebermann 943-946. *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 188.

<sup>240</sup> *Alfred* 11: *Gif mon on cirlicre fæmnan breost gefo, mid V scill. hire gebete.* F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 56. As Fell also notes of the laws in this section, it is clear that the "compensation" is paid directly to the woman herself. See Fell's discussion on this and other laws governing sexual offences against women in *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 62-64. Perhaps this compensation does not seem like much. However, the amount may be worth consideration, since, in law 16 of the same code, it seems that a single shilling can buy a cow or a stud-mare. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 58. Hill comments on a similar protection law in *Æthelbert*, and points out that the fine (in this case of six shillings) may in fact be a significant deterrent: "Even the poorest of women was entitled to the protection of their personal peace. To break the peace of 'a widow of the fourth class' was an offence punishable by a fine of six shillings, [*Æthelbert*, 75], which represented the price of six lambing ewes or of one good woven woolen blanket. Such a payment would make anyone think twice before molesting her." "Marriage in Seventh Century England," p. 69.

penalty for rape, perhaps the most vicious disturbance of the integrity of the self, involves severe punishment.<sup>241</sup> And, perhaps more importantly, these punishments serve to satisfy the victim's private right to vengeance, rather than to simply ensure that public justice is served.<sup>242</sup> It seems that in all cases, Anglo-Saxon law serves the personal satisfaction of the victim and is clearly integral to their sense of public justice.<sup>243</sup>

### Conclusions:

The specific content of the sexual riddles of the *Exeter Book* suggests that Anglo-Saxon society treats men and

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<sup>241</sup> There are, as noted, fines imposed according to the rank of the woman offended, but these fines may be only a secondary consideration. As Fell notes, "in the case of sexual assaults on women it may be impossible for the offender to get away merely with financial compensation." Firstly, Alfred 42 7, entitled a woman's relations — husband, brother, father, or son — to kill the perpetrator of such a crime if he is caught in the act: *mon mot feohtan orwige, gif he gemeted othere ne at his awum wife, betynedum durum oððe under anre reon, oððe at his dehter awumborenre (oððe at his swistar borenre) oððe at his medder ðe wære to awum wife forgifen his fæder.* Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 76. Moreover, if a male servant rapes a female servant, he is subject to castration: *Gif ðeowmon theowne to nedhæmde genede, bete mid his eowende.* *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 64. Fell discusses these laws in *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 62-64.

<sup>242</sup> It should be noted that this is different from modern rape law in which justice is seen to be done if the public process is served and the perpetrator of the crime goes to prison. This has more to do with paying a debt to society than it does with conciliating the victim directly.

<sup>243</sup> See Alfred 42 7, footnote 244, above. Pollock and Maitland comment on this law, but they identify the crime as an adultery only: "an adulterer taken in *flagrante delicto* by the woman's lawful husband, father, brother, or son, might be killed without risk of blood-feud." *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I* (Cambridge: University Press, 1923), p. 53. They come to this conclusion even though the action of the perpetrator is specifically *æt*, not *mid*, as one would expect in this case, and as it is stated in Alfred 10, a law clearly governing adultery: *gif mon hæme mid twelfhyndes monnes wife, hundtwelftig scill. gebete.* Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, p. 56.

women equally and further, that this is an essentially holistic society. It is natural, then, that these riddles give moral instruction from a holistic viewpoint in which there is a natural connection between public and private experience. Historical evidence corroborates what the riddles imply. What is personal is never entirely separated from public interests. Thus, the issues raised in the sexual riddles encompass much of what is fundamental to the society which gave rise to them.

These connections can only be made if the specific content of the sexual riddles is examined for what it is, not what it is purported to represent. In the past, the preoccupation with finding non-sexual "solutions" as the key to these "jokes" has disallowed such direct examination. "Solving" the problem has effectively led to suppressing the work itself. Literature is often seen in terms of an underlying question to be answered, a "problem" to be solved. Pierre Macherey has outlined this perception by way of Edgar Allan Poe's explanation of literature as "proceeding, step by step, to its completion with the precision of a mathematical problem."<sup>244</sup> But, as Macherey notes:

The mathematical problem is a fanciful image of the work: the solution of the one corresponds to the conclusion of the other . . . the work's solution also entails its

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<sup>244</sup> Edgar Allan Poe: *A Grotesque and Solemn Work*, quoted in Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 23-24.



disappearance, hence the work is sustained only by the question to which it must provide an answer.<sup>245</sup>

This approach to literature as a "problem" is regularly imposed on the riddles. For instance, one critic notes a difficulty with Elli Kongas-Miranda's approach to the riddle genre. The problem that this reader has discovered is not important in itself, but his application of a mathematical principle to riddles is. As he explains:

[Miranda] insists that the identity of the object of the riddle image with the answer object necessitates the identity of which those objects are members. This is logically impossible, however, since a class and its members are of different logical types, as defined by Whitehead and Russel in *Principia Mathematica*. A class, for example, cannot be a member of itself and, therefore, cannot act like any of its members.<sup>246</sup>

Here, *Principia Mathematica* is directly applied to riddles in order to create an answer which is completely separate from the object which defines it. The sexual riddles appear to be *especially* subject to the "math-problem-to-be-solved" approach because of difficulties involved in evaluating their explicit content. Typical of this approach is Archer Taylor's discussion of "Erotic Scenes" in riddles:

[A] trick characteristic of riddling at all times," he says "has been the description of an erotic scene with the intent of confusing the hearer by an entirely innocent answer. I have deemed it sufficient to cite the answers to these

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<sup>245</sup> Machery, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), Ch. 6, p. 23-24.

<sup>246</sup> Michael D. Lieber, "Riddles, Cultural Categories, and World View," in *Journal of American Folklore*, 89 (1976), p. 258.

riddles with the reference to the place where they have been printed."<sup>247</sup>

Taylor goes so far as to include the "answers" only, *omitting* the riddles themselves altogether. This illustrates precisely Machery's assertion that "the work's solution also entails its disappearance." The consequence of imposing this perspective on literature is that we are deprived of the very essence of the work itself. The sexual riddles of the *Exeter Book* were, in this same way, made invisible by their imposed solutions.

In spite of what early readers of the *Exeter Book* asserted about them, and in spite of what more recent critics continue to say, the six riddles which are sexual are not *double entendre*. It is only the sexual solution which is always compatible with the details given, and it is this solution which imparts the most significance to them. Therefore, it is finally the only convincing solution. In Riddle 25, the "solution" is penis, not a vegetable; the "hanging thing" of Riddle 42 is not a key, but a penis; the "swelling thing" of Riddle 43, also penis; the content of Riddle 53 can hardly be explained in any other way besides the sexual, as most readers will admit; the specific action of Riddle 59 suggests sex, not dressing; the heated object of Riddle 60 is a penis as well, not a mechanical device for boring wood. The suggestive language never displaces, but rather enhances, this primary sexual meaning. Yet these

<sup>247</sup> Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), p. 687.

solutions have been maintained by subsequent readers and editors ever since they were invented a century ago.

Daniel Calder has pointed out the problems with accepting the opinions of early scholarship as an unquestioned basis for any further work. He argues, "in the mid nineteenth century . . . their expertise in scientific philology was somewhat more advanced than their literary training," and further that they had "a belief in the natural superiority of the Germanic races. . . . from such notions of subject, narrative and structure, very clear moral, ethical, and theological opinions followed. The criticism of Old English has yet to shake off these legacies of the founders."<sup>248</sup> As Calder suggests here, these biases have affected all of the interpretation of Old English literature. However, Calder's statement seems *particularly* true of the interpretation of the sexual riddles in the *Exeter Book*, and of the early commentators who endeavored to effect the disappearance of content.

The differences between our modern social structure and that of the Anglo-Saxons is a difference of respective moral frameworks. Regarding sexuality, what early modern critics have taken as *intrinsic* differences in behavior for women and men, *seemly* attitudes about sex, and *correct* expectations of marriage, we have deemed to be universal and thus applied even where these measures have no meaning or

<sup>248</sup> Daniel G. Calder, "The Canons of Old English Criticism Revisited," in "Twenty Years of The Year's Work in Old English Studies," *OEN Subsidia*, 15 (1989), 19.

relevance. Such values may perhaps be imposed because they are purported to have evolved beyond those of our "primitive" past, and are thus a superior and suitable standard to weigh against older ones. In fact, they evince a kind of propriety that has been forced upon the material of these riddles, bending them into a distorted reflection of our own attitudes towards women and men and their respective place in society. It is to their credit that such norms never existed for the Anglo-Saxons. Clearly, there is a need to re-examine and re-evaluate past assumptions concerning the roles of men and women in Anglo-Saxon society. Certainly there is evidence to suggest that men and women functioned *in partnership*, in personal relationships as well as public ones, a thousand years ago. It was considered, for the space of at least five hundred years, *normal* for men and women to be on equal terms. From this perspective, Anglo-Saxon society — a system often called "artistically developed" but "barbaric" — is one more truly sophisticated than our own.

— Appendix One —

From the following information, it can be seen that the six riddles under consideration — 23, 42, 43, 52, 59 and 61 — are agreed to be sexual *double entendre* by most scholars. Various other riddles are regarded as sexual, but there is no unanimous agreement about them:

▪ Frederick Tupper believed the six riddles — 23, 42, 43, 52, 59 and 61 — to be "obscene" *double entendres*, with the possible addition of 10 "Ox", and 35, the first of the two "Bellows" riddles. *Riddles of the Exeter Book* (New York, 1911), p. xci.)

▪ Alfred J. Wyatt also notes 23, 42, 43, 59, and 61 as *double entendre*, adding 40 "Cock and Hen" and 61 "Beaker" to a sub-category which contain "similar [traits]" but are "of learned origin . . . confined to one sentence or portion of the whole and . . . much less gross." *Old English Riddles* (Boston, 1911), p. xxxi.

▪ A.E.H. Swaen denotes the same six as "obscene": 23, 42, 43, 52, 59, and 61, "which turn upon a *double entendre*." He adds, as Wyatt does, 61 "Beaker." "Notes to Anglo-Saxon Riddles," *Neophil*, 31 (1947), p. 11.

▪ Paul F. Baum also lists 23, 42, 43, 52, 59, and 61 as "obscene" *double entendre*. Baum would add the two "Bellows" riddles, 35 and 83, to this category. *Anglo Saxon Riddles of The Exeter Book* (North Carolina, 1963), pp. 57-60.

✓ ▪ Gregory Jember places the six riddles cited above — 23, 42, 43, 52, 59, and 61 — within a larger group which he

calls "sexual". The other riddles in Jember's "sexual" group are: 63 "Onion," 2 "Uncertain," 9 "Cup of Wine," 15 "Uncertain," 18 "Sword," 19 "Plough," 21 "Bow," 28 "Tree/Wood," 35 and 83, the two "Bellows" riddles, 40 "Cock and Hen," 63 "Onion," 76 "Horn," 87 "Key," and possibly 16 "Jug." "An Interpretive Translation of the Exeter Book Riddles" (University of Denver dissertation, 1975).

■ Craig Williamson notes what he calls the "*Erotic group*" of which the *double entendre* comprise a large part. He includes 23, 42, 43, 52, 59 and 60, adding 35 "Bellows." Williamson adds that "erotic elements, but without the sustained sense of *double entendre*, also occur in 10, 18, 40, 61, and 87." *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs* (1982), p. 22.

■ Ann Harleman-Stewart lists the six noted above — 23, 42, 43, 52, 59 and 60 — as *double entendre*, plus 35 and 83 "Bellows" and 40 "Cock and Hen" in the same group. She also identifies a second grouping as "borderline" because, as she says, "scholars are not in agreement about whether or not these riddles have a double meaning." This category includes 10 "Ox," 18 "Sword," 36 "Bull Calf," 48 "Fire," and 61 "Beaker." "Double Entendre in the Exeter Book Riddles," *Lore and Language*, 3 (1983) pp. 39, 45.

■ Edith Whitehurst Williams appends 87 "Key" to the usual *double entendre* group, reading it "Keyhole" with the "female receptable" [sic] as the sexual subaudition.

"What's so New About the Sexual Revolution? Some Comments on

Anglo-Saxon Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Women Based on Four Exeter Book Riddles," *Texas Quarterly*, 18, p. 52.

▪ In addition to the usual riddles considered to be *double entendre*, K.S. Kiernan adds 91 "Book." Kiernan says that this riddle refers to a "Prostitute." "Kwene: The Old Profession of Riddle 95," *MP*, 72 (1974).

▪ Richard Schrader comments only briefly on the sexual riddles, but he does note Nos. 18 [20], 23 [25], 40 [42], 43 [45], 52 [54], and 59 [61] as constituting the *double entendre* group. See Richard J. Schrader, *God's Handiwork: Images of Women in Early Germanic Literature* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1983), footnote, p. 56.

▪ Christine Fell notes the following riddles as *double entendre*: 25, 45, 54, 61, 62, 63. *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 57.

— Appendix Two —

Riddle 40

Cock and Hen \*

Ic seah wyhte wrætlice twa  
undearnunga ute plegan  
hæmedlases; hwitloc anfeng,  
wlanc under wædum, gif thæs worces speow,  
fænne fyllo. Ic on flette mæg  
thurh runestafas rincum segan  
tham the bec witan beaga ætsomne  
naman thara wita. Thær sceal Nyd wasan  
twega other ond se torhta Æsc,  
an an linan, Acas twegen,  
Hægelas swa some. Swa ic thæs hordgates  
cægan cræfte tha clamme onleac  
the tha rædellan wið rymemenn  
hygefæste heold, heortan bewrigene  
orthoncbendum. Nu is undyrne  
werum æt wine hu tha wihthe mid us  
heanmode twa hatne sindon.

42.4: *speow*: MS. *speoth*.

42.11: *Swa ic*: MS. *hwilc*.

42.11: *tæs*: MS. *wzs*.

*I saw two ornamented creatures un-secretly out playing at sexual intercourse; the white-locked one received a woman's fill, the proud one under (her) clothes, if that work was to succeed. I can say to men on the floor, to those who know books, the names of those creatures, both together, through rune-staves. There shall "Need" be, one of two, and the bright "Ash," on one line, two "Oaks," "Halls" the same. So I unlocked with key's craft the bond of the hoard-gate, that guarded that riddle, concealed by skill-bonds against rune-men wise in heart. Now it is un-secret to men at wine how the creatures among us, the low-minded two, are called.*

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\* Variant Numbers: Williamson, 40; Grien, 43; Trautmann, 40; Tupper, 43; Wyatt, 42; Mackie 42; K-D. 42. All editors accept Dietrich's "Cock and Hen." The solution is based upon the runes names in lines 8-11.



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## INDEX

- Adams, J. F. 118  
 Advice, about sex 3, 14  
 Æthelbert 91, 92  
 Æthelflæda 95  
 Æthelred 89  
 Alexander, M. 118  
 Aristocracy 32, 54, 78,  
     88, 89, 98, 100  
 Assault, penalties for  
     65, 106  
 Bandel, B. 96  
 Barale, M. 118  
 Baum, P. F. 12, 113  
 Bede 96  
 Belanoff, P. 118  
 Bennett, H. 118  
 Bethrum, D. 118  
*Formal solutions:*  
     Onion 5, 18, 19, 20,  
         47, 50, 66, 114  
     Key 5, 23, 24, 25,  
         26, 27, 49, 50, 108,  
         110, 114, 115, 116,  
         124  
     Dough 5, 28, 29, 30,  
         31, 32, 50  
     Churn 5, 33, 34, 35, 66  
     Helmet/Shirt 5, 37, 39,  
         40  
     Boring tool/Poker  
         43, 44, 46, 66  
 Bosworth and Toller 56,  
     57, 61  
 Brandes, S. 65  
 Burrow, J. A. 118  
 Calder, D. 110, 111, 118  
 Canute 93  
 Chronicle 96, 97  
 Clothing 23, 43, 77, 78,  
     79, 80  
*Cock and Hen* 75, 113,  
     114, 116  
 Confinement 20, 38, 40,  
     66, 74, 81  
 Containment 37, 73, 74  
 Crossley-Holland, K. 31  
 Cutler, K. 119  
 Cwenthryth 89  
 Dietrich, F. 20, 25, 43  
 Double entendre 5, 6, 8,  
     9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 33,  
     36, 40, 48, 110, 113,  
     114, 115  
 Edith, queen 6, 83, 89,  
     114, 119, 122  
 Edward the Martyr 89  
 Esne 23, 33, 55, 69, 70,  
     71, 84  
 Ethelburgh 95  
 Fell, C. 101, 115  
 Female (see also Women)  
     52, 58, 59, 62, 65,  
     66, 67, 68, 71, 76,  
     79, 83, 85, 100, 102,  
     114, 120, 122  
 Freud, S. 64, 65  
 Godden, M. 119  
 Hacikyan, A. 119  
 Harleman-Stewart, A. 7,  
     8, 12, 54, 62, 63, 114  
 Hild of Whitby 95  
 Hlæfdige 31, 32  
 Humor 5, 11, 12, 63, 64  
 Jember G. K. 113, 114  
 Kiernan, K. 12, 115  
 Kinship 101  
 Klaeber, F. 119  
 Klinck, A. L. 100, 120  
 Kongas-Miranda, E. 108  
 Lawsuits 97  
 Leach, E. 76  
 Lerer, S. 75  
 Macherey, P. 108, 120  
 Mackie, W. S. 120  
 Male (see also Men) 29,  
     46, 52, 55, 56, 58,  
     64, 65, 66, 67, 68,  
     69, 70, 71, 81, 83,  
     85, 90, 95, 98, 100,  
     102  
 Marriage 35, 52, 72, 81,  
     82, 83, 84, 86, 90,  
     91, 93, 94, 98, 101,  
     111, 119, 121  
     Agreements concerning  
         marriage 94, 98  
     *Concerning the Betrothal  
         of a Woman* 92  
     Fees concerning marriage  
         33, 35, 82, 91, 92, 93  
 McNamara, J. 120  
 Men (see also Male) 3, 14,  
     25, 33, 35, 36, 41,  
     54, 55, 56, 58, 64,

- 65, 67, 69, 70, 72,  
79, 80, 81, 85, 87,  
88, 90, 95, 97, 98,  
99, 100, 101, 103,  
104, 107, 111, 112
- Miller, C. 120
- Monastic life and women  
90, 95
- Morals, Anglo-Saxon  
concern for 16, 51,  
72, 73, 74, 76, 85,  
86, 107, 111
- Morris, R. 120
- Nelson, M. 12, 66
- Obscenity 6, 8, 11, 12,  
37, 38, 58, 65, 113
- Offa 89
- Owen-Crocker, G. 121
- Patriarchy 100, 101
- Peace-weavers 88, 89, 90
- Penis 19, 20, 21, 23, 24,  
25, 26, 30, 39, 42,  
44, 46, 47, 68, 69,  
81, 82, 110
- Pepicello, W. 121
- Poe, E. A. 108
- Pollington, S. 48
- Pollock, F. 121
- Pornography 85
- Pregnancy 30, 35, 52, 80,  
81, 84
- Private concerns 3, 14,  
15, 16, 51, 52, 71,  
74, 75, 77, 80, 81,  
82, 100, 103, 104,  
105, 107, 122
- Ptolemy 121
- Public concerns 3, 14,  
15, 51, 52, 77, 80,  
81, 82, 84, 103, 104,  
105, 107, 108, 112
- Raffel, B. 121
- Reader Bias 10, 16, 66,  
111
- Riedinger, A. R. 87, 94,  
121
- Robertson, A. J. 121
- Roeder, F. 82, 121
- Rollason, D. 122
- Romance 63, 72, 84
- Ross, M. 122
- Schrader, R. 115
- Schulenburg, J. 122
- Searle, E. 122
- Seaxburh 95
- Secrecy 74, 77
- Sexual meaning 17, 21,  
31, 50, 110
- Explicitness 5, 16, 77,  
86, 109
- Slang 62, 68
- Smut 11, 51, 64, 65
- St. Athelbert 89
- Swaen, A. E. H. 19, 28,  
29, 37, 39, 62, 63,  
70, 113
- Taylor, A. 109, 122
- Trautmann, M. 19, 37, 44
- Tupper, F. 6, 7, 8, 10,  
11, 20, 28, 35, 37,  
38, 43, 44, 46, 47,  
49, 58, 60, 63, 64,  
65, 70, 78, 82, 113
- Vagina 20, 21, 26, 39,  
40, 48, 68, 81
- Vendetta 105
- Whitehurst-Williams, E.  
6, 38, 61, 78, 83, 114
- Whitelock, D. 122
- Whitman, F. 7
- Widows 90, 94
- Williamson, C. 12, 19,  
31, 33, 35, 36, 44,  
45, 46, 66, 114
- Women (see also Female) 3,  
14, 18, 21, 25, 32,  
59, 61, 64, 65, 67,  
68, 69, 72, 74, 79,  
80, 81, 85, 87, 88,  
89, 90, 91, 94, 95,  
96, 97, 98, 99, 100,  
101, 102, 103, 104,  
106, 107, 111, 112,  
115, 118, 119, 120,  
122, 123
- Naming of women 102
- Women's possessions:  
Gift giving 98, 99  
Grants of land 97  
Wills 97, 98, 99
- Woolf, H. B. 102, 123
- Wulfstan 98, 103
- Wyatt, A. 6, 39, 113
- Wynflæd 96, 121
- Young, E. 101