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# Riddle Hero

## Play and Poetry in the Exeter Book Riddles

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The author discusses the Exeter Book riddles, some of the earliest poems in English, specifically Old English, as perfect examples of how play and poetry intersect. Their playfulness, he claims, is most apparent in the original manuscript, but notes that few modern readers read Old English. The orthography of the manuscript also helps to make the play of the poems more obscure. Moreover, contemporary readers nearly always encounter the riddles in modern editions and with modern English translations, and editors and translators often provide the riddles with clear divisions and interpretive notes. They sometimes offer their own solutions to the riddles (although the actual manuscript provides no explanation for them). All of which leads to a different and less playful experience for readers of the riddles. The author explores what it means to play the riddles in their original context, making the individual reader the riddle hero (*hæleþ*) whom the text calls on to construct playful worlds of imagination and language. He examines how the Old English riddles demand to be played and how they oscillate playfully between the mundane, the sacred, and the obscene. **Key words:** Beowulf and play; Old English poetry; riddles and play in poetry

**M**YTHS, NOVELS, AND STORIES more generally are rife with examples of riddles and riddle games. Often these playful little texts embedded in larger narratives have serious consequences for the players. In J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, Gollum and Bilbo play a riddle game, exchanging riddles of increasing difficulty as each tries to stump the other. If Gollum wins, he gets to eat Bilbo. If Bilbo wins, Gollum must show him how to navigate around the icy pool. After several rounds, Bilbo wins when he asks Gollum a question not initially intended to be a riddle: "What have I got in my pocket?"<sup>1</sup> The answer is the ring, the one ring that Bilbo had forgotten was in his pocket. A similar situation plays out in Norse mythology between Odin and King Heidrick, and the game breaks down when Odin asks the king an unanswerable riddle.<sup>2</sup>

The point is that riddles, especially when they are plot devices embedded in narratives, have two key features. First, there are always at least two parties, a riddler and a riddlee, yet these terms and roles are hardly settled, especially in the English language. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not even acknowledge the term “riddlee” to refer to a riddle player or riddle reader. A riddler is a common enough term, along with other names like *magister ludi* or game master, but the person solving the riddle, the player, occupies a more ambiguous lexical space. Nevertheless, most of the time, this riddle player is the hero of the story. Second, the riddles must be challenging; but, they ought to be solvable. When they are unsolvable, the game breaks down, usually spilling over into a more serious and less playful conflict. King Heidrick attacks Odin for asking an unanswerable riddle, and it is the very answer to the nonriddle—“what have I got in my pocket”—that precipitates the plot of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

The riddles embedded in a broader narrative context like a myth or novel work only when they play by these two basic rules—that there are two contestants and the riddles are both challenging and solvable. But what happens when riddles lack the scaffolding of a larger narrative context and conflict? What happens when a reader is faced with the task of solving and there exists no game master to confirm whether an answer is right or wrong? What happens when the reader is no longer solving the riddles second hand, participating merely vicariously by watching the hero in the story?

In the tenth-century Old English manuscript known as the Exeter Book, after nearly one-hundred folios of miscellaneous poems, fifty-nine riddles appear without any paratextual information (i.e. title, author, note, or solution) and without any clear break from the other poetic material that precedes them. Another thirty-four appear at the end of the manuscript, and two others are interspersed amongst other poems. (I am using George Philip Krapp’s and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie’s numbering.)<sup>3</sup> Throughout, the manuscript fails to signal that these are riddles or provide clear breaks from one riddle to the next. They stand, perhaps appropriately, enigmatically without title, genre, or solution. The manuscript is damaged in some parts, leaving some riddles incomplete. In many cases, only a scribal flourish after the last word in a riddle and larger initial capital in the following line indicate separation from one riddle to the next. In some cases, the division between one riddle and the next is not so clear. These are puzzling little texts.

The Anglo-Saxon riddles, in their original manuscript, are not a spectator

sport. Readers do not observe others playing and play along with them vicariously. Readers are the only players, and like the heroes of myths and novels, they must use their prowess to solve what is veiled behind the obfuscating language of the riddle. Moreover, in this manuscript, there is no game master present to confirm a solution with either a yes or a no, correct or incorrect. In this way, the game never really ends. Play goes on. New heroes encounter the text and propose new solutions, bringing with their solutions prior cultural experiences different from the experiences of readers a thousand years ago in Anglo-Saxon England. However, most of these new heroes are academics who specialize in Old English because they are the few readers equipped to encounter the texts in their original manuscript and in the original Old English language of that single manuscript in Exeter Cathedral, often mediated by print or digital facsimiles. On the other hand, modern editions and translations solve, delimit and rein in the riddles for the readers, leaving little room for the dynamics of unending play witnessed in the unruly manuscript. Of course if editors did not provide some paratextual support, the riddles would be no more than an esoteric interest of an elite class of academics. The Old English riddles fall into a paradoxical situation. They are really only accessible to most readers in modern editions and translations where editors and translators have disciplined the unruly text. Few would have the opportunity to read the riddles if it were not for the editions and translations. What is lost with that discipline is the playful possibilities of a text that does not offer order, context, and definitive solutions.

To put it in blunt terms, riddles ought to be played rather than read, and it takes a bit of work for readers to reconstruct a textual experience like the Exeter Book to foster active play over a passive reception of editorially delimited solutions. In the book *Twisty Little Passages*, a work focused on contemporary forms of interactive literature, game theorist and poet Nick Montfort cites the riddle as one of the earliest forms of interactive fiction, or literature that readers play.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, the Exeter Book riddles are remarkable, philologically complex cultural artifacts. Like dice or table games found in archeological digs, these riddles are traces of ancient play. On the other hand, unlike the objects unearthed from ancient settlements, these games are not just fossilized signs of the past but potentially dynamic texts ready to be played and replayed. In fact, they demand to be played. Like the world of Jorge Luis Borges's garden of forking paths, the riddles create a dynamic space coded with choices, double entendre, and no definitive answer, showing the potential of language games such as riddles to move playfully between the sacred, the obscene, and the mundane.

The Exeter Book was composed shortly before 1000 and bequeathed to Exeter Cathedral by its first bishop, Leofric, after his death in 1072. Only four predominantly poetical Old English manuscripts survive, and the Exeter Book is notable for the sheer number and variety of works it includes within its 123 folios.<sup>5</sup> Scholars know little about the date and origin of most of the material, though some scholars assign a few of the works to the poet Cynewulf. Most of the material, though, is simply anonymous. The book begins with twelve “Advent lyrics” (named by editors for focus on the coming of Christ), which are also commonly grouped together and called *Christ I* or *Christ A*, because a second *Christ* (II or B) poem appears later in the manuscript. The manuscript also includes a number of well-known elegies, such as *The Wife’s Lament*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*, made famous by modernist poet Ezra Pound. The Guthlac poems and *Juliana* derive from the hagiographic, or saint’s life tradition. Poems such as the *Phoenix* and the various short works stemming from the Greek *Physiologus* describe beasts, mythical or real, with moral components. The manuscript also includes some homiletic excerpts, prayers, and songs. Out of the 144 works in the manuscript, 95 are conventionally described as riddles, taking up more than 30 folios in a manuscript of 123 folios.

In *Homo Ludens*, the early twentieth-century foundational work on the history and theory of play, Johan Huizinga calls play “a well-defined quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary life.’”<sup>6</sup> While the play of the riddles themselves might be outside ordinary life, what is remarkable about their ludic qualities is the way they directly engage with ordinary, everyday life. The riddles move seamlessly between what might seem to us as conflicting or unrelated things, mixing together images that evoke the mundane, the sacred, and the obscene. Nothing is off limits in the riddles. Potential solutions range from bookworms to swords to the body and soul to brooms to food to sex. A single riddle can oscillate between the dirt of the earth to the ephemeral world of thought and intellect. The bookworm riddle (Riddle 45 according to editors) is an exemplary case:

Moððe word fræt    me þæt þuhte  
 wrætlicu wyrd    þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn  
 þæt se wyrm forswealg    wera gied sumes  
 þeof In þystro    þrymfæstne cwide  
 7 þæs strangan stapol    stælgieſt ne wæs  
 wihte þy gleawra    þe he þam wordu swealg

[A moth ate words    to me it seemed  
 An amazing fate    hen I learned of that wonder

That the worm had swallowed the words of a human  
A thief in darkness a mighty sentence  
And the strong foundation the thief guest was not  
any wiser for having swallowed the words.]<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, the solution in this particular riddle is not as difficult as some of the others. It is a bookworm, but the solution does not stop there. The riddle creates a vivid material world (i.e. holes in a book from a worm) alongside an abstract conceptual world (i.e. reading and understanding). Reading and learning involve ruminating on the text. Ideas need to be chewed over and then digested and understood. The worm chews, but does not learn. Moreover, the worm literally destroys the text. For the medieval scribe writing the Exeter Book, this was serious business. For often, as is the case with the riddles, there is no other text available. Books were expensive and rare containers of knowledge. Writers throughout the Middle Ages displayed an anxiety that their work would fall in the hands of mutilating scribes or ignorant readers. Chaucer famously displays his concern for his book at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*:

So prey I God that noon myswrite thee,  
Ne thee mys metre for defaute of tonge.  
And red wher-so thou be, or elles songe,  
That thow be understonde God I beseche! (V. 1795-8)<sup>8</sup>

This notion of proper scribal transmission and proper understanding go hand in hand for an author like Chaucer. Sometimes, in the process of copying, scribes made mistakes because they did not quite understand what they were copying. Readers, too, could substantially destroy a text by perpetuating misreadings and misunderstandings. A hungry little worm and an unwitting reader both posed serious threats to the continuation and circulation of ideas. Of course today we would not use the term bookworm in quite this way. A bookworm connotes someone who reads voraciously. The term has a positive meaning, appearing today as a rather benign image in such places as children's books. The bookworm of this medieval riddle, though, is far more insidious. *Wyrm*, it should be noted, has a rather more negative connotation in Old English. Dragons are *wyrms*, and Satan in the Garden of Eden, perhaps the greatest source of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of all time, often appears in Old English texts referred to as *wyrm*.<sup>9</sup>

The bookworm riddle makes no explicit demand of the reader to solve it

like many others in the manuscript do. However, the implicit demand thrusts us into multiple worlds simultaneously. On the one hand, we are in the physical space of the book. When closed and on the shelf, the book is dark and subject to the hungry worm. On the other hand, something that is dark might refer to the difficulty in understanding the text. In this abstract world of reading and understanding, the reader who chews but does not learn or the scribe who introduces errors are figured as no better than the ignorant bookworm. This is what the riddles do so well. They force us to oscillate between worlds, playfully moving between physical and abstract or between innocent and salacious.

In his comparison between riddles and the games of interactive fiction (i.e. poems that demand input, choose-your-adventure narratives, and similar devices), Montfort argues that “the riddle offers what can be understood as a ‘world’ in which things relate to each other and are endowed with special abilities or attributes systematically. This world has its own nomenclature that reflects a different sort of ordering and a different conception of the world we live in.”<sup>10</sup> In Montfort’s 2003 essay “Literary Games,” he argues that games are, among other things, “ritual spaces in which rules that are not the ordinary social and cultural ones apply.”<sup>11</sup> In this way, this ritual space is the world of the game, and rules are both what defines the space and that which differentiates it from other worlds. Other fiction forms have worlds as well, but like games and interactive fiction, the riddle’s world and its attendant rules are the very things that readers must understand to navigate the meaning of the text. If one does not understand the rules, boundaries, objective, and potential moves, the game cannot be played. As Montfort says in *Twisty Little Passages*, “without understanding the workings of the riddle’s world . . . , the solution cannot be reached and the experience of the riddle remains incomplete.”<sup>12</sup> The complicating issue and significant difference between games of the present and the Exeter Book riddles of the Anglo-Saxon period is that games today have creators who have defined the boundaries of the world of the game. Perhaps, part of the aesthetic of new media design is to obscure where those boundaries are, but inevitably the world has its limits. Because the Exeter Book riddles have no author, no supporting paratext, no riddler to say “no, that’s wrong,” the world created by the riddles can be rather murky and unstable; the reader or player is left to enter the dark world of the riddles without a guide and a clear sense of what are the parameters of this ritual space.

The lack of a clearly defined space and well-established world in the original manuscript creates a paradox. On the one hand, with no game master to respond

to new solutions, the game never really ends. New players with new solutions, if accompanied with convincing claims, are always welcome. On the other hand, few have the resources to navigate the riddles in their original context and thus encounter them in a context in which an editor or translator has provided a far more delimited world and space.

The popularity of riddles in the community of Anglo-Saxonists says something about these little texts and their power to invite interaction and play from among those most equipped to solve them in their most playful context. In 2006 the University of Exeter published a digital facsimile and edition of the manuscript, making images of the manuscript available widely for the first time.<sup>13</sup> Since then, several monographs on the riddles have followed, including John Niles's 2006 *Old English Poems and the Play of the Texts*, Dieter Bitterli's 2009 *Say What I am Called*, and Patrick Murphy's 2011 *Unriddling the Exeter Book*.<sup>14</sup> Today, the riddles are perhaps the most commonly discussed Old English texts other than *Beowulf*, with hundreds of articles offering solutions to one or several of the riddles.<sup>15</sup> In this ongoing conversation regarding the riddles, scholars often present new solutions or revive old ones, through readings of cultural evidence and elaborate philological investigations.

Niles's book, which is the earliest of the three monographs noted, has the most to say about the significance of playing the riddles. Niles explores what it means to read and answer riddles that often resist solution. He explores how readers play with meaning in the serious ways the riddles seem to have in mind, and he practices this play by offering his own elegant solutions to several of the more challenging and enigmatic riddles. Finally, he evaluates the processes of offering a valid interpretation. Perhaps the most germane issue Niles raises, and the one that has been, in part, the impetus for this essay, is what it means to think of poetry and the act of reading poetry as a kind of play. In this same vein, Niles suggests that the compiler of the manuscript might have had a fondness for "poetry that offered a challenge to the reader and that in some way had to be 'solved.'"<sup>16</sup> Others have noticed a similar pattern of poetic playfulness in the manuscript. In *Two Literary Riddles of the Exeter Book*, James Anderson looks at the riddlic patterns in two of the nonriddle texts of the manuscript, delineating two collections of works, both with multiple poems that work together to function in the same way as the more apparent riddles in the manuscript.<sup>17</sup> In other words, he uses the riddles as a keyhole through which he examines some of the other materials in the book. He isolates what he calls "Riddle 1" and the "Easter Riddle." We might add to Anderson's "other riddles" the poem *The Phoenix*, in

which the bird that rises from the ashes never dies and lives in a paradise where there is no winter. The poem never asks, “What am I?” But all metaphors, in their use of signifiers to indirectly name something, implicitly demand to be solved like a riddle, deciphering the tenor (i.e. the referent) from the vehicle (i.e. the figurative image or language). For the Christian Anglo-Saxon community that produced the manuscript, the vehicle is the mythological phoenix and the tenor is of course Christ. In the *Physiologus* poems, derived from the second-century Greek stories that mix quasi-natural history and allegory, while the poem names figures like the Panther and the Whale directly, the descriptions that follow them rely on the same pool of playfully descriptive metaphors that appear in the riddles. In many ways, then, this manuscript is built on riddles and riddling metaphors and poems. The Exeter Book is not just a miscellany that contains some riddles but a book constructed around riddles and other texts that demand similar active participation.

Niles takes his point further, “suggesting that there is something to be gained from considering Old English poetry in general as a form of play. At every level of magnitude from the kenning to the story line, one can see in it the workings of the ‘double task of revealing and concealing’ that is the special mode of the riddles.”<sup>18</sup> Huizinga, in fact, similarly cites poetry generally as a form of play.

Men make poetry because they feel a need for social play. . . . The rhythmical word is born of that need; poetry enjoys a vital function and has full value in the playing of a community, and it loses both these to the degree that social games lose their ritual or festive character. Such elements as the rhyme and the distich derive from and only have meaning in those timeless, ever-recurring patterns of play: beat and counter-beat, rise and fall, bound up with the principles of song and dance which in their turn are comprehended in the immemorial function of play.<sup>19</sup>

The riddles have all these poetic elements that make poetry playful and likely had a now-lost festive context in an oral and aural tradition. What sets the riddles apart from other forms of poetry is that the riddles demand active engagement by readers. They demand that we not merely relish passively in the revealing and concealing but that we actively engage in these processes.

Dan Pagis suggests that “every riddle must fulfill two conditions: the first is its social function as a competition between the riddler and the riddlees; the second is its literary form, which must be difficult and enigmatic, yet containing the clues needed to decipher it.”<sup>20</sup> He goes further to distinguish the riddle from



other textual forms, suggesting the riddle demands a solution and explanation. The reader of a conventional text also must interpret but is rarely required to offer a solution directly. The riddle player is asked to engage and interpret directly and often publicly.

The scholarly conversation surrounding the Exeter Book riddles remained quite vigorous for most of the twentieth century precisely because the riddles could be classified as poetry and thus as something worthy of study. The fact that they were riddles was secondary to their role as poetry because poems represented something deserving serious study as cultural objects whereas riddles were considered mere pastimes. In 1944, discussing the riddle form in general, Leo Spitzer stated quite frankly that “the mythical approach to the world which the riddle presupposes has been replaced today by the scientific approach—with the result that the riddle has lost its seriousness in modern civilization where it has become either a game for children or a social pastime for their bored elders.”<sup>21</sup> Spitzer essentially argues that the scientific approach has rendered the riddle “just a game,” designed to amuse and pass the time. This assumption that games are not serious underpins a critical division between low and high, unserious, and serious.

The academic discourse has been changing, however. Electronic games and similar interactive cultural artifacts have become pervasive. They are far more popular than written literature, and they are challenging the dominance of film as a narrative form. As a result, the scholarly conversation surrounding electronic games and interactive media has been vigorous in the fields of cultural studies and ludology (i.e., the study of games and play). In disciplines like English, scholars have been applying traditional modes to analyze these new textual forms (using the term “text” here in the broadest possible sense as a constructed cultural artifact).<sup>22</sup> Most of this work focuses on new texts, often looking closely at new productions and future platforms, but it ought to look back at game forms from the past as well.

Though historically different, the parallels between the Exeter Book riddles and contemporary games and the game-like texts often found in electronic media are fairly obvious. If one were to plug in a video game console, put in a game, turn on a television, and pick up the controller, the narrative of the game, and the meaning of the game would fail to unfold without the direct interaction of the reader and player, pushing the buttons and making decisions within the nimbus of the game. Video games have borders or limits, of course, set by the designers of the game and determined by the code. In other words, the code

determines the framework for play, delimiting the moves and choices available in a given game environment, yet one of the aesthetic values of many gamers is the perception that a game's possibilities are infinite, or at least so vast and extensive that they could never all be realized fully. The riddles, unbound by author or delimited solutions, participate in this aesthetic of vastness. Moreover, Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland exploit this aesthetic in an electronic literature project called *Sea and Spar Between*, which they describe as “a poetry generator which defines a space of language populated by a number of stanzas comparable to the number of fish in the sea, around 225 trillion.”<sup>23</sup> Taking words from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Emily Dickenson's poetic corpus, Montfort and Strickland have created a repository of stanzas so vast that it would be impossible to read them all in a lifetime. The beauty of the riddles is that, without solution, they too present something not fully knowable in a single lifetime (or even a thousand years). Potential answers for the riddles, even those riddles where the answer seems to have been settled, might evoke new answers in the future that we in the present cannot anticipate, or they might have had other answers in the culture of the past, now forever lost. Take Riddle 74, for instance:

*Ic wæs fæmne geong feax hār cwene  
 ond ænlic rinc on ane tid  
 fleah mid fuglum ond on flode swom,  
 deaf under yþe dead mid fiscum,  
 ond on foldan stop hæfde forð cwicu*

[I was a young woman, a gray-haired lady,  
 and a peerless warrior at one time  
 I flew with the birds and swam in the sea,  
 dove under the wave, dead among fishes,  
 and stepped on land. I had a living spirit.]

Niles devotes an entire chapter of his book to this riddle, pointing out just how many different and various solutions have been proposed. Niles traces nine different answers offered by critics, including cuttlefish, shadows, quill pens, the sun, sirens, sea eagles, swans, barnacle geese, and the figurehead of a ship.<sup>24</sup> The number of answers and variety are remarkable. A quill pen and a cuttlefish (an inky creature), the sun and a swan, conjure up very different images. Niles details the rather elaborate and sometimes esoteric arguments that conclude with one of these disparate answers. Niles himself offers “ship” as a solution, arguing that the young woman and fair-haired queen represent earlier states of the ship as a

living tree. However, the point I think that such a variety of answers suggests is that the riddles are not closed texts with fixed meanings. Rather, they are imaginative spaces in which readers can move variously toward different meanings.

Niles claims that the absence of a *magister ludi*, a game master whose responsibility it was to set the solution, perpetuates the variability of answers.<sup>25</sup> A comparable role today would be the game designer responsible for the code that determines the potential moves and outcomes in a video game. However, even the best video game designer cannot account for all possibilities in a game's code, and whole communities have developed around finding fissures and faults in the code. Nowadays, in fact, some games allow players to manipulate the game at the level of the code, including the game *Hack 'n' Slash*, a *Zelda*-style game in which the very goal of the game is to alter the code. Not bound by the parameters encoded by the game designer, users hack their way to victory by changing the game's code, sometimes realizing victory and sometimes introducing catastrophic changes to the code causing the game to crash.

The riddle tradition in the Middle Ages reveals something similar. When it comes to solutions, the Exeter Book is conspicuously silent, thus prompting the vibrant hacker-like solving that Niles sees possible in the absence of a *magister ludi*. However, at first glance, the Latin tradition seems quite different. Many of those manuscripts do have solutions. However, in "Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Tradition," Andy Orchard complicates matters by pointing out the "range, variety, and occasionally demonstrable falsity" of a majority of the solutions found in the manuscripts.<sup>26</sup> Many of the solutions appear in the margins of the manuscripts, oftentimes in a later hand. The point is that the act of glossing in the margins, which is paralleled in some of the runic notations in the margins of the Exeter Book, is a sort of hacking or coding not unlike the kind going on in *Hack 'n' Slash*. The beauty is that both game environments grant the reader or player a degree of authority to interact with and encode the text to work toward a solution.

This authority to encode and solve is granted in the very first lines of the very first riddle in the Exeter manuscript. On folio 101r, in the editorially determined "Riddle 1," the game begins immediately with an invitation to the reader or listener to engage actively with the material by asking:

*Hwylc is hǣleþa þæs horsc 7 þæs hygecræftig  
þæt mæge asecgan hwa mec on sið wræce*

[What hero is so sharp and clever  
that may say who drives me forth on my way]

Two things stand out in these initial lines. First, it is a question. Riddles always ask a question, either explicitly or implicitly. Often, the question concludes the riddle, almost as a signal to the reader that it is now his or her turn to participate in the unfolding of meaning. In fact, this is the only Exeter Book riddle that begins with a question. By beginning with a question, interaction is called for immediately, and the genre of the riddle is obvious. Moreover, the language evokes a contest. The first contestant is the speaker in the riddles, who often asks, in one form or another, “What am I?” In a rhetorical construction known as *prosopopoeia*, the speaker is both a contestant and the solution.<sup>27</sup> The personified contestant, the riddler in this first riddle, challenges the reader to identify it or him or her. Most notably the speaker addresses the reader as “*hæleþa*.”<sup>28</sup> Translators of the riddles, nearly always, have decided to render this word as the rather tame term “man.” Alexander, Crossley-Holland, Williamson, Baum, Tupper, and Thorpe all choose to translate *hæleþa* as man.<sup>29</sup> Others use similarly neutral terms or avoid gendered language. However, the word is often used in other poetic contexts to mean something more like hero or warrior. Bosworth and Toller’s entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* on *hæleþ* (or *haele*, the two standard nominative singular forms of the word) points out that the word appears exclusively in poetry. They define the term as “a man, warrior, hero,” citing specifically a number of examples where the *hæleþ* is an extraordinary figure.<sup>30</sup> Bosworth and Toller add that *hæleþ* is “used with complimentary force of both temporal and spiritual persons; implying excellence in worldly matters.”<sup>31</sup> All the evidence suggests simply that “man” is a limiting term, leaving out any notion of heroic actions or excellence. That connotation of praise is universally lost in the translations of the riddles but remains in translations of other Old English texts. For instance, the word *hæleþ* or the related term *haele* appears pervasively in *Beowulf*, in one form or another (thirty-two times, in fact), and translators nearly always choose to translate the word as hero or heroes.<sup>32</sup> Based on usage, the only way we can really decipher most words in the Old English lexicon, *hæleþ* connotes a praiseworthy individual in a contest for something; the same should be true when it appears in the Riddle 1. Perhaps the greatest difference lies in the referent. In *Beowulf*, *hæleþ* refers to characters in the narrative. Heroes are people we read about. In riddles, the term is used to refer to the person asked to solve the riddle—the riddle hero; we, as the readers, are the *hæleþ*.

This linguistic point sets this poetic game apart from passive forms of imaginative language and resonates even today. It is no coincidence video games

like *Guitar Hero* exist, which nominally bestow authority on the player. Countless other games shift the role of hero from someone read about or watched on screen to the subject position of the player, and *Hack 'n' Slash* actually bestows real encoding authority on a player. I say this slightly tongue in cheek, but to see the riddles as games, readers and players need to embrace their role as riddle heroes and be willing to interact with the text.

So the riddles of the Exeter Book begin by staking clear sides: the reader and hero and the speaker and text. The speaker challenges the hero to be *horsc* and *hygecræftig*, learned and clever, in such an explicit way that the riddle constructs itself as interactive and incomplete. The objective of the game is to discover who is speaking. It is the lack of a set answer that makes the riddle a game. New media scholar Espen Aarseth calls these kinds of texts “ergodic,” appropriating a Greek term from physics, which roughly translates as “work.” In other words, readers need to work for meaning to occur. Of course all reading and all interpretation is a sort of work. However, for Aarseth, the distinction is that nonergodic reading does not have the “pleasure of influence.” Aarseth uses a metaphor of train-travel to distinguish non-ergodic reading from a more dynamic and involved form of ergodic play:

A reader, however strongly involved in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. Like a spectator at a soccer game, he may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player. Like a passenger on a train, he can study and interpret the shifting landscape, he may rest his eyes wherever he pleases, even release the emergency brake and step off, but he is not free to move the tracks in a different direction. He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence. “Let's see what happens when I do *this*.” The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent.<sup>33</sup>

The Exeter Book riddles hang delicately in the balance between Aarseth's perceived voyeurism and “Let's see what happens when I do *this*.” Compared to the utter lack of paratextual information in the Exeter Book manuscript, the riddles very often appear in modern editions and anthologies surrounded by paratextual material, including commentary, numbered divisions, answers, and translations. Readers are safe, but they are impotent. The imaginative space of the riddle is far more confined in the modern edition than it is in the manuscript, where there is little to limit the reader or player's imaginative interaction with the text. Therefore the lack of paratext in the manuscript hints at the riddles' once permeable and malleable condition. This absence of authorial guidance

remains as a vestigial of the text demanding that the reader says: “Let’s see what happens when I do this.” Perhaps, more precisely, it demands that the reader say: “Let’s see what happens when I imagine the speaker or object as this.” In this, the reader-hero becomes the active participant rather than a passive recipient of translations and the scholarly tradition each riddle carries with it. With the foreignness of Old English today and omnipresence of translations, answers, and commentary surrounding the riddles, I am not so sure this kind of ideal interaction remains possible, but the unadorned riddles in the Exeter Book manuscript remind us that it might have been at one time and likely was even more so in an oral and aural context.

Perhaps the role of the reader or player in the creation of meaning becomes most provocative in the case of the erotic riddles, which critics have tried to negotiate and explain away for the past two centuries. More recently, Glenn Davis has examined the sexual idiom of the erotic riddles, showing how the coded language of the erotic riddles might direct readers to sexualized language elsewhere in the Old English corpus, language that might not have been previously recognized as sexual.<sup>34</sup> Davis also summarizes A. H. Stewart, pointing out that the erotic riddles “oscillate” between sexualized and nonsexualized solutions by avoiding the naming of body parts directly.<sup>35</sup> Of course, it is common for riddles to be opaque, but Davis’ choice of the term oscillate is important, for it shows that the language of the erotic riddles creates a space for the reader to see what happens when they imagine the speaker or object in multiple ways.

When the speaker is not the answer as in the prosopopoeia riddles, the riddle very often asks the reader to see what happens directly by beginning with the phrase *Ic Seah* (I saw).<sup>36</sup> The role of the reader is to share that same vision, to inhabit the space the riddler has created. However, as Niles has shown, this vision or world proposed by the riddler is not always a fixed space. It is, rather, coded as a sort of garden of forking paths. What happens if I imagine the answer as *x*? What about *y*? Many riddles resist a single answer, but perhaps the erotic riddles demand the most attention because the difference between one answer and another might cross a line from the mundane to the obscene. For instance, there are two riddles ostensibly about an onion and two about keys, and sometimes an onion is just an onion; sometimes an onion is something else entirely:

*Ic eom wunderlicu wiht wifum on hyhte  
neahbuendū nyt nængum sceþpe  
burgsittendra nymþe bonan anum  
stapol min is steapheah stonde ic on bedde*

*neoþan ruh nathwær neþeð hwilum*  
*ful cyrtenu ceorles dohtor*  
*modwlonc meowle heo on mec gripeð*  
*ræseð mec on reodne reafað min heafod*  
*fegeð mec on fæsten felep sona*  
*mines gemotes seþe mec nearwað*  
*wif wundæn locc wæt bið þæt eage*<sup>37</sup>

[I am a wonderful being, a joy to women,  
 to neighbors profitable. I scathe no one  
 who inhabits the city except only my killer.  
 from my foundation is steep and high I stand in the bed;  
 underneath, in places unknown, I'm hairy. Sometimes dares  
 a very attractive farmer's daughter,  
 a maiden bold, to grip onto me.  
 She rushes onto me red, ravages my head,  
 closes on me fast, feels immediately  
 what meeting me means when she approaches,  
 a curly-haired woman. Wet is that eye.]

Notably, Riddle 25 is not an "I saw" riddle but an example of prosopopoeia where the speaker (i.e. solution) describes itself, but what that thing looks like is up to the imagination of the reader. The language, full of sexual innuendo, forces the reader to construe an image of an onion rather than the more salacious possibility that it is not an onion but a penis. So if we think of this poem according to Aarseth's notion of an ergodic text, or a text that allows for the "pleasure of influence," the riddle fails to "be" without the input and influence of the reader. The image of an onion or penis is only possible if readers actively engage with the language and decide to see what happens when their imagination allows one image or the other to take hold. What appears notable in this example is that the language demands that the reader privilege the image of a penis while never abandoning the innocent possibility that the image is just an onion. The riddle implicates the reader's imaginative input by never naming the body part directly.

In many ways, the potentially obscene riddles have proved especially difficult for scholars as they dance around the possible impropriety with elaborate philological explanations or apologies for the Exeter Book scribe who must have innocently left in such obscene riddles. Frederick Tupper, in his 1910 edition of the riddles, sees the potential obscenity as an obstacle to a fuller understanding of the riddles. Not atypical of a Victorian scholar, he delicately eschews the issue of sexual impropriety, often using the phrase the "obscene problem" to describe

the possibly salacious solutions. He also does little to engage in the potentially obscene answers, stating simply that the obscene implication is obvious, preferring to name specifically the more mundane solutions.

A. J. Wyatt says nothing of the potential sexual meaning of the riddles, simply ignoring those possible meanings all together.<sup>38</sup> Baum calls one of the obscene riddles “an inferior piece, meant only for its impropriety.”<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, what they miss in their tiptoeing around the riddles is that the riddles themselves are not actually obscene. There is nothing directly obscene in the language of the riddles. Obscenity is in the mind of the reader who imagines that which is obscene amongst a constellation of words and images. It is the reader who produces the image of the penis in the case of Riddle 25, not the object speaking. No body part or function is actually named. It is like an inkblot in a Rorschach test that only has meaning when the viewer constructs it. It is the reader’s input, the choice of a particular path amongst an array of forking paths. The riddle creates a world that the reader enters, but how the reader sees that world and moves and interprets within that world is up to the reader.

The world that the riddles construct is also quite permeable. It depends on context. A penis riddle might make more sense in a mead hall than a church or the scholarly work of a late Victorian antiquarian. Moreover, if we consider the riddles in the Exeter Book as a unified collection, once an onion and penis are somehow connected in the world of Riddle 25, it is difficult to read Riddle 65 without questioning if it really is just an onion:

*Cwico wæs ic ne cwæð ic wiht cwele ic efne seþeah  
 Ær ic wæs eft ic cwom æghwa mec reafað  
 hafað mec on headre on min heafod scireþ  
 biteð mec on bærlíc briceð mine wisan  
 Monnan ic ne bite nymþe he me bite  
 sindan þara monige þe mec bitað*<sup>40</sup>

[I was alive but did not speak; even so I die.  
 Back I came before I was. Everyone plunders me,  
 keeps me confined, and shears my head,  
 bites on my bare body, breaks my sprouts.  
 I bite bit no one unless the person bites me;  
 many there are who do bite me.]

Again, the speaker is the object rather than an observer, but this time onion is the clearer answer; however, while onion is more clearly the object speaking,



the language of the latter riddle recalls the language of the former to reveal a pattern of violent, sexualized language. Appearing in both riddles is the word *reafað* (*gereafian* in the infinitive), a word that many have translated as “plunder” (also “steal, spoil, and to take from”) but shares its root with the modern “rape.”<sup>41</sup> *Cwele* (from *cwelan* in the infinitive and the etymological ancestor of “quell”), in the first line of 65, translates to “I die,” which could be a euphemism for an orgasm (such as *la petit mort* in the French tradition). Bite or biting is repeated multiple times, including the suggestive *biteð mec on bærlíc* (bites on my bare body). Even if an onion is just an onion, it is difficult to ignore such language, in the context of the previous onion riddle.

This ordering is not unique to the onion examples. The key riddles, 44 and 91, are like the onion riddles in that the more salacious of the two appears first.

*Wrætlic hongað bi weres þeo  
frea under sceate foran is þyrel  
Bið stiþ ond heard stede hafað godne  
þonne se esne his agen hrægl  
ofer cneo hefeð wile þæt cuþe hol  
mid his hangellan heafde gretan  
þæt he efe lang ær oft gefylde<sup>42</sup>*

[Wonderously it hangs by a man's thigh,  
under the master's cloak. Front is pierced.  
It is stiff and hard; it has a goodly place.  
When the servant man his own garment  
heaves over his knee, he wishes to greet  
with the head of what hangs the well-known hole  
he had often filled with its equal length.]

Again, as in the first onion riddle (25), a potential solution is a penis. It would be challenging to ignore language such as “*hongað*,” “*þeo*,” “*stiþ*,” “*heard*,” etc. Nevertheless, plenty of serious late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century scholars did ignore the sexual idiom. Wyatt's note on Riddle 44 states that the answer is “key” and dismisses another argument that the answer might be “sheath.” In spite of his efforts to acknowledge other scholarly opinions and other philologically valid solutions, he completely ignores the sexual idiom of the riddle, bowdlerizing it and, in fact, recoding it in a sense.

As more recent critics have noted, however, the language of these riddles is unmistakably sexual, yet the text never resorts directly to sexual language but

instead employs an idiom that in context takes on a sexual meaning. A key does all of the same things as a penis. It hangs on a belt. Its function is to enter a lock that is designed to accommodate it. The language is valid both as a fantastic description of a key and a rather matter-of-fact description of the sexual function of a penis. Perhaps, the ultimate purpose is to make the reader never see a key or an onion (or a penis for that matter) the same way again, especially when a key is encountered again later in the manuscript. Riddle 91 reads:

*Min heafod is homere geþuren  
searopila wund sworfen feole  
Oft ic begine þæt me ongean sticað  
þonne ic hnitān sceal hringum gyrded  
hearde wið heardum hindan þyrel  
forð ascufan þæt mines frean  
mod freopað middel nihtum  
Hwilum ic under bæc bregde nebbe  
hyrde þæs hordes þonne min hlaford wile  
lafe þicgan þara þe he of life het  
wælcraefte awrecan willum sinum<sup>43</sup>*

[My head is forged with hammer,  
wounded with sharpened tools, polished by files.  
Often I take with a wide-open mouth what is set before me  
then I ought to strike, girded with rings  
hard against hard, pierced in behind,  
must drive forth that which protects at midnight  
the heart's delight of my own lord.  
Sometimes I turn backwards my beak,  
when, protector of treasure, my lord wishes  
to hold the leavings of those he had driven  
from life by battle-craft for his own desire.]

While the first key riddle mixes the idiom of sex with the function of a key, the second draws in the idiom of battle to describe the world and function of a key, with another related image being the sword or other instrument of battle.

The question remains for both the two onion riddles and the two key riddles: can they be read in isolation, or does the world of one begin to meld with the world of the other? Do all four begin to occupy a world of swords, keys, onions, and penises? Not only that, but there are other riddles that employ the same idiom as well: the world in Riddle 12 includes an ox, leather, and a sex toy; Riddle 45 mixes images of rising dough and a penis; Riddle 61's world blends

putting on a shirt with sex; Riddle 63 is fragmentary but seems headed in a similarly sexualized direction. To return to Riddle 12, the one about leather, Riddle 38 and Riddle 72 are also about leather and are inevitably influenced by the sexual ending in 12. Again, notably, the sexualized version of the onion, key, and leather riddles appear first in the manuscript and inevitably bring meaning to the more innocent (or at least more ostensibly innocent) riddles occupying the same imaginative world that follow in the Exeter Book.

Of course, these riddles and all the riddles are not limited to these meanings alone, and each riddle's imaginative world and the context in which it is experienced brings to bear meaning to the reader-produced image of the world of the riddles. What is more, because the riddles' subjects begin to overlap, so to do the images and worlds created. This is the game of the riddles: not just the game of a single riddle but a game that encompasses the collection of riddles. Similar to a video game, or chess, or a labyrinth, the corpus of Exeter riddles stands ready to be played, to move from one riddle to another, with the world of the previous riddle inevitably having an effect on the reader-produced vision of the world in the next riddle. Like moves around a game board or moves within the world of a video game, the experience of the riddles and the worlds they produce demand that the reader or player actively engage in the game, imaginatively participating in the meaning-making exercise.

Clearly this play is not so recognizable today, though. Few readers actually can or would bother to read the Old English in the original manuscript. Rather, readers encounter the riddles in modern editions and translations with explanatory notes and singular answers provided by editors. Play just is not the same when so much has already been coded and determined. In some ways, to understand what it means to play the Exeter Book Riddles we have to consider how they appeared in the Exeter Book, as puzzling little texts with little guidance for the riddle hero they call on us to become.

#### NOTES

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or, There and Back Again* (1937), 78.
2. Adam Roberts, *The Riddles of the Hobbit* (2013), 31–55.
3. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Exeter Book* (1936).
4. Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* (2003), 37.
5. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*. 6 vols. 1931–53.

6. Johan Huizinga, *Home Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950), 4.
7. Bernard J. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry* (2006), DVD. I have transcribed the original Old English from Muir's facsimile of Exeter Book, in consultation with Muir's own transcriptions. All translations are my own. I have consulted several translations and the notes of the editions when preparing these translations. Riddle 74 appears on the bottom of 126v.
8. Geoffrey Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (1987), 584.
9. See *Beowulf* and the episodes with the dragon for instance. George Philip Krapp, *The Junius Manuscript* (1931). See *Genesis A* and *Genesis B* in the examples of Satan described as *wyrm*.
10. Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages*, 43.
11. Montfort, "Literary Games." *Poems that Go* 15 (2003). [http://nickm.com/writing/essays/literary\\_games.html](http://nickm.com/writing/essays/literary_games.html).
12. Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages*, 44.
13. Bernard James Muir and Nick Kennedy, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry* (2006).
14. John D. Niles, *Old English Poems and the Play of the Texts* (2006); Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition* (2009); Patrick J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (2011).
15. The MLA International Bibliography cites nearly two hundred scholarly articles and books in which "Riddles (Exeter Book)" is the "primary subject work." Some are completely devoted to offering new solutions. For a recent example, see Luisa Maria Moser, "New Solution for the Exeter Book Riddle Number 70-A Double Flute," *Notes and Queries* 261 (2016): 3-4.
16. Niles, *Old English Poems*, 24.
17. James Edward Anderson, *Two Literary Riddles in the Exeter Book: Riddle 1 and The Easter Riddle: A Critical Edition with Full Translations* (1986).
18. Niles, *Old English Poems*, 49-50. Niles cites Marie Nelson, "The Rhetoric of the Exeter Book Riddles," *Speculum* 49 (1974): 424.
19. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 142.
20. Dan Pagis, "Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle," in *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, ed. Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman (1996), 81.
21. Leo Spitzer, "Charade," *Philological Quarterly* 23 (1944): 80.
22. Steven Edward Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (2008). Jones examines video games from the traditional English-based discipline of textual studies.
23. Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland, *Sea and Spar Between* (2010). [http://www.saic.edu/webspaces/portal/degrees\\_resources/departments/writing/DNSP11\\_SeaandSparBetween/index.html](http://www.saic.edu/webspaces/portal/degrees_resources/departments/writing/DNSP11_SeaandSparBetween/index.html).
24. Niles, *Old English Poems*, 18-23.
25. *Ibid.*, 24.
26. Andy Orchard, "Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Tradition," in *Latin*

*Learning And English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Andy Orchard (2005), 284.

27. Margaret Schlauch, "The 'Dream of the Rood' as Prosopopoeia," in *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown*, eds. Carleton Fairchild Brown and Percy Waldron Long (1940), 23–34.

28. *Hæleþa* is the genitive plural form of word *hæleþ* or *hæle*.

29. Michael Alexander, *The Old English Riddles: From the Exeter Book* (1980); *The Exeter Riddle Book*, translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland (1978); Craig Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (1977); Paull F. Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of The Exeter Book* (1963); Frederick Tupper, *The Riddles of The Exeter Book* (1910); Benjamin Thorpe, *Codex Exoniensis: A Colletion of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (1842).

30. Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth* (1898), 500.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Howell D. Chickering, *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (1977); R. D. Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript: Complete Texts; And The Fight at Finnsburg* (2010); Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (2000).

33. Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), 4.

34. Glenn Davis, "The Exeter Book Riddles and the Place of Sexual Idiom in Old English Literature," in *Medieval Obscenities*, ed. Nicola MacDonald (2006), 39–54.

35. *Ibid.*, 44; Ann Harleman Stewart "Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles," *Lore and Language* 3 (1983): 39–52.

36. Orchard, "Enigma Variations," 289.

37. Muir, *The Exeter Amthology of Old English Poetry*. Riddle 25 appears on folio 106v–107r.

38. A. J. Wyatt, *Old English Riddles* (1912), 104.

39. Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles*, 75.

40. Muir, *The Exeter Amthology of Old English Poetry*. Riddle 65 appears on folio 109v–110r.

41. Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 429. "ge-reáfan." Page 391 adds "to take with violence, rob," and in another "to strip an object of a covering, clothing, etc."

42. Muir, *The Exeter Amthology of Old English Poetry*. Riddle 44 appears on 112V.

43. *Ibid.* Riddle 91 appears on 130R.