ENIGMA VARIATIONS:

THE LITERARY PRAGMATICS OF THE RIDDLE IN EARLY ENGLISH LITERATURE

Anita Arwen Taylor

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of English

Indiana University

July 2015

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University,

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Doctoral Committee

_____

Michael Adams, Ph.D. (Chair)

_____

Judith H. Anderson, Ph.D.

_____

Robert D. Fulk, Ph.D.

_____

Shannon Gayk, Ph.D.

June 25, 2015

Acknowledgements

I have been endlessly fortunate in the depth and variety of support I have received while at work on this dissertation. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to my advisor and mentor Michael Adams, whose enthusiasm for my work has been as buoyant as his critique of it energizing, as well as Shannon Gayk, Robert D. Fulk, and Judith H. Anderson, all of whom have pushed me, with both kindness and confidence, to think more clearly and write more carefully. My work has been propelled especially by the help of my trusty dissertation-writing group, Emily Houlik-Ritchey, Cynthia Anne Rogers, and Erin Elizabeth Sweany, who have with good humor and great patience read most of this multiple times, and offered not only incisive feedback, but friendship, emotional support, and usually lunch. I am indebted more generally to innumerable colleagues and professors in the Department of English and the Medieval Studies Institute at Indiana University for the invaluable exchange of ideas in a welcoming community, as well as the staff of the English Department, Bev Hankins in particular for knowing everything and answering all my questions. I am also extremely grateful for the award in 2013-14 of funds from the Ruth Neikamp Cummings Fellowship Fund, which allowed me to focus on my work full-time for that academic year. I thank Robert D. Fulk for suggesting the title and Kerilyn Harkaway-Krieger and Kjerste Christensen for patient and generous proofreading, as well as Ann Cox, for providing a kitchen table and a pile of candy that enabled me to finally finish the thing. Finally, I am grateful to my large and unruly family: my parents, who instilled in me both a love of books and an interest in learning,

and especially my siblings, Genevieve, Aaron, Sheila, Kynthia, Beth, and Kat, for the decades of camaraderie, affection, trivial arguments, intense conversations, and general silliness that have both made me who I am, and made the hardest parts of graduate school more bearable.

Anita Arwen Taylor

Enigma Variations: The Literary Pragmatics of the Riddle in Early English Literature

"Enigma Variations" explores the various literary functions of riddles in medieval and early modern British literature—poetic, narrative, rhetorical, philosophical. In considering riddles and enigmatic language from a wide swathe of literary history, from the Anglo-Latin *ænigmata* of Aldhelm to the playful but pointed speech of Shakespeare's fools, I examine these functions using linguistic methodologies, particularly theories of reference and speech act theories developed from Austin and Searle. I ask not only what riddles are (a question in riddle-studies that has been well-trod since Aristotle defined them in terms of metaphor) but what they do: How do riddles work to create meaning as well as reference, and how do they contribute to the conversational negotiation of understanding and power, either among speakers in the text or between the text and its reader? Riddles signify in both oral and literary settings not only by their internal form and structure, but especially by their performance in particular speech situations, accommodating the expectations of the riddling interlocutor created by genre and context, and expanding the avenues for making meaning available to a person engaged in the challenge of the riddle. With their demand for both interpretation and contribution from an interlocutor, riddles draw attention to the perlocutionary force of the speech act and thus the way that speech acts play out rhetorically in context. The way we engage, interpret, and draw meaning from riddles makes for an instructive microcosm of the way we make meaning out of literary texts in general.

Michael Adams, PhD
Judith H. Anderson, PhD
Robert D. Fulk, PhD
Shannon Gayk, PhD

Table of Contents

Introduction: Riddle Forms and Functions

When one does not know what it is, then it is something;
but when one knows what it is, then it is nothing.

Swedish riddle reported by Archer Taylor

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; he had a great fall, and then could not, even by the power of all the king's horses and men, be put back together again. This is the first riddle Archer Taylor gives in describing and defining the "true riddle" (the answer, of course, is "egg"),[1] and it appears regularly in other introductions to and discussions of the riddle.[2] It provides a lovely example of how the combination of prosopopeia and the out-of-context description of a referent's specific qualities (i.e., the impossibility of Humpty Dumpty's being put back together again) make for what various authors have referred to as a true, authentic, or proper riddle, and in keeping with Aristotle's description of the riddle, it expresses "true facts under impossible combinations."[3] The fragility of an egg is the true fact; the personification of an egg and its being the object of the king's horses' and men's attention is the impossible, inexplicable part. "Humpty Dumpty" is a quintessential riddle.

---

[1] Archer Taylor, "The Riddle," *California Folklore Quarterly* 2.2 (1943): 129.

[2] Savely Senderovich also explores this example, as does Anatoly Liberman, who refers to it as one among "countless egg riddles." J. M. Dienhart brings it up as well, but introduces it as a "nursery rhyme" and follows it up with the remark, "This is actually a riddle, with 'an egg' as the 'solution'." While it is in "fact" a riddle (we might say, in its form), it has to be marked as "actually" a riddle because Dienhart knows his audience will not immediately think of it as a riddle. Sendorovich, *The Riddle of the Riddle: A Study of the Folk Riddle's Figurative Nature* (London: Kegan Paul, 2005), 35; Liberman, *Word Origins—and How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 168; Dienhart, "A Linguistic Look at Riddles," *Journal of Pragmatics* 31 (1999): 100.

[3] Aristotle, *Poetics,* 22.1458a, trans. S. H. Butcher, Internet Classics Archive, 1994-2009, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.3.3.html.

Yet in other important ways, "Humpty Dumpty" is not now a riddle. It does not typically appear in modern riddle collections for children, and most English-speakers regard this as a nursery rhyme rather than as a riddle.[4] We no longer hear it as a problem in search of a solution, nor as a description needing a referent. In a nursery rhyme, it does not matter who Humpty Dumpty is, why he is on that wall, or what makes him irreparable, any more than it matters why Miss Muffet takes her curds and whey on a tuffet—the genre conventions of nursery rhymes mean that they can be nearly nonsensical, appealing for their rhyme, rhythm, and imagery more than for the sensibility or coherence of their narrative. In riddles, however, a particular kind of sense extracted from the threat of nonsense is exactly what makes them both meaningful and pleasurable.

On the other hand, we do know the solution to this (sometime) riddle, even if we do not think of it as a riddle, or of the solution as a solution—the character of Humpty Dumpty simply *is* an egg. Iona and Peter Opie, in the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, describe Humpty Dumpty as a former riddle, and point out that "Humpty Dumpty has become so popular a nursery figure and is pictured so frequently that few people today think of the verse as containing a riddle. The reason the king's men could not put him together again is known to everyone."[5] Picture-book versions of Humpty Dumpty are nearly always illustrated with an egg, so that the problem and solution are

[4] This is not to say that nursery rhymes and riddles are mutually exclusive genres, but that the genre expectations for riddles do not any longer apply to Humpty Dumpty; the meaning made of it is not shaped by the pressure to determine a solution. As a case in point, an item that makes occasional appearances on *BuzzFeed* listicles and their ilk is the dramatic revelation that Humpty Dumpty is not actually an egg, because "the rhyme never says he's an egg." If the verse were known to be a riddle, such an assertion would be absurd—of course a riddle should not make its own answer explicit. While the verse still has the formal potential to work as a riddle, and may do so in some contexts, the point is precisely that such a marked context must be specified.

[5] Iona Opie and Peter Opie, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes,* new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 252-53.

both retained as a part of the text, only more in the form of text and image than problem and solution. The ex-riddle's solution is so fossilized that it is foregone; it has been so firmly affixed to the problem that the two are inseparable.[6] Humpty Dumpty no longer registers as a riddle because the gap between question and answer has collapsed, not only by the addition of an illustration, but also by the semantics of the name Humpty Dumpty—the referent "egg" has been folded into the referential meaning of the phrase "Humpty Dumpty".

If "Humpty Dumpty" was a riddle in the past, but no longer is one now, what has changed, and what does this mean for the nature of the riddle? The difference is not in the verse itself (which has been altered very little since its first appearance in the manuscript record), but in the context, among the people who are exchanging and understanding this riddle—there is a difference in how we in the twenty-first century hear and speak this riddle, compared with how it was apparently heard and used in the past, and that difference is the difference between a riddle and not-a-riddle.[7] It was a riddle once, but no longer is, because we, the hearers (or speakers or readers) of the riddle, no longer

---

[6] This tradition extends beyond texts that simply include the verse among other nursery rhymes. For example, in the 1903 picture book version by W. W. Denslow (*Humpty Dumpty* [New York: G.W. Dillingham Co., 1903]) describes Humpty Dumpty as a "smooth, round little chap" who is worried that "he might fall and crack his smooth, white skin"; eventually, Humpty Dumpty gets himself hard-boiled so that can safely travel as a wandering minstrel. The illustrations clearly show him as an egg, but the word is never used. Similarly, the 2012 children's book *Who Pushed Humpty Dumpty?* by David Levinthal and John Nickle (New York: Random House, 2012) investigates, noir-style, the fate of Humpty Dumpty, while never explicitly stating that he is an egg although again, of course, all the illustrations make this obvious.

[7] The earliest version recorded of Humpty Dumpty runs thus:

> Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
> Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
> Four-score Men and Four-score more,
> Could not make Humpty Dumpty where he was before.

Opie and Opie (*Dictionary,* 253) cite this to Samuel Arnold's 1797 *Juvenile Amusements.*

hear/speak/read it as a riddle. The genre of riddles relies on a pragmatic co-construction of the text, which is to say that the hearer of a riddle-proposition contributes a part of its expression if the riddle is to be satisfactorily executed. Thus it is critical that a riddle be recognizable as a riddle, because it can only function as a riddle when it is both posed and received as one.

A riddle's meaning—that is, not only its solution, but its purpose, broader significance, and effects— cannot be understood without appeal to its function, to what it *does* as well as what, taken in isolation, it *is*. I argue in this dissertation that riddles must be understood functionally as well as formally, in part because in their most natural setting they are an oral, performative genre.[8] Not only how they are put together, but how they are enacted in context tells us what and how they mean, and this is true as well of the literary context that distills and reflects that oral context. Of course the relationship between form and function is reciprocal: the formal organization of metaphorical, deceptive, and otherwise polysemous language is essential to the function of riddles, just as the functional context applies pressure that can alter the riddle's referential structure (as we saw above). The project of this dissertation is to consider riddles in terms of the

[8] Linguistics as a discipline is most often practiced on the assumptions of one of two camps: formalist or functionalist. Broadly speaking, the difference between these two is the difference between an approach to language which analyzes its construction from minimal units, and one which analyzes it in terms of its communicative social/contextual use. Formalism tends to view language's use for communication as incidental to its production, since it is also vehicle for thought, play, dreams, and virtual all aspects of human activity; see, for example, Frederick J. Newmeyer, *Language Form and Language Function* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 1. Functionalism, on the other hand, focuses on "*language as social semiotic* . . . how people use language with each other in accomplishing everyday social life," as well as how the meanings of language "are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged." Suzanne Eggins, *Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics,* 2nd edition (London: A&C Black, 2004), 3. Where I refer to function and functionalism in what follows, it is with this general orientation, rather than any particular functionalist theory, in mind.

conjunction of form and function—in terms of both referential structure and speech act theory.

The analysis of riddling structures and speech acts developed in the following chapters could likely apply to a historically and culturally much broader range of riddles than I focus on here, though naturally one hesitates to universalize conclusions. In this dissertation I primarily address the riddles and enigmatic language of a thousand years of early English literature (ranging from Aldhelm, writing in the late eighth century, to ballads recorded in the eighteenth), in large part simply because of the abundance and variety of riddles available in this period. From the intricately wrought poetry of the Exeter Book riddles to the enigmatic gestures toward divinity in *The Cloud of Unknowing,* riddling has a certain weight in the literature of these periods that stands in sharp contrast to their place in my own native twentieth and twenty-first century American culture, where riddles have largely moved to the periphery, the domain of children and fantasy.[9] While the periods of English literature that have my attention here

[9] Of course riddles still crop up in literary use (in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Richard Wilbur, the novels of Dan Brown, the musical *Into the Woods*) long after this period, and folk riddling persists, as it seems to do in virtually every culture. But with the rise of (philosophical) rationalism and (literary) realism in the imaginative habits of the west, riddling within literature becomes a deliberate subversion of these modes of thought, whether because the riddles appear in fantastical or speculative contexts (*Alice in Wonderland,* Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series) or because they allude to the medieval and classical worlds (the *Harry Potter* series, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*). Riddling now tends to evoke pre-modern, pre-industrial history, which makes sense, given that industrialization appears to have dramatically altered the status of the riddle in folklore. Annikka Kaivola-Bregenhøj, in *Riddles: Perspectives on the Use, Function and Change in a Folklore Genre* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2001), argues that oral riddling traditions have "undergone radical change" in the twentieth century, particularly "throughout the Western world, where the technical revolution and industrialisation were a rapid process. True riddles are an integral part of the conceptual and fantasy world familiar to the people making their living from farming and its parallel occupations . . . The riddle tradition never caught up with the change in material culture and thus did not renew accordingly, so that it gradually became a culturally alien tradition." As riddles became associated with "the old, backward agrarian society" they were turned, with fairy tales, "into children's lore" (14).

are too long and varied for me to make any coherent historical claims about the whole millennium's riddling practices, the literary records shows those practices to be varied and complex. At the least, this dissertation will show, descriptively, how literary riddles can work poetically, rhetorically, theologically, and narratively, even without making claims to have delimited their historical meaning, or exhausted their possible uses.

Furthermore, the riddles that have my attention in this dissertation cross—and contest—the boundary between "folk" and "literary" riddles, terms established by Archer Taylor to distinguish short, orally traded riddles from longer, more complex compositions. Taylor, whose folkloric scholarship on riddles in the first half of the twentieth century laid much of the groundwork for their subsequent study, asserted that literary riddles could be distinguished from folk riddles "in subject matter by admitting abstract themes and in form by employing the first person and elaborate antitheses"; the folk riddle on the other hand, "contrasts a vague description with one that is understood less literally," while the literary riddle "contains a long series of assertions and contradictions and is often put in the form of a speech made by the object that is being described."[10] All the riddles in the Old English Exeter Book, for example, are literary riddles according to Taylor. Of course the dichotomy is problematic, as Taylor himself recognized;[11] the creators of literary riddles may draw on folk riddles, or short literary

---

Kaivola-Bregenhøj goes on to suggest that riddles have been displaced orally by "joking questions," which channel ethnic aggressions, test taboos, and help manage responses to tragedy and catastrophe (16-24).

[10] "The Riddle," 143; see also *The Literary Riddle Before 1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), 3.

[11] As Taylor observes in *The Literary Riddle*, "Since the sharp separation of literature and folklore has come about only slowly, we often find little difference between the riddles of art and the riddles of the folk as we go backward in time. The oldest riddles often present difficult and indeed insoluble problems in differentiating the shares of art and of the folk" (12).

riddles may be circulated orally as folk riddles, and the obscure origins of many medieval riddles make this distinction especially problematic—are the Exeter Book riddles only consciously composed art objects, or are they a record of riddles exchanged orally? Conceivably they are a little of each. Riddle 40, a 100-plus-line translation of Aldhelm's long poetic Anglo-Latin enigma "Creatura," is clearly a self-conscious and literate composition, while Riddle 69 (discussed below) is one line long, and not particularly abstract; most of these riddles fall somewhere in between. If the Exeter riddles are taken as in part a written version of oral literature, as many scholars believe about *Beowulf* and other Old English poems, then the dichotomy of oral/folk and literary collapses.[12] At the very least, the two must be put at the ends of a spectrum, rather than at the boundaries of discrete categories. For this dissertation especially, the folk/literary distinction must be troubled. Riddles that appear in literature are in some sense always "literary," and of course fiction has the luxury of allowing characters to recite, or even create in the moment, riddles that are probably longer and more complex than people would be able to compose extemporaneously in reality. My interest is in riddles as a genre, regardless of length or subject, and riddles can be identified generically according to their pragmatic conventions—riddles are riddles, in part, because of the way that they position their reader, and the expectations that a reader who recognizes the riddle within its genre has

[12] As John D. Niles sums it up, "A good deal of scholarship is based on the premise that *Beowulf*, together with the *Finnsburg* and *Waldere* fragments, has some meaningful relation to a tradition of aristocratic oral poetry that was cultivated during much of the Anglo-Saxon period, whether outside monastic walls or within them." "Understanding *Beowulf*: Oral Poetry Acts," *Journal of American Folklore* 106.420 (1993): 132. For an illuminating discussion of the balance between "oral poetry" and "literate composition" in Anglo-Saxon poetry, especially in relation to material manuscript culture, see also Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

for the riddle to evoke meaning according to the reader's successful interpretation of it.[13] Whether the riddles I examine are recorded collections of folk riddles, careful literary creations, or literary presentations of folk riddling, my approach is a literary/linguistic, not an anthropological or folkloristic, one.

This linguistic approach, coupled with a close study of riddles in early English literature, contributes both to a rigorous conception of language within literature and to a more thorough interpretation of the literature itself. This project explores and exposes the linguistic factors at play in riddling situations in general, contributing to a clearer conception of the power dynamics of conversation and the way that information, knowledge, exclusivity, and ritual are constructed by pragmatic factors and linguistic functions. In turn, this exploration supports a more nuanced reading of the works of literature that make riddles a prominent element of their narrative or their discourse. A clear understanding of the poetics of riddling, as well as the effects of riddling speech acts on the shape and rhetoric of a work of literature, allows us to read it better, more sensitively, with more awareness of whose interests are served by riddles, and who is at their mercy. This dissertation thus contributes to the genre study of the riddle, as well as to both linguistics and literary studies, by drawing conversations about the riddle's form and structure into intersection with more recent discussions of the riddle's poetic and literary elements. Examining riddles in a literary context adds perspective not only on the literary qualities of the riddle, but on how the context in which a riddle performs

[13] Paul Cobley, for example, asserts that "genre is not a set of textual features that can be enumerated; rather, it is an expectation." Much as signs are only signs if they are received by someone as a sign, "that which lends the signs in such texts their generic character is the relation of expectation that accrues in the sign user." "Objectivity and Immanence in Genre Theory," in *Genre Matters: Essays in Theory and Criticism,* ed. Garin Dowd, Lesley Stevenson, and Jeremy Strong (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2006), 41, 43.

contributes to its form, significance, and uses, both conversational and cultural. A strictly formal or structural definition of the riddle will never suffice as a starting point for understanding what the riddle is, because the context of its utterance licenses (or restricts) the kinds of form the riddle can take—for example, as I discuss in chapter 2, the questions used as riddles in riddle-ballads are not always satisfying riddles on their own, but the pressure of the context allows them to perform as riddles within the narrative. Focusing on literary contexts is one way of exploring the relationship between internal form and contextual function that forge the riddle's workings.

Riddle Structure

Riddles in their most prototypical form are referential problems, requiring an interpreter to identify the object, idea, or scene the riddle describes. This description is oblique, using strategies including metaphor, polysemy, wordplay, prosopopeia, hyperbole, and others to deflect interpretation away from the referent as much as toward it, thus creating an expression that simultaneously refers and mis-refers. In Frege's terms, riddles test the limits of sense at the expense of clear reference: they are much more invested in *how* they refer to something than in *what* they are referring to, and it is in that *how* that both their problems and their poetry arise.[14]

[14] Gottlob Frege, an early analytic philosopher, distinguished between the reference (*Bedeutung*) of a word and its sense (*Sinn*): the former is the word's denotation of a particular thing in the world; the latter is the particular way in which that thing is cognitively evoked. To give one of Frege's examples, Mark Twain and Samuel Clemens make reference to the same person, but do so via different senses. See "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," in *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, NF 100, 1892, S. 25-50; reprinted in translation in (among other places) *Readings in the Philosophy of Language,* ed. Peter Ludlow (MIT Press, 1997), 9-30.

Consider for example the brief and relatively straightforward Exeter Book Riddle 69: *Wundor wearð on wege / wæter wearð to bane* [There was a wonder on the way: water became bone]. The most widely accepted solution to this riddle is ice, or water in the process of becoming ice. Assuming the referential equivalence of a riddle and its solution, the two parts taken together might be summarized:

"water becomes bone" = "water becomes ice"

or, pared down by the cancellation of common elements:

bone = ice.

Here is the exact location where reference fails, and a contradiction in the riddle's (mis)reference emerges: the word used in the riddle-proposition (bone) does not align referentially with the object intended (ice). The riddle's audience is asked to accept the provisional substitutability of ice for bone—but ice is not, in literal fact, bone, any more than water can literally ossify. The audience must know to look for a non-literal way of interpreting its reference, even (especially) after the answer has been revealed. If the riddle is successful (if it is interpreted as a riddle, and not as a description of a miracle or a fantasy world) then the equivalence will be understood as metaphorical rather than literal; that is, as a similarity, not really an equivalence.

Riddles thus vex the relationship between *signifiant* and *signifié*: the connection from the former to the latter is unintuitive, as the riddle seems to draw possible connections between a signifier and a variety of potential signifieds. From a post-structuralist perspective it may be difficult to defend the objective ascendancy of one such *signifié* over all the other possibilities. Barthes, for example, would likely aver that all conceivable solutions to a riddle exist simultaneously alongside the range of

literal/imagistic interpretations of it; a more measured position suggests that the riddle may be flexible in its meaning, but is not infinitely so. This does not make riddles strictly different from language in general; the connection between signifier and signified is always uncertain, always plural, never the determined, one-to-one word-to-concept correlation that language-users must pretend exists in order to use language. Such a structuralist and/or post-structuralist view provides a pertinent reminder that the interpretation of riddles is broadly of a kind with the interpretation of language (or any other sign-system). But to what extent does a riddle's construction of meaning align with the construction of linguistic meaning in general—and more importantly, in what essential ways does it differ? What, generically or semiotically, makes it a riddle?

Although there is certainly no consensus definition of the riddle among folklorists and other scholars of the riddle, a number of scholars have attempted to establish the criteria that distinguish a riddle from other oral constructions.[15] Modern attempts to define the riddle on purely structural grounds (i.e., in terms of its internal characteristics, without reference to context or function) begin with Robert Petsch in 1899. Petsch's dissertation anatomized the riddle into five parts: "(1) introductory frame, (2) denominative kernel, (3) descriptive kernel, (4) block, or distractor element and (5)

[15] Elli Köngäs-Maranda, in considering the internal form of Finnish riddles, argues that "a definition of the riddle is not necessary for the identification of the genre . . . In fact, any a priori definition would be theoretically mistaken, since what we want to study is the 'classes of phenomena,' i.e. domains, established by the participants of the culture." Köngäs-Maranda asserts that the ethnographer should assume that the members of the culture under study can better identify their own riddles, and then "analyze the characteristics of this class." I am sympathetic to this position, in that I am not convinced a universal definition that delineates the necessary and sufficient conditions for all riddles in all cultures is either needed or possible. Nonetheless, at least as it applies to my own corpus of study, I am interested in establishing an approximate description of the riddle, while allowing its borders to remain lightly drawn and porous. "The Logic of Riddles," in *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, ed. Pierre Maranda and Elli Köngäs-Maranda (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 191.

concluding frame."[16] Of course not all elements are included in all riddles. The "frame" elements in particular are optional, and although the block element—the element of the riddle that makes it seem uninterpretable—is the core of what Taylor later called a "true" riddle, it is not present in many riddles, as Petsch himself acknowledges.[17] Absent these elements, the riddle in Petsch's account of it boils down to an act of referential description: a denomination of a thing and a description of it.

Subsequent structural work on the riddle bears out this focus on description (though not always explicitly). Archer Taylor described the "true riddle" in 1943 as consisting of "two descriptions of an object, one figurative and one literal," which "confuse the hearer who endeavors to identify an object described in conflicting ways." Taylor calls these "positive" and "negative" descriptive elements: the details of the former suggest the answer, but "mislead the hearer" because they are figurative while appearing to be literal; the opposite holds for the latter—the "negative" detail is literally true but appears to be impossible, and so the hearer will try to interpret it figuratively.[18] And so in Humpty Dumpty the positive element is the set of details that lead the hearer to imagine Humpty Dumpty as a literal person, such as him sitting on a wall; the negative element is the detail that, after falling off a wall, he is in such a state of disrepair that he

[16] Robert Petsch, *Neue Beiträge zur Kenntnis des Volksrätsels* (Berlin: Palaestra 4, 1899), quoted in Lyndon Harries, "The Riddle in Africa," *Journal of American Folklore* 84.334 (1971): 379.

[17] See Harries, "Riddle in Africa," 380.

[18] Taylor's example ("The Riddle," 130) is the traditional English riddle "As I went through the garden gap, whom should I meet but Dick Redcap, a stick in his hand, a stone in his throat. Guess me my riddle and I'll give you a groat." The positive (figurative) element is the name Dick Redcap, which "may be an appropriate name for a cherry," but must be interpreted non-literally (i.e., the cherry is not actually named Dick Redcap), while the "stone in his throat" is literally accurate, though it seems impossible. Taylor does not account for the fact that the "throat," though a part of the literal half of the riddle's description, is a part of its dominant metaphor of cherry-as-person; the division of literal and metaphorical description is less exact than Taylor's definition allows even in his prototypical example of it.

cannot be "put back together again" (though in fairness, a person in multiple pieces would also be difficult to reassemble). Taylor's negative element is thus closely analogous to Petsch's "block," the piece of the expression that engenders the feeling of an interpretive impasse. Taylor's positive element seems to incorporate both denomination and description, from Petsch's scheme, but also adds another element of interpretive misdirection to the riddle.

Taylor's is an elegant construction of a certain kind of riddle, but it overdetermines the riddle's effect, demanding that the confusion of literal and metaphoric description be accomplished not once but twice in the riddle's form, and adding a secondary layer of confusion by requiring that the metaphoric energy of interpretation to move in two different directions. This may be true of some or many particularly complex and artful riddles, but it narrows significantly the category of Taylor's "true riddle," and it turns out he himself does not hold to the narrowed definition he has recommended (beyond the problem that, as discussed above, Humpty Dumpty's status as a riddle is troubled despite its conformity to Taylor's riddle structure).[19] Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes, responding to Taylor's definition of the riddle in light of his sizable collection *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*, point out that despite Taylor's assertion that only "true" riddles (those meeting the conditions given above) are included in his

[19] Taylor acknowledges other types of riddles, including an "ineffective" subspecies of true riddles which "do not achieve a clear picture, but merely enumerate the parts of an object. Here the enigmatic effect arises from the apparent impossibility of uniting these heterogeneous details into the description of a single object" ("The Riddle," 134), as well as literary riddles—which are not, by Taylor's understanding, true riddles—riddling questions or "false riddles" (145), and "message riddle[s]," which are coded messages (147).

collection, a large number of riddles appear there which do not meet this definition.[20] Georges and Dundes give, to draw on only one example, "'My fader have a horse, / Go everywhere he like' (pumpkin vine, 419)" as an example of a riddle that employs a metaphor but does not have any negative descriptive element—there is nothing to this riddle which seems impossible, which presses for a figurative reading while being in fact surprisingly literal. Furthermore, Taylor's collection includes a number of riddles such as "'Red outside, / White inside' (apple, 1512)" which are not even metaphorical.[21] This latter riddle is purely descriptive, and neither Petsch's nor Taylor's schema can accommodate it, though it must have been reported and received as riddle in convincing enough terms to merit inclusion in Taylor's list.

Of course, Georges and Dundes acknowledge that whether or not these are "true" riddles, Taylor is "undoubtedly right in considering these texts riddles," even though "they do not possess the major formal features of the true riddle as he defines it."[22] Riddles are invariably bound to a compendium of cultural knowledge, so that if the participants in a culture identify an expression as a riddle, then a descriptivist methodology requires the researcher to accept that it is one. The pumpkin-vine riddle above is in fact, despite its brevity, difficult to grasp outside of its culture of origin—

---

[20] Georges and Dundes, "Toward a Structural Definition of the Riddle," *Journal of American Folklore* 76.300 (1963): 111-18, here at 112.

[21] The structure of this riddle, which Taylor records in Virginia, is hardly anomalous; it is replicated in riddles such as "My father has a thing, it's green outside and white inside"—Coconut" (Taylor's riddle 1500b); "Here's a t'ing. / Green outside / An' yaller inside. –Papaw" (1502); "Me riddle me riddle me randy oh./ Here's a t'ing. / White outside / an' yaller inside.—Egg" (1504); "What green outside, an' red inside?—Watermelon" (1508); and many, many more. Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 624-25.

[22] Georges and Dunes, "Structural Definition," 112.

especially in a culture that lacks both pumpkin vines and horses as everyday things. A horse may not seem like the obvious metaphor for a pumpkin vine, and the word "go" turns out to be operating polysemously, since the horse actually travels while the pumpkin vine simply expands. For that matter, it is inexplicable why the horse should belong to "my father" if one is not aware of that phrase as a formula. (A large set of riddles begin "My father have" or sometimes "My mother have"; moreover, the phrase "My father have a horse" is a formula that begins a number of riddles within this set.) The metaphors of this riddle are as bounded by cultural habit as they are expressive of an innovative resemblance.[23]

Having identified the limitations of Taylor's definition, Georges and Dundes go on to attempt their own: "A riddle is a traditional verbal expression which contains one or more descriptive elements, a pair of which may be in opposition; the referent of the elements is to be guessed."[24] As a formal definition of the riddle, Georges and Dundes' has some problems. The word "traditional" seems to be less about the expression's form than about the stakes and implications of calling it a "folk" riddle. Can a riddle have a clear moment of creation by an individual author, or do its origins need to be obscured in tradition? Must each separate riddle be "traditional," or is it just that the origin of riddles generally is lost in the mists of "tradition"?[25] The second clause of Georges and Dundes' definition seems mostly a nod back to Taylor and Petsch, and is certainly an

[23] The pumpkin-vine riddle is attested in Jamaica, and the provenance of the other "My father have a horse" riddles is the Caribbean according to Taylor's collection (Antilles, Trinidad, Bermuda, Béaloideas, Bahamas, Grenada); see *English Riddles,* 141-43.

[24] Georges and Dundes, "Structural Definition," 113.

[25] For example, what is the status of the riddles in *The Hobbit*, which certainly are constructed in the vein of various traditional Germanic folk riddles, but are also a part of a literary composition?

acknowledgment that this is what many English-speakers expect of riddles, but in the strictest terms it does not add defining value to this definition of the riddle—if something may or may not be present then it cannot be a determining factor. Moreover, as Charles T. Scott points out, while Georges and Dundes' aim is explicitly to define the riddle in terms of "internal morphological characteristics," the final clause is a statement of function, not structure—when uttered, the riddle is intended to have a certain effect on the hearer, but this is not an element of its internal morphology.[26] Once again, the riddle comes down to reference and description. Indeed, Georges and Dundes argue that the "minimum unit" of riddling is the "descriptive element," consisting of a topic and a comment; the former is the "apparent referent" evoked in the riddle-proposition's imagery, the latter, the assertion made about that referent, "usually concerning [its] form, function, or action."[27] In the most reductive reading, Georges and Dundes end up defining the riddle's structure as, basically, at least one noun phrase.

Yet Georges and Dundes' definition is not inaccurate. That is, it successfully describes riddles, those in Taylor's collection as well as the Persian riddles Scott takes as syntactic test cases—even as Scott rejects each element of Georges and Dundes' definition, he does not produce a riddle that belies it.[28] Certainly with Scott's stipulations,

[26] Scott also parses out the syntactic deep structure of the "descriptive element" to find that it can be described as a NP and VP headed immediately by S; it is unclear whether he would make the same analysis of any topic-comment concatenation. Charles T. Scott, "On Defining the Riddle: The Problem of a Structural Unit," *Genre* 2 (1969): 129-42.

[27] Georges and Dundes, "Structural Definition," 113.

[28] Scott's own definition of the riddle suggests an essential "partially obscured semantic fit between the items of meaning specified in the proposition and the item of meaning specified in the answer" ("Defining," 28). Lyndon Harries follows this line of thought, emphasizing that too many previous scholars have analyzed the riddle-proposition at the expense of the solution and, most importantly, the relationship between the two (his terms are "Precedent and Sequent"), pointing out that the relationship between precedent and sequent is not necessarily

this definition describes the proverb as well as it does the riddle. However, if the functional element of their definition is allowed to stand, then Georges and Dundes have successfully drawn together the riddle's formal (descriptive) element with its function (which is, as I hope to show in this dissertation, essential to its definition): that it demands that a respondent identify the referent obliquely described by the riddle. Taylor's definition, too, emphasizes a functional element: the (true, folk) riddle "compares an object to another entirely different object. Its essence consists in the surprise that the solution occasions: the hearer perceives that he has entirely misunderstood what has been said to him."[29] The "essence" of the riddle is not any internal quality of it (granted that Taylor never claims that he expects it to be a purely formal matter), but the way it affects an interlocutor confronted with its description.[30]

John Frow similarly views riddles at a cross-section of form and function, noting that "It is insufficient, then, to think of the riddle solely as a verbal form. It is, more broadly, a discursive practice which constructs a certain kind of relationship between its

---

grammatical, nor is it phonological—it is semantic. Harries further finds that in this lies the meaning of the riddle, beyond just its solution: the "meaning is in the application of the semantic features shared by both expressions [precedent and sequent]." "Riddle in Africa," 391.

[29] Taylor, "The Riddle," 129.

[30] Despite the fact that their work is at least a half-century old, I focus on Taylor and Georges and Dundes here because their discussions of the riddle are foundational, if only as a starting place from which subsequent scholars tend to stake out their own position in terms of agreement or disagreement. Attempts to produce a universal definition of the riddle in internal, morphological terms were especially prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s during the heyday of structuralism in folklore studies (following the recovery of Aarne and Propp's work, from earlier in the century, and appearance in English translation, as well as the emergence of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology; for an overview see Peter Harle, "Structuralism," *Folklore Forum* 30 [1999], 9-17). Riddle scholarship since the 1980s has been less interested in constructing a formal, universal definition of the riddle, and there is little in more recent scholarship that attempts it. A prominent exception is Savely Senderovich, who defines the "folk riddle from oral tradition . . . by its apparent bipartite structure: the description and the answer, wherein the description presents an unclear, confused metaphoric substitution for the object which ought to be named in the answer" (*Riddle of the Riddle*, 16).

protagonists." Frow describes the riddle as "a basic language game built on the social dynamics of question and answer, or challenge and response, and explores these dynamics through the control of an enigmatic or hidden knowledge," emphasizing the conversational practice of riddling alongside the riddle's form. Frow goes on to emphasize Taylor's category of the "true" riddle, distinguishing it from "riddle-like statement[s]," and asserting that the true riddle involves more than one predicate, and "the 'work' of the riddle involves a crafted play with the overlap of these predicate-sets."[31] He acknowledges that this might only apply to the European riddle tradition of riddling (though nonetheless citing specific African riddles as something less than "true" riddles). However, in spite of his functional concessions, his definition of the riddle is *a priori,* arising more from his own intuition of riddling than from what, in a given culture, counts as a riddle.

Despite historical resistance to including riddles' functionality as an endemic part of their structure and creation of meaning, I define the riddle in terms of two basic elements, one formal and one functional. A riddle proposes some kind of unclear (often, but not always, descriptive) reference, and in doing so it puts pressure on a hearer (loosely speaking—the "riddle-hearer" may in fact be a reader) to produce a solution. The riddle cannot be defined or described *only* formally, or for that matter *only* functionally—it emerges as these formal qualities and functional effects interact, the former advancing the latter and the latter shaping the former. Riddles constitute an area of language in which the interaction of formal and functional analysis is particularly potent, and in which it makes no sense to examine either without the other.

[31] John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33.

A rigorous model of the riddle should incorporate pragmatic concerns such as hearer and context, as well as internal formal elements. One place to turn in modelling this is to the field of semiotics, especially the work of the turn-of-the-century logician and philosopher C. S. Peirce. Peirce includes, as essential elements of the sign system, both the real-world object of a sign's reference and the interpreting subject's apprehension of that object. Furthermore, he sub-divides his *interpretant* (a corollary, roughly, to Saussure's *signifié*) to include its interpreter's immediate, association-laden response to it; the real effect it has on the interpreter in context; and its ability to carry a relatively consistent meaning for a given speech community.[32] The advantage of Peirce's approach (over, for example, Saussure's) for this project lies in his inclusion of the unreliable, individual interpreting subject *within* the relatively stable sign system. A sign thus can have both its subject-specific, provisional, plural, and ephemeral meanings, and also its socially-set, agreed-upon, broadly-consistent meaning(s). The variation and instability of the sign as different subjects encounter and deploy it do not, for Peirce, undermine the reality of its denotation, of the fact that most speakers use this word and mean roughly the same thing and basically understand each other.[33] Likewise, a riddle can have both a

[32] Peirce divides the sign into six, rather than two, elements. His "representamen" is a close approximation of Saussure's *signifiant*. He separates the object into the "dynamic object" i.e., the thing-in-the-world, and the "immediate object," which is the object as the interpreting subject apprehends it. The three elements of the interpretant are the "immediate interpretant," which refers to the interpreting subject's set of immediate, variable, individual associations with a sign, the "dynamic interpretant," which refers to the effect the sign has on the interpreter, and the "final interpretant," the broadly agreed-upon meaning of any sign within its social context; that "which does not consist in the way in which any mind does act but in the way in which every mind would act" (8.315). C. S. Peirce, "The Basis of Pragmaticism," in *Peirce on Signs,* ed. James Hoopes (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 253-59.

[33] "The meaning of a sign is not contained within it, but arises in its interpretation. Whether a dyadic or triadic model is adopted, the role of the interpreter must be accounted for—either

single widely accepted "correct" answer, legitimated in part by its very acceptedness, and at the same time a wide array of possible alternative solutions which are also present in its social/structural existence. What it cannot maintain, as will be discussed in chapter 1 in greater detail, is no solution at all.

The centrality of the interpreter in riddling can be further conceptualized in terms of genre. Riddles as a genre impose pressure upon the hearer to find a solution—that is, the genre constraints of riddles include the perlocutionary demand for a contribution from the riddler's interlocutor. When a speech act has been recognized within the genre of riddle (and developing this recognition is a part of the work of genre), the hearer of the riddle becomes a participant in it, speaking back to the riddle-proposition. Of course the hearer may refuse to engage the riddle, but the very fact that passivity in this context amounts to rejection is indicative of the riddle's expectation for participation.[34] Riddles thus exemplify a particularly substantial intersection of genre and semiosis. Unlike the reader of, for example, a novel, a riddle's audience is positioned not only receptively, but

---

within the formal model of the sign, or as an essential part of the process of semiosis." Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (Routledge: New York, 2002), 35.

[34] Gunther Kress makes the point that all genres make some generically suitable demands their audience: "Every genre positions those who participate in a text of that kind: as interviewer or interviewee, as listener or storyteller, as a reader or a writer, as a person interested in political matters, as someone to be instructed or as someone who instructs; each of these positionings implies different possibilities for response and for action." *Communication and Culture: An Introduction* (Kensington, Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 1988), 107. Riddles, however, are especially dialogic, and their audience, which is positioned generically as a potential solver, is meant to participate directly in the riddle's expression. Even the riddle-hearer who comes up short and says "I don't know; what *do* you call fifty penguins at the North Pole?" is contributing to the riddle dialogue that will culminate in a solution (e.g., "Really lost."). Although written riddles read silently do not function in precisely the same way as riddles exchanged orally, in an encounter with a written riddle a reader is still meant to respond by trying to solve it—trying to supply the second part of the text. (A reader who makes no effort to solve the riddle is more a bystander than an audience, overhearing, but not participating in, the expression of the text.) As discussed in greater detail below, riddles are a strongly perlocutionary category, felicitous only when they have certain effects on a hearer.

actively. The novel-reader is meant to recognize generic markers and interpret the text within generic constraints, but not necessarily, say, to write up a defense of her interpretation and submit it for publication (though she might choose to do that anyway). But the riddle reader /hearer's expectations for the riddle, based on her knowledge of the genre, will entail her verbal contribution—the riddle is not complete until she has attempted to interpret it. The generic structure of the riddle includes not only the formal elements it is supposed to have (that the riddle-proposition will evoke a disguised referent, that the solution will be clever, metaphorical, and indirect), but its semiotic structure, as well. The formal incompleteness of the riddle proposition is complemented by the functional demand that it be completed—the riddle as a genre is pragmatically co-constructed.

The semiosis of riddles becomes further complicated if we consider the differences between spoken and written riddles. The riddles of Aldhelm and Symphosius, for example, are not effective as riddles for modern readers as they appear in the manuscript, because each riddle is titled with its solution. The riddle genre requires that the solution follow the proposition, because the riddle's perlocution requires a delay, a gap, between question and answer, problem and solution. A reader of these riddles may still enjoy their poetry, the figurative way of seeing the world that puts question and answer into conversation,[35] but will have missed the opportunity to engage the unsolved riddle-proposition in its bizarre and baffling imagery, and will have lost out on the

[35] Nicholas Howe argues that while Aldhelm's riddles apparently fail to "abide by the chief rule of their genre" by beginning with their solutions, many of them are actually using the relationship between the title/solution and the riddle-proposition to suggest a further etymological riddle, asking "'What does my name mean?' rather more than "What am I?'" "Aldhelm's *Enigmata* and Isidorian Etymology," *Anglo-Saxon England* 14 (1985): 37-59, here at 37.

pleasure of the moment of revelation of how the riddle and its solution come together. If we suppose an oral use for such riddles, e.g., that they were read out loud to Latin language students, or during mealtimes at a monastery, then the riddles would still have been able to perform as riddles for everyone but the reader, who then becomes a proxy for the riddling author.[36] The poetic form of the riddles is intact, in that the metaphors, connections, and misdirections are all in place, but the pragmatic structure has been undermined by the riddles' presentation. The intersection of genre and semiosis in riddles highlights the degree to which genre might be performative as well as—or more than—a matter of form.

Peirce famously observed that, while everything *may* be a sign, "Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign";[37] hermeneutics and pragmatics are implicit elements of his semiotic systems.[38] Signs can only carry meaning if there is a context in which they are used and interpreted; linguistic signs demand not only a speech community in order to mean, but an immediate usage context, in which they are deployed and engaged by interpreting subjects. Even in their most distilled formal elements, signs cannot banish the pragmatics of linguistic exchange from their basic structure. Scholars have pointed out that genre works in a related way—texts will often be interpreted as members of a genre

[36] Aldhelm's *ænigmata*, as well as Tatwine's, were composed in part as an exercise in Latin metrics, and were evidently used as Latin teaching tools. See Patrizia Lendinara, "The World of Anglo-Saxon Learning," in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature,* ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 308.

[37] C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce,* vol. 3, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 3.208.

[38] "Peirce was a contextualist. But he did not refrain from developing a formal method to analyze the meaning of sentences uttered. Standing between radical pragmatics on one side and formalists on the other, Peirce furnishes us with nothing less than an architect's plan to bridge the two approaches, and to look for new ways to analyze the phenomenon of meaning in language." Daniel Hugo Rellstab, "Peirce for Linguistic Pragmatists," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 44.2 (2008): 312.

if they are marked or framed in terms of that genre.[39] Many speech acts or texts *could* be interpreted as riddles, if someone chose to interpret them that way; perhaps the most notorious case of this is Bilbo Baggins' question to himself, "What have I got in my pocket?" which his interlocutor Gollum (over)hears and takes to be a riddle, even if not a fair one. This question succeeds as a riddle only because Bilbo and Gollum are engaged in a riddle game, and it is Bilbo's turn to pose the next riddle when he utters the question.[40] It is marked and framed as a riddle, and so becomes one for the purposes of this exchange at least. A speech act can be made a riddle either intentionally or interpretively, as language becomes riddling when the interpretation of it is intensified, the users of it hermeneutically invested in a referential significance beyond the literal, and in its being imbued with a "secret" meaning available only to the successful reader of riddles.

Riddles as Speech Acts

A speech act is the minimal unit of communicative meaning, an utterance which accomplishes something in the real world. The notion of speech as actions is a development from the theory of linguistic performativity. J. L. Austin observed in his

[39] In an infamous example, Stanley Fish recounts an incident in which he left a list of surnames on the chalkboard between one class and the next, telling the second class that the list was in fact a poem. His students enthusiastically close-read the "poem" to produce a compelling cloud of interpretive possibilities, leading Fish to hypothesize that "It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities." "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One," in *Is There a Text in This Class? (*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 326.

[40] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, Or, There and Back Again* (New York: Del Rey–Random House, [1937] 1986), 79. Tolkien draws not only on old European riddling traditions in crafting the specific riddles that Bilbo and Gollum exchange, but in narrating the game itself. Of course Bilbo cheats; in riddle contests, someone almost always cheats.

1975 *How to Do Things with Words* that some types of utterances are "performative," in that they accomplish something just by their being spoken;[41] Austin goes on to make the case that, in fact, all utterances have some performative element, in that they perform their own meaning and correlated effects. For example, the utterance "Why did the chicken cross the road?" is not a strong performative in the way that the culmination of a wedding is (the chicken is not transported to the other curb just because I asked the question), but it does perform a request, paraphrasable as "I request you tell me why the chicken crossed the road." The utterance having been spoken, the request is now performed—it does not describe an action that is going to happen; it *is* the action. Utterances are all therefore one or another type of speech act, in that they, after Austin, do things with words.

To pose a riddle is to perform the speech act of riddling, an observation which might be so true as to be useless unless we determine what makes a speech act a riddle, and under what circumstances that speech act can be performed. Austin addresses how context makes a given speech act "happy," which John Searle later re-terms with the more Latinate "felicitous": what makes it able to effect the thing its content promises? "Why did the chicken cross the road?", asked in the absence of a proximate road-crossing chicken (either physically or already introduced to the conversation), cannot be felicitous as a direct speech act, one which seeks the information that its literal meaning suggests it is seeking. It may be felicitous as a joke, however, or as a comment on something particularly obvious or obviously unknowable—all depending on the context, the intent

[41] Austin's example, which has become the default example, is that of a church/state official saying "I now pronounce you husband and wife," upon which the thing spoken is enacted, and the people standing in front of that official become a married couple. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 5-6.

of the speaker, and the interpretation of the hearer. Similarly, for "Humpty Dumpty" to be felicitous as a riddle, it would need to be uttered in a context wherein its answer is not already fossilized (England in the year 1700 might do), or one in which it was clearly established already that the thing about to be spoken will be a riddle (e.g., as one among other riddles in a riddle-game).

The riddle is a curious pragmatic creature, in that it is typically asked by someone who already knows the answer, who is not so much looking for information about the subject of the riddle as for the meta-information about what information (or ingenuity) her interlocutor possesses. Posing a riddle puts the poser in a position of evaluation, and thus of power, particularly in cases where something (usually a life or a marriage) is staked on the answerer's ability to give a correct answer. Riddles are in this way a power play, a means for the riddle-asker to establish, affirm, or enact power, or even for relatively disenfranchised figures (such as Lear's Fool, or Patience in *Piers Plowman*) to navigate the power structures in which they are involved. In context, riddles tend to be either ritualistic or aggressive, depending on whether the answer is assumed to be known or not, and in literary contexts, riddles are more often the latter than the former.

Of course, they can also be both. Consider the power dynamics played out in the story of Apollonius of Tyre (a widespread narrative that appears in von Vitterbo's Latin *Pantheon*, a freestanding Old English translation, the *Gesta Romanorum,* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis,* among other places) wherein a king, Antiochus, who has fallen in love with and raped his daughter, demands that any who wants to marry her answer a riddle: "By crime I am carried away, on maternal flesh I feed . . . I seek my father, my

mother's consort, my wife's daughter, and I find none."[42] The riddle describes his ongoing abuse of his daughter, and those who fail to answer it correctly are beheaded, which leaves a lot of heads on Antiochus's gate before the titular hero arrives. Antiochus's riddle works as a legalistic maneuver by which he can maintain his position, both as his daughter's abuser and a king who has an excuse to execute a lot of the competition. But when Apollonius answers the riddle correctly, it casts a cold light on the king's real intentions: clearly he never meant anyone to *solve* the riddle, since in this his crimes are exposed, and his daughter lost (or, from her perspective, rescued). The riddling speech act is an assertion of power, but also of coercion—the riddle, not the axe, is the real weapon that allows Antiochus to go on slaughtering his daughter's suitors, with their consent as well as that of his subjects (and, in a way, the reader's). The riddle-game enables the riddle's performativity to such an extent that people die.

But in confrontation with Apollonius the speech act exchange fails, and the game dissolves around them as Antiochus violates its terms, first by claiming that Apollonius has gotten the riddle wrong, then by sending him away instead of killing him. Belatedly realizing that his secret is now out, he sends his steward after Apollonius to kill him after all, by which point the reader cannot help thinking that it might have been simpler and

[42] I draw in this discussion primarily on the Old English version of the riddle. Even in this version, the riddle is given in Latin, and then translated into English: "'*Scelere vehor, materna carne vescor*.' (Þæt is on Englisc, 'Scylde ic þolige, modrenum flæsce ic bruce.' Eft he cwæð, '*Quæro patrem meum, meæ matris virum, uxoris meæ filiam, nec invenio*.' (Þæt is on Englisc, ' Ic sece minne fæder, minre modor wer, mines wifes dohtor, and ic ne finde')." R. D. Fulk, *An Introductory Grammar of Old English with an Anthology of Readings* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2014), 60. In the *Historia Apollonii,* the riddle is slightly different, mentioning a brother rather than a daughter: "Scelere vehor, maternam carnem vescor, quaero fratrem meum, meae matris virum, uxoris meae filium: non invenio." Elizabeth Archibald, *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations* (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1991), 114.

smarter to just use a less dangerous riddle, one not so revelatory of the king's own secrets and sins. Perhaps Antiochus is subconsciously indulging his own compulsion to confess, but he clearly also has a great deal of faith in the power of the riddle to be unsolvable and thus bolster his position, and he uses it effectively in those terms for a long time.

Antiochus's riddle does not have one single concrete solution. It does not refer to an object or even an abstraction, but a situation. Nor is there any central metaphor; the riddle does not put two predicates in tension or balance literal and figurative descriptions. It describes a troubling and specific set of circumstances—the apparent (though clearly non-literal) cannibalism, the absence of all these familial figures—but not a paradoxical or impossible one. Even the prosopopeia is inconsistent, as the "I" of the first clause seems to be Antiochus himself, but the "I" of the second clause is apparently, at least provisionally, his daughter. Perhaps Taylor would describe it as a literary rather than a folk riddle, but it is not especially long, poetic, or abstract (Taylor's qualifications for the literary riddle) any more than it is short, metaphorically precise, and concrete, as a folk riddle is supposed to be. It does not fit neatly into either category of riddle, or into any definition of the riddle given above, and in fact the solution is a few extra steps removed from the riddle-proposition—what about this case of sexual abuse makes it impossible to find the father, the mother's consort, the wife's daughter? Fully interpreting this riddle requires (as I explore further in the following section) an explication of the text in which it appears as well as the language of the riddle itself. The riddle's form is not sufficient to its interpretation; it needs its discursive context in order to make sense, and its meaning likewise bleeds beyond its own borders and into the surrounding text.

Of course, the audience for the riddling speech act is not only Apollonius and the other would-be suitors who attempt it, but the reader or hearer of the story, as well. From our perspective encountering the riddle in its narrative context, the solution is supplied before the riddle, in that the reader knows what the abusive situation is before Antiochus concocts a riddle to describe it. For the sake of the reader, the riddle does not need to be answerable because the reader will never be in a position to wonder what it means. In context it is as meaningful for the commentary it provides on the characters and conflict as for the referential confusion it creates. Both the internal context (in which Antiochus poses the riddle to his daughter's suitors) and the external context (in which the reader of the narrative has the solution before the riddle is posed) have an impact on the kind of form the riddle is able to take. It does not need to be particularly coherent as a riddle in terms of its internal structure because two levels of context either allow or prefer it to be referentially vague and imagistically blurry, rather than a clear and solvable riddle. The riddle in *Apollonius*—and this is not uncommon among riddles in literature—relies for effect on both its internal form, its use of specific language to negotiate a relationship to its referent, and its contextual function, the way that the circumstances in which it is uttered (and read) contributes to the construction and interpretation of its meaning. In sum, the riddling speech act in *Apollonius* works both inside and outside the text, as a riddle posed both to the character and to the reader. But because the speech act depends on context, not just form, for meaning, it is a different speech act for the reader than it is for Apollonius, and accomplishes different things.

Riddles and Literary Interpretation

If literature can be defined by the acts of interpretation it inspires, then riddles are a type of literature that demands interpretation even on the referential level. Though they may merit and call for interpretation beyond that level, the kinds of larger, more abstract, or thematic meanings available to them are dependent upon their determination of referential meaning. Poetry and riddles are often understood together via their habitual (though not inevitable) use of metaphor, and of course because of the generic overlap between (some) riddles and (some) poems; critics such as Andrew Welsh in fact see riddles as the imagistic root of lyric poetry.[43] There are those riddles that are themselves poems, such as the riddles of the Exeter Book (which we usually think of as riddles first and poetry second), as well as poems that are in fact riddles, particularly identified among the works of Wallace Stevens, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Richard Wilbur, among others (which we usually think of as poetry first and riddles second). One poem read widely as a riddle is "Earthy Anecdote," the first in Wallace Stevens' first published collection, *Harmonium*:[44]

[43] "The riddle . . . derives from this same process of seeing, knowing, and naming. Although riddles are now just a game and even to folklorists a minor form of folk literature, traces of an older seriousness surround the riddles posed to Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's Pericles, for whom it was find the answer or lose your life. Poets, moreover, will still struggle with their namings as if their neck depended on it, and solve their puzzles with the same satisfaction of watching the Sphinx die of shame. Then, it may seem to the rest of us, they become sphinx-like in turn, masters in an old tradition who hide their meanings in obscure riddles and puzzling images. But the riddle is still a naming and a teaching, and in folklore or in poetic imagery the puzzle is meant ultimately to reveal rather than conceal." Andrew Walsh, *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 26.

[44] *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books–Random House, [1923] 1982), 3.

Every time the bucks went clattering
Over Oklahoma
A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,
They went clattering,
Until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the right,
Because of the firecat.

Or until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the left,
Because of the firecat.

The bucks clattered.
The firecat went leaping,
To the right, to the left,
And
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept.

"Earthy Anecdote" may be referentially enigmatic, but it is also an imagistically lively poem, evoking a wild confrontation on a flat landscape, the steady pattern of the bucks' herd-movement contrasted with the singular, reactive appearance of the firecat. The scene it conjures up is easy enough to visualize, despite that the central figure has no clear referent. Stevens refused in his lifetime to explain what the "firecat" was supposed to be, because "explanations spoil things," although he did assert that the picture it paints is not meant to be symbolic, but of actual animals.[45] But there is no animal called a firecat that preys on, herds, or otherwise threatens the deer of Oklahoma, and so critics have been left to interpret this poem with a variety of more-or-less symbolic solutions—the firecat may

[45] Letter 216 in the *Letters of Wallace Stevens,* ed. Holly Stevens (London : Faber and Faber, 1967), 204.

be "a cougar, lightning, a prairie fire, the sun, God actual or imagined by the bucks, the imagination, the female, Stevens himself, an oil well, a red panda (called a firecat in China), the color yellow," etc.[46] Perhaps most inventively (though not most convincingly), Mervyn Nicholson makes of the poem a thoroughly detached allegory in which the firecat is the sun and the bucks are the planets, the former controlling the motion of the latter—wherever the planets go, they cannot escape the firecat. Nicholson's reading does supply a satisfying explanation of the title, although the degree to which even movement is metaphorical (turning right and left cannot literally refer to turning right and left) makes it difficult fully to parse.[47]

Interpreting the riddle of this poem means engaging with many of the central problems of literary interpretation. To what extent does historical contextualization drive interpretation? "Firecat" is another name for the thoroughly adorable, now endangered red panda of southwest China—would Stevens have known about red pandas, and would he have had any reason to place one in Oklahoma (where he had also not, it seems, spent much time)?[48] To what extent does authorial intent matter? Given that Stevens evidently

---

[46] William A. Sigler, "Stevens Textplication 20: Earthy Anecdote," *Poet Tree* (blog), July 8, 2012, http://billsigler.blogspot.com/2012/07/stevens-textplication-20-earthy.html. Alternatively, Bart Eeckhout's ecocritical and biographical reading of "Earthy Anecdote" reads the poem lyrically without being especially distracted by its riddling, concluding that it "*is* about Stevens' investment in earth's natural cycles and its unspoiled natural environments, and it *is* an affirmation (if an ambiguous one) of natural vitality rooted in the body and the senses, at the same time as it *also* aboschut a poet in the act of finding a simultaneously local and international voice in modern art, about that poet's exploration of questions of image-making or his confrontation with the epistemological and signifying limits of poetry, and about his attempts at reinventing the genre of the lyric in the guise of a laconic, dehumanized, ritual incantation that stages an intentionality not to be recuperated by referring to a poet's individual expressivity." "Wallace Stevens' 'Earthy Anecdote'; or, How Poetry Must Resist Ecocriticism Almost Successfully," *Comparative American Studies* 7.2 (2009), 190.

[47] Mervyn Nicholson, "Reading Stevens' Riddles," *College English* 50.1 (1988), 13-31.

[48] Eeckhout, "Wallace Stevens' 'Earthy Anecdote'," 179.

intended the firecat to refer to a real animal, must we limit possible solutions to that sphere? What are the limits on metaphorical interpretation, and what are the conditions that give rise to acceptable metaphors? Eleanor Cook suggests that riddle poems "cannot be read with much beyond pleasurable puzzlement until we have found the questions for which the poem provides answers,"[49] but readings of "Earthy Anecdote" do not seem to be limited to just puzzlement, although they do tend to emphasize the search for a solution (much as happens with scholarly commentary on the Exeter Book riddles). What, then, is the relationship between solving the riddle of this poem and interpreting its meaning—if, for example, one reads this poem as describing "the Sisyphean plight of the individual . . . [e.g.] the writer redirecting but not capturing reality with his bright eyes and muse-powered will," does this constitute a solution to the riddle?[50]

The struggle to solve and/or interpret "Earthy Anecdote" is moreover indicative of the role of particular reference in thematic interpretation—that while having a clear understanding of such a reference is helpful, it is surprisingly not entirely necessary. The meaning and significance of a riddle exceeds its solution, just as the meaning of a poem exceeds its literal references. Stevens's poem furthermore showcases the reception overlap of riddles and poetry. Both tend to make oblique references, to depict some subject in roundabout ways that have the effect of making the familiar strange.[51] Both

---

[49] Eleanor Cook, *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 187.

[50] Sigler, "Stevens Textplication."

[51] "[A]s we grow older . . . We become 'fixed' in our receptions, and the world, once fresh and new, loses its ability to surprise us as we become increasingly familiar with the objects it contains, and increasingly adept at placing the objects encountered today into boxes created yesterday. Artists of all kinds—poets, painters, playwrights, sculptors, architects—know this, and they work at creating new objects for us, establishing new relationships, challenging our view of the world. It has been argued, convincingly in my opinion, that riddles, too, can provide

therefore make heightened interpretive demands on their audience, asking the reader or hearer to re-evaluate how certain words or phrases both refer outside the text and contribute to the construal of meaning within it. Furthermore, both must be recognized, and recognizable, within their genre in order to be interpreted either poetically or enigmatically (i.e., as a riddle). When Luke 1.46-55 appears in-line with the prose of the chapter, as it does in the King James Bible, it does not stand out as a poem; when the same text is broken into poetic lines (as more recent translations frequently do) or set to music as the *Magnificat,* it becomes poetry. Similarly, if "Humpty Dumpty" is framed and delivered as a nursery rhyme rather than a riddle, then even an interlocutor who does not know its protagonist is an egg will probably not try to solve it, because nursery rhymes do not, in general, demand to be solved.

Riddle studies offer to poetics the energy of telos, a motivation to keep digging for meaning. The generic norms of riddles promise a meaning—a correct meaning—because someone has deliberately left it for us to find (whether or not this promise reflects reality). Poetics offer to riddle studies a capacity to put off those teleological blinders and appreciate the richness of enigmatic ambiguity, the possibilities that inhere in a text with no single clear interpretation. Riddles are a site where the author has never been dead, has indeed never even been sick; in conversation, solving a riddle means determining not just what solutions are conceivable, but what solution the riddler has in mind. This is of course a product of the riddle's originally oral nature—like other conversational or ritualistic genres, riddles are co-constructed in a pragmatic context. But this quality seeps up into the literary riddles in interesting ways, as well. As scholars

---

for adults the sense of newness and exploration which otherwise diminishes in the growing-up process." Dienhart, "Linguistic Look," 98.

debate the answers to those of the Exeter Book riddles that do not have generally accepted solutions (and even some of those which do), they are not proposing alternative possible solutions, but arguing for *correct* solutions, and against other mistaken, incorrect solutions previously advocated. In riddling, the promise of a single deliberately encoded meaning tends to overwhelm other possible modes of interpretation. Riddles are an opportunity to expose, address, and query our investment in authorial intent, while still enjoying the possibilities of meaningful simultaneity.

To return to *Apollonius,* there are two perspectives one can take in examining the literary significance of Antiochus's riddle. On the one hand, it is itself a literary object (i.e., an entry in the genre "riddle"); on the other, it is a potent crux for the meaning of the whole Antiochus episode of *Apollonius of Tyre.* The narrative has at its heart the trauma of the princess's rape—though Apollonius is the protagonist of the rest of the tale, he is introduced initially only as a secondary character, after Antiochus and his daughter—and Antiochus's riddle is the culmination of all the ways that he, and others, are speaking and not speaking about the situation. The princess herself, when asked what has happened after the first time Antiochus rapes her, elusively replies that "Two noble names have perished in this chamber," and when her nurse suggests she tell her father, she asks "where is my father? . . . the name of father has ceased to exist." Her euphemistic description of the event forces her interlocutor, the nurse, to do the interpreting for her, solving the riddle to find a way of saying the unsayable. The princess's assertion that two noble names have perished, and her father's name ceased to exist, is itself a riddle, forecasting the shape of the coming riddle game. Here, too, the riddler is working to not speak the solution that tells the trauma, forcing the nurse to work out not only whose

"names" they are, but the synechdochic significance of these names, and in what metaphorical sense the father's "name" has evaporated. In light of the princess's use of such enigmatic speech to recount the situation to her nurse without having to say it directly, Antiochus's use of the riddle seems almost like a plea for someone to interpret his own actions for him, to speak the thing he has made, literally, unspeakable.

The structure of the *Apollonius* riddle may be messy, but it is evocative; it comments on the situation that is its solution even as, obliquely, it describes it. The relationships among the king, the daughter, and the absent mother are negated; the king's sins have obliterated the structure of his family, dissolving boundaries and leaving the participants in liminal categories where they cannot any longer be identified as mother, father, daughter. The riddle expresses Antiochus's awareness of how catastrophic his actions have been, while also allowing him, ironically, to perpetuate them. His riddle suggests not only an ambivalence about representation and semantics, but about crimes and confessions, his own sublimated wish to repent on balance with his desire to continue in his evildoing. The riddle works as a brief, vivid poem that says the unspeakable, that allows its user(s) to manage trauma; in an eddy of metaphor and periphrasis, Antiochus and his daughter can negotiate their damage without facing the real truth of it. It does what poetry does best, in that its significance far exceeds the boundaries of its reference. In all of this, the interpretation of the riddle is embroiled with the interpretation of the text—the episode cannot be understood without understanding the riddle, and vice versa.

Such a thematic overlap between the riddle and its textual context is common, though not necessary. But the way that the riddle functions—deferring meaning, playing with language, heightening interpretive demands—is a way of heightening the reader's

awareness that she is reading a text that may also be deferring meaning, playing with language, demanding interpretation. The hermeneutic work that a riddle evokes is of a piece with, and so dovetails naturally into, the hermeneutic work of interpreting any literary text (or any text at all). The relative smallness of riddles as both linguistic and literary expressions allows for a very focused and thorough look at the work of language at a literary site. The heightened interpretive demand of riddles, their uncomfortable incompleteness absent a compelling solution, allows them to explore the interpretive problems of literary language writ small. For riddles that appear in the larger context of a literary work, posed by one character to another, linguistic pragmatics offers a way in to this strange mode of communication. Considering riddles and their surrounding expressions in terms of speech acts and implicature allows inroads into the precise structures of not only meaning, but interpersonal negotiation at play—not only what is being said by such characters, but what is being *done* by them, and how they are positioning themselves relative to each other in terms of knowledge, in-groupness, and power. In turn this permits a far more rigorous account of the kinds of meaning the text generally produces—exposing the power dynamics of conversational riddles, and drawing attention to representational choices, to what the text asks us to believe about its reference by the shaping of its sense.

A specifically linguistic attention to riddles can also contribute to the field of stylistics, which suffers sometimes from a tendency to be over-occupied with single final interpretations of literary texts. Historically grounded in Russian formalism and the Prague School's approach to literary interpretation, stylistics can unsurprisingly still look very much, from the perspective of modern literary criticism, like New Criticism (though

with an especially rigorous and empirically grounded methodology behind it). Despite the functional-linguistics insistence that language is a *social* semiotic, stylistic readings are often anything but socially inflected, concerned foremost with a literary work's internal structure and locating its expression of meaning primarily internally. The formalist assumptions to which stylistics is often bound can be limiting. Witness for example the 2007 assertion of the pioneering scholar of linguistics and verbal art Ruqaiya Hasan that literature has, by definition, at its core a theme which is "*the* meaning of an instance of verbal art."[52] Certainly a long list of scholars in the last half-century have demonstrated the various ways in which a single text may bear a multiplicity of meanings, even contradictory ones, and as many interpretations as it has readers.

Nonetheless, stylistics can and does give rise to tightly argued scholarship, and it offers valuable tools in its application of current, working linguistic theories and models to literary texts. Literary critics who depend primarily on Saussure and his philosophical (not linguistic) heirs for their understanding of the workings of language are missing out on a whole field of scholarship, discovery, and further theorization that has moved far beyond Saussure. M. A. K. Halliday, for example, extends the concepts of *langue* and *parole* into a model wherein the two are "complementary and inherent aspects of language, engaged in a dialectic whereby the system of language supports and makes

[52] Hasan is concerned that the pedagogy of literary studies is mostly occupied with educating students in "received evaluation," i.e., the established valuation and understanding of a given work of literature. Ironically, her own model seems much likelier to lead to a situation in which students are forced to adhere to the one accepted interpretation of a work of literature, at the expense of their own analysis and interpretation. Ruqaiya Hasan, "Private Pleasure, Public Discourse: Reflections on Engaging with Literature," in *Language and Verbal Art Revisited: Linguistic Approaches to the Study of Literature,* ed. Donna R. Miller and Monica Turci (London:Equinox, 2007), 13-40.

interpretable the instances of language use."[53] On the other hand, recent literary scholarship that draws new formalism into dialogue with new historicism, addressing the ideological context that shapes and is shaped by literary form, works at the convergence of exactly the "immanent and transcendent" qualities of literature that systemic functional linguistics should find familiar.[54] For both models, the abstracted system is inseparable from the immediate expression—they cannot be considered individually, nor can the influential relationship be pinned down as going only one way, in either direction. Both stylistics and literary criticism could benefit from greater attention to the efforts of the other: the latter from the rigorous empirical methodologies that linguistics offers, and the former from the greater attention to ideology, culture, history, and politics offered by modern literary criticism. Riddles are particularly emblematic of these two fields' mutual interests: as speech acts, their origin in oral exchange rewards linguistic (especially pragmatic) consideration, but as elements of literary texts, they are likewise implicated in the making of aesthetic, ideological, formal, philosophical—in a word, literary—meaning.

Riddles and Linguistic Analysis

Literary riddles offer an interesting limit case for linguistic analysis. Literature in general lies at the other end of the spectrum from natural, spontaneous language (which functional linguistics particularly views as the default): heavily revised, often ungrammatical, and as focused on its own form of language as its communication of

[53] Hasan, "Private Pleasure," 22.

[54] See, for example, Susan Wolfson, "Reading for Form," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (2000), 1-16; Jim Hanson, "Formalism and Its Malcontents: Benjamin and De Man on the Function of Allegory," *New Literary History* 35.4 (2004), 663-83.

content. Examining literature is revelatory not of how language functions in its most "natural" mode, but of what language can accommodate: e.g., poetic semantics demonstrates the limits of meaning a given word can take, the range of possible meanings attributable to it. Literature in general also features a noteworthy metalinguistic element, in that it carries information about what its author believes about language, the limits of its representative capacity, and the interplay of its form and its function. When the author of *Piers Plowman* portrays various kinds of aggressive and passive-aggressive conversations among characters (as I explore further in chapter 3), he is also conveying information about how he believes politeness, as well as impoliteness, is expressed and engaged, and how speakers are liable to manage the threat of such conversational aggressions. Similarly, as the Exeter Book riddler(s) compose(s) their riddles, they expose their own view of metaphor and cognition (though of course they would not use those terms), how far linguistic reference can be pushed out from the literal before it will fail entirely. Literature is a compelling site at which to observe language in its extremes—what is possible with language rather than what is regular.

These literary-linguistic processes are particularly evident at the site of riddles. The creation of meaning, the interpretation of intent, the relationship between language and the world, and the relationship negotiated by language between language users—all are intensified in riddles, the processes folded back on themselves to double and redouble the effects of language making meaning. In speaking or hearing riddles, language users are drawn not only to use language but to contemplate it, to pay deliberate attention to the way that it is, or can be, interpreted. Riddling showcases the ability of language to refer on multiple planes at once: whether we conceive the riddle's multiple references as

competing semantic spheres, a site of tension between literal and metaphorical reference, or simultaneous references to multiple *signifiés*, riddles provide a boundary case for considering the relationship between language and the world. Even with their elements of deliberate mis-reference, deception, and misdirection, riddles still manage to create meaning, precisely by that manipulation of reference, constructing innovative relationships among parts of the world around us. Riddles test the ordinary boundaries of semantic apprehension, showing how flexible (or not) cognitive-linguistic categories are.

Furthermore, as speech acts, riddles escalate and expose the power relationships that undergird virtually any exchange of language; in riddles, information is very literally power. The kinds of conditions that make speech acts riddles, and riddles felicitous, are imbricated within the power imbalances of riddlers and riddle-hearers, speakers and interpreters—those with access to privileged knowledge and those competing for that access. Caught up in these power dynamics, riddles thus also have enormous potential to be "face-threatening," a term coined by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson to describe the way that language and other social acts impact social identity.[55] A face-threatening act degrades the personal and social status of its target, either as an insult (damaging what the hearer is allowed to believe about herself, and to believe that others believe about her), or an imposition (interfering with her ability to go about her own business unhindered by others' demands).[56] Riddles tend to be face-threatening in both ways, putting demands on hearers to perform, to prove themselves to an interlocutor who has, in posing the riddle, claimed the right to be asking riddles. And just as any riddle can

[55] See Brown and Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[56] These are termed "positive" and "negative" face-threatening acts, respectively, by Brown and Levinson; see chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of face and face-threat.

be felt as face-threatening, any riddler can be viewed as impolite. A speaker must have some standing in the conversational interaction in order even to be able to pose riddles and assume that their riddling challenge will be accepted. Thus, understanding the riddle entails a close examination of the felicity conditions and pragmatic context that make riddles possible, to say nothing of effective. The context in which a riddle is uttered can make it face-threatening, or it can ameliorate the riddle's face-threat; it can enable a power-grab or subversion of power dynamics. In analyzing the function of riddling, and the functional context in which riddling happens, I examine the possibilities for meaning that inhere in any conversation and its context—possibilities that are realized into meaning as a function of perlocution.

Perlocution, the element of the speech act by which an effect is (intended to be) produced upon a hearer, has tended to haunt the margins of speech act theory,[57] largely because it is so much more difficult to predict, formulate, and schematize than is illocution. Attention to perlocution means taking more than one linguistic psychology into consideration—the hearer's as well as the speaker's—and navigating the relationship between them, as well as the murky terrain between intention and interpretation. The founding figures of speech act theory were prone to relegate perlocution away from their discussion of the subject. Austin's focus in *How To Do Things With Words* is expressly on illocution, and thus his interest in perlocution is primarily in its distinction from the illocutionary act, limited to the ways in which perlocution contrasts with, and might thus

[57] Austin first describes the perlocutionary act as that which "produce[s] certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them." *Words*, 101.

further delimit, illocution.[58] Searle, similarly, views illocution as the central element of the speech act, while perlocution is ancillary, arguing that "[f]or many, perhaps most, of the most important illocutionary acts, there is no essential perlocutionary intent associated by definition with the corresponding verb, e.g. statements and promises are not by definition attempts to produce perlocutionary effects in hearers."[59]

Yet Searle's view only holds if language is abstracted wholly away from its own use, since statements and promises are generally uttered within a social context in which they are intended to be heard and understood by, and thus to have an effect on, an interlocutor.[60] Peirce, for example, points out that "When a writer makes an assertion, his

[58] Austin views illocutionary acts as "conventional," in that they "could be made explicit by the performative formula," while perlocutionary acts are not, and thus evidently not regular or predictable enough to be explicable (Ibid., 103). He is nonetheless aware of, and perhaps a little put off by, the unreliability of the movement from utterance to interpretation, pointing out that "*any*, or almost any, perlocutionary act is liable to be brought off, in sufficiently special circumstances, by the issuing, with or without calculation, of any utterance whatsoever . . . We have then to draw the line between an action we do (here an illocution) and its consequences" (110-111). However, Andrew Munro observes that despite "the primacy that Austin would accord illocution," perlocution persistently "worries his project" as "the presuppositions of illocutionary description are troubled by perlocutionary concerns." "Reading Austin Rhetorically," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 46.1 (2013), 24. Munro argues, for example, that Austin uses so many legal topoi in his exploratory examples because "his legal figures endorse a zero degree of interpretive activity . . . For illocutionary ends, speech acts result from a systematizing suspension of the contingencies of real contexts, genres, and history" (26). Thus, perhaps in spite of himself, "Austin engages some properly *rhetorical* lines of inquiry" (23).

[59] John Searle, "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts," in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3. Interestingly, in *Speech Acts,* Searle offers statements as an example of a speech act "where there generally is a correlated perlocutionary effect," though it may still be suppressed if "I . . . make a statement without caring whether my audience believes it or not but simply because I feel it my duty to make it." *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 46.

[60] Austin makes some distinction between "uptake" and "perlocution," in that uptake is an element of illocution—the hearer's recognition of the speech act being performed and understanding of its content, as opposed to the perlocutionary effect that the speech act works upon the hearer. While the two are distinct (as Munro argues in detail; see "Reading," 27-28), it is difficult to separate them practically, in that it is hard to imagine an uptake so abstracted that

principal purpose is to induce the reader to believe in the reality of the fact asserted,"[61] and Andrew Munro notes of promising that "a promise induces the promisee to rely on—to act in accordance with or in relation to—a future performance by the promisor."[62] Statements and promises may be, in the abstract, only expressions of the speaker's intentions and beliefs, but any utterance of either in a real-world context is for the purpose of affecting the belief state and actions of a hearer.[63] The consequences of a speech act, its perlocutionary element, may be unreliable and difficult to predict, but it is no less essential an element of a speech act for that.

Andrew Munro's 2013 article in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* makes a compelling argument for engagement with perlocution as a way of making speech-act theory attendant to rhetoric, which is of course always concerned with real contexts and consequences. Focus on the perlocutionary act, Munro argues, makes speech-act theory

---

a hearer can understand a speech act without being affected by it. Searle similarly distinguishes between illocutionary and perlocutionary effects, illocutionary effect being essentially Austin's uptake, but largely for the purpose of further banishing perlocution from consideration.

[61] Peirce, *Collected Papers,* 4.353; also quoted in Munro, "Reading," 27. Munro points out that Austin makes the comparable assertion that "The giving of straightforward information produces, almost always, consequential effects upon action." Austin, *Words,* 110, quoted in Munro, "Reading," 27.

[62] Munro, "Reading," 29.

[63] Searle's example of a speaker who "make[s] a statement without caring" whether it is believed or not (*Speech Acts,* 46; see note 59 above) strikes me as specious: if I make such a statement "simply because I feel it my duty to make it" (46), with no care at all for how it affects my audience, then do I really need an audience at all? Even if I am convinced no one will believe me, I must still want my audience to *consider* my statement, weigh it, decide about it, and confront my belief in the content of the statement. We might revise Peirce to this end: When a writer makes an assertion, her purpose is to submit information for her reader to examine and evaluate, in order to decide whether he will believe it. The difference is both perlocutionary and rhetorical. If I tell my students that "John of Gaunt wanted to be king of England," I likely expect them to believe my assertion; if I make the same statement at an academic conference, I likely expect my audience to consider and evaluate this claim without necessarily accepting it. Thus the perlocutionary effect I have in mind differs according to rhetorical context.

able truly to consider the "total speech-act" in its "total situation," as was Austin's stated goal.[64] Munro observes that surveying illocution only in terms of idealized, "ordinary" speech is a way of bracketing perlocutionary concerns under the obscuring assumption that in the abstracted illocutions of this "ordinary" language, "understanding works transparently," and so the variability of meaning needs addressing only in terms of the speaker's intention and action. [65] Taking perlocution seriously, however, means taking stock of *situated* interlocutors who are "desiring sign users, historically implicated and practically involved," their speech reactive to a discursive network of other speech acts and speakers, and their interpretations influenced by myriad contextual elements including, but much greater than, the immediate felicity conditions of the speech act under consideration.[66] Focusing on the perlocutionary act, Munro argues, introduces the rhetorical concerns of "discursive responsibility," as well as the question of "which words might be used in which discursive situations with a view to determining particular interpretant effects."[67]

---

[64] Austin, *Words,* 52; see also Munro, "Reading," 25.

[65] Munro, "Reading," 28.

[66] In addressing rhetoric in perlocutionary terms, Munro draws on Peirce's "speculative rhetoric," observing that Peirce's theorization of the "dynamic interpretant," which "consists in [the] direct effect actually produced by a Sign upon an Interpreter of it" (quoting Hardwick, *Semiotics and Signifiers,* 110), leads to a construal of utterers and utterances as they stand in relation to other utterers and utterances. Furthermore, the meaning of a speech act is located "in relation to its simple or complex response" and in the way that "one sign gives birth to another" via "real uptakes and their contingencies" (Munro, "Reading," 31-33). The meaning of an utterance, under this rubric, can only ever fully exist *historically*, in the meeting of a speaker's intentions (realized in response to a litany of foregoing signs) and a hearer's interpretive inclinations (shaped by a different network of foregoing and simultaneous signs). *Semiotic and Signifiers: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, ed. Charles S. Hardwick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1977.

[67] Munro, "Reading," 34.

While Munro does not address literary discourse, his approach makes a strong implicit case for the reading of literature according to speech act theory. Literary scholars have applied speech act theory with more or less success to literary texts[68]: Stanley Fish, for example, executes a virtuoso speech-act analysis of *Coriolanus,* after which he happily eviscerates a few other scholars' attempts to read literature via speech act theory and then comes to the conclusion that speech act theory is not actually useful for most literature—only for *Coriolanus.*[69] Shoshanna Felman parses the act of seduction in terms of the speech act of promising—the (felicitous, but insincere) promise as the rhetorical core of seduction—and thus analyzes the *Don Juan* narrative as an exploration of the pleasurable tensions between performative and constative (descriptive, non-performative) speech.[70] J. Hillis Miller, meanwhile, puts some pressure on what constitutes a "speech act" with the argument that literature may not only contain a variety of speech acts, but that a literary work "taken as a whole" may have a "possible performative dimension" as

[68] Austin (*Words,* 22) sets aside literary speech acts from his discussion of speech acts with the view that they are "parasitic upon [language's] normal use," and thus not in the preferred category of "ordinary" language. Searle takes a similar position that, in fictional discourse, the "rules relating illocutionary speech acts and the world" are suspended, meaning that fiction is made up of pretended, rather than "serious," illocutions. "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 65-67. Searle's position may be logically satisfying, and there is certainly value in restricting the scope of one's study (e.g., to "ordinary speech), but neither makes any account of the way that these "pretended" speech acts function *within* a work of literature—that is, what precisely is being pretended (or represented), and what is its literary or pragmatic consequence.

[69] Fish argues that *Coriolanus* is exceptionally concerned with the performance and felicity of speech acts, "the rules of their performance, the price one pays for obeying those rules, the impossibility of ignoring or refusing them and still remaining a member of the community. It is also about what the theory is about, language and its power: the power to make the world rather than mirror it, to bring about states of affairs rather than report them." Stanley Fish, "How to do Things with Austin and Searle: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism," *Modern Language Notes* 91.5 (1976): 1024.

[70] Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages,* trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

a speech act.[71] Considering these and other literary explorations of speech acts, the exact pragmatic nature of literature grows steadily more polyvalent. At the least, a literary text may be a speech act; it may contain speech acts; it may represent speech acts; it may philosophize about speech acts; it likely is and does all of these and more.

Literature can be understood rhetorically on at least two (enmeshed) levels: it creates a rhetorical situation within the text, in which fictional characters utter fictional speech acts for fictional purposes, and it is involved in a rhetorical situation constructed among author, text, and reader (and all the contingencies that shape a text's creation and reception). A perlocutionary focus is a means to parse the speech acts on both levels of rhetoric, as well the relationship between them (e.g., Miller points out that the title of the 1865 novel *Can You Forgive Her?* is a question posed simultaneously to a betrayed character in the book, and to readers who are asked similarly to evaluate and respond to the "her" of the book).[72] Just as for Munro, establishing the speech act in a way that takes perlocution into account allows him to situate that meaning in, and partially interpret, a broader rhetorical context, so a focus on perlocution within a literary text can be a way to begin ascertaining the meaning of the whole text. And literature doubles the stakes of perlocution, because the speech act in the speech situation exists both within the literary text and in the real world, at every instance that the literary text is engaged and interpreted. Within a text, there is no possibility of abstracting utterances out from their contextual "real"-world consequences, motivations, etc.[73] Furthermore, granting Miller's

[71] J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1.

[72] Miller, *Speech Acts,* 1.

[73] As conversations are represented within a text, perlocution is unavoidable and evident in part because the text will generally seek to make clear what perlocutionary acts have taken place (as opposed to a speech act considered in the abstract, which can only forecast possible abstract

suggestion that a work of literature might be understood as an extended speech act, literary perlocution can offer an entry into understanding what constitutes, broadly speaking, a text's politics—what the author intends it to accomplish, what effect it is meant to have, or does have, or has had, on an audience, how it responds to the authority, claims, and actions of other texts and entities in the world. To consider literature from the perspective of perlocution is to attend closely to the tension between intention and interpretation, the illocution attempted by a speech act, the success of that illocution's uptake, and the perlocution either intended or accomplished.

Perlocution is thus entwined with the whole problem of literary interpretation, and riddles are particularly suited to exemplifying and unraveling this overlap. As an endemically oral genre they can be easily reconstructed as (potential) speech acts, but they are also embedded in literary processes—metaphor, aesthetics, mimesis, etc. A riddle's obscurity compels the hearer to exert interpretive effort, motivated particularly by the recognition that the riddle expression is incomplete. The hearer's uptake of and response to the riddle thus has stakes for the uptake of and response to the work of literature. A riddle to which the answer is known may not produce this perlocutionary act

---

perlocutions, or a speech act analyzed in real history, the perlocutions of which are often legion and can be ascertained only by attention to the ongoing chain of signifiers moving in both directions from the speech event.) For example, although Fish neglects perlocution in general, his reading of illocutions is often dependent on them in a way he never acknowledges. When Citizen 3 in *Coriolanus* (2.3) observes that really, they as citizens have no power to reject Coriolanus as consul because "if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them," Fish glosses over the perlocutionary act that Coriolanus would perform by "tell[ing] his noble deeds"—making the populace acknowledge them, perform gratitude, and thus become obliged to appoint him consul ("How to Do Things," 985-86). So strong is this perlocutionary act that this citizen feels the effects of it even in the subjunctive-contrary-to-fact, since Coriolanus will in fact refuse actually to ask for the votes he needs to be made consul, never actually telling his noble deeds. This citizen, however, knows the effect it would have if he did.

exactly, but it does produce a parallel compulsion for the hearer to produce—even if only mentally—the solution. In either case, the riddle's primary perlocution is to draw the hearer to an act of completion, to attempt to provide the second half of a text that is known by its genre to have two halves. Examining riddles in terms of perlocution further exposes how deeply political is the perlocutionary act. As Michael Adams has argued concerning the pragmatics of nicknaming, perlocution is a process of selecting from a bundle of illocutionary possibilities, and a hearer has some discretion as they make their selection among these possible perlocutions and decides how to respond. Both the range of perlocutions suggested by the speaker's illocution and the perlocution(s) absorbed by the hearer reflect the politics of the speech situation, and both the distribution of power and the desires of interlocutors relative to that distribution.[74] Riddles, like nicknames, have a great deal of potential for face-threat: posing a riddle is a way of demanding that an interlocutor prove herself, while putting the speaker in a position of evaluation and judgment. On the other hand, when an insult is coded as/within a riddle, the target has options about whether or not to acknowledge the insult, and is then paradoxically complicit in the face-threatening speech act if perceiving it as an affront.

In sum, riddles heighten the perlocutionary stakes of any speech act event, including that between a work of literature and its reader. The generic architecture of riddles is intricately bound up with the riddles' uptake and perlocution, with an audience's agreement that a given utterance was indeed a riddle, and with the perlocutionary effect that a hearer feel compelled to solve the riddle. All this recalls my definition of the riddle above, that a riddle proposes an unclear reference and thus puts

[74] Michael Adams, "Power, Politeness, and the Pragmatics of Nicknames," *Names* (57.2, 2009): 81-91.

pressure on a hearer to produce a solution. This is in fact to say that the riddle is defined as much by perlocution as by illocution, by the effect it (regularly, generically) produces in or on a hearer.

Chapters

The four chapters of this dissertation, following this introduction, are organized around various specific discursive functions to which riddles can be put, as well as ways of thinking linguistically about riddles. Chapters 1 and 4 are occupied largely (although not exclusively) with the referential problems of riddles—how their language refers (or does not) to real things in the real world, how readers are asked to construct those references, and how hermeneutics and metaphor intersect to make enigmatic language carry and produce meaning. Chapters 2 and 3 are focused on speech act theories: chapter 2 uses Searle's concept of felicity conditions to understand how form and context overlap in the expression of the riddle, while chapter 3 addresses issues of politeness and aggression in language and the way that riddles can highlight or ameliorate either of those. Chapter 4 makes use of speech act theory and pragmatic considerations alongside its return to reference, using the intersection of these two theoretical orientations to move beyond speech acts that are clearly riddles and into language that is enigmatic, "riddling" in a general descriptive sense, which may or may not perform any bounded speech act that constitutes a clearly defined riddle.

Chapter 1, "Riddling Poetics," examines the reading of a riddle as a process not of locating or interpreting, but of producing—co-constructing—metaphors. This process is an effect of the perlocutionary force of riddling, a central concept for my approach to the

unanswered riddles of the Exeter Book, which seeks to explore their poetic potential rather than merely arguing for a single "correct" answer. Both the Exeter riddles and the foregoing Latin genre of *ænigmata* are, as they stand in the manuscript, defective as riddles: the former because they lack recorded answers, the latter because the answers are too present, appearing as the title of each entry. Thus we have on the one hand riddles that can never be conclusively answered, and on the other, *ænigmata* that have already answered the question before it has been asked. Given the connection I have suggested between perlocution and genre, i.e., that genre can be understood as a codification of the perlocutionary force that a text exerts upon its audience, the *ænigmata* do not function as riddles, even though they may have the formal potential. This claim for a perlocutionary limit on the genre *riddle* is borne out by an exploration of the *ænigmata*'s poetics, which moralize, allegorize, and interpret, but do not in general work by metaphorical disguise or deceptive reference. In contrast, the poetics of riddling in the Exeter Book relies on the production of an initial riddle-image which is then aligned with various possible solutions. From the interpreter's perplexity is then generated an array of potential metaphors of varying degrees of congruence, to be evaluated in terms of how well they are able to make the riddle-image pertinent to the possible solution. Although the promise of a single correct solution that the genre entails is what motivates the production of this array of flickering, overlapping, conceivable metaphors, it is the multiplicity itself that makes the riddle poetic. The desire for telos, for a solution that will settle the riddle's meaning, is the driving force that allows these riddles to be, not so unlike poetry in general, potent in the production of literary meaning.

Riddles such as those of the *Exeter Book* which appear as a compilation of discrete poems suggest primarily formal problems; chapter 2 moves on to address the pragmatic functions of riddles situated within larger literary contexts. "Quests and Answers" thus explores riddles as sites of narrative conflict and resolution, expressed as contests of authority, knowledge, and, especially, language. Focusing on the felicity conditions that help to negotiate how an utterance may adopt the perlocutionary force of a riddle, I explore the contribution of riddling to the heavily gendered negotiation of power, both in a few late medieval riddle-ballads, and in the English loathly lady tales. The speech act of riddling constitutes a particular type of ambidextrous question, one which explicitly seeks information, and does indeed demand a response that will supply that information, though not because the asker does not know the answer. Rather, the asker seeks primarily to investigate the answerer's capacity to solve riddles. In narrative contexts, this makes riddle-asking into a power play wherein the riddle-asker manipulates the speech situation to test and judge the riddle-answerer, which thus becomes a (if not the) central narrative conflict. I find in such narratives that the contextual case for riddling is so strong and established that even questions which do not seem in their form to be riddles—such as "What do women most desire?", the riddle at the center of the English Loathly Lady narratives—effectively become riddles because the pragmatic context forces them to act as riddles. Thus functional indication can, to an extent, make up for formal deficiencies. An utterance can act as a riddle even if its form seems unsatisfying; hence the tradition of neck riddles, in which the riddle's formal insufficiencies are allowed (if not often enthusiastically) because of the ritualized functional context that leads the audience to expect a riddle. The tensions incorporated

into such a speech act reflect the tensions that govern the work's narrative contests, the politics of its plot, and thus for the reader, the meaning of the text and the meaning of the riddle become intertwined. Riddling speech acts posed to both character and reader work to shape the rhetorical force of the whole narrative, and sensitivity to the pragmatic valences of riddling helps to make that rhetoric legible.

Chapter 3, "A Sweet and Bitter Fool," attends even more deliberately to the rhetorical possibilities of riddling. In this chapter I extend my application of speech act theory to those riddles that primarily comment on events and characters, rather than driving the narrative conflict. Because the perlocutionary force of riddling requires the hearer to co-construct its meaning, the hearer becomes complicit in the meaning that the riddle makes, which can soften it in the performance of face-threatening speech acts that might otherwise be, politically, unsayable. Riddling discourse is thus of particular use to marginal, disempowered figures who need an indirect way to approach more institutionally central characters: the Fool in *King Lear*, for example, can criticize Lear's catastrophic decisions in a way no other character could get away with, and this is enabled not only by his social role as a fool, but by his use of riddles to simultaneously express and leave veiled his judgments. Riddles can be a way to disavow language even as it is spoken, and can therefore function both as face-threatening speech acts, and as amelioration of their own face-threat. Polysemous even on the level of reference, riddles create a bundle of sometimes contradictory perlocutionary options, offering the hearer recourse away from a perlocution that they do not, for reasons rooted in the politics of the context, desire. These choices can have ethical consequences as well: riddles tend to be verdictive in any case, evaluating an interlocutor by her ability to solve them, but when

their meaning is ethically and religiously significant, as are the riddles of *Piers Plowman,* then the evaluation likewise takes on that moral and theological dimension. The way that characters go about solving—or refusing to solve—such riddles is revelatory of the hermeneutical ethics that a text imagines for itself; for medieval literature particularly, this usually reflects the ability and willingness to read spiritually rather than literally.

Chapter 4, "The Riddle of Truth," expands the scope of what language is understood as "riddling" to consider the use of enigmatic language more broadly in asserting and performing authority. The perlocutionary force of enigma is, as in more explicitly riddling speech acts, to draw an interlocutor into interpretation. Enigma, however, lacks the demand for the hearer to co-construct the completed speech act that riddles entail, since it does not carry the promise of an answer, a coded but discoverable reference, which a riddles does. Thus the work of interpretation is more contemplative than goal-directed, and while the enigmatic speech act may carry an implicit verdictive on the hearer, it is often left up to the hearer to internally evaluate her ability to respond to the enigma, rather than any external evaluation. The use of enigma suggests that the truth to which it refers is more than just true, but significant, that it is information to be guarded by linguistic disguise, accessible only to those able to contemplate and interpret carefully and correctly. And as a speech act used to various social as well as philosophical or referential ends, enigma grants, in part by taking it for granted, a speaker's authority: enigmatic speakers not only imply their own unique access to this truth, but they assert as well their authority over the construction of an interpretive community, since not everyone will have eyes to see and ears to hear the enigma's meaning.

Chapter I
Riddling Poetics

The poem must resist the intelligence
Almost successfully.

Wallace Stevens, "Man Carrying Thing"

The most notorious unanswered riddle in English literature is probably the Mad Hatter's to Alice: "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?" When Alice concedes she cannot guess and asks the Hatter for the answer, he and the March Hare both answer breezily that they haven't the slightest idea. Alice responds in her characteristic moralizing tone that they "might do something better with the time . . . than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers."[1] Her complaint is a legitimate one: without an answer, a riddle such as this seems less a riddle than just a bizarre question. And Lewis Carroll's readers, it turned out, were as agitated as was Alice; Carroll evidently received enough queries about the answer to this riddle that in a subsequent edition, he clarified that it originally had no answer, and then offered the solution: "because it can produce a few notes, although they are very flat, and it is nevar put wrong end in front."[2] Later readers, still feeling the pique of a riddle with no answer, offered further solutions: "because the notes for which they are noted are not noted for being musical notes"; "because Poe wrote on both"; "both have quills dipped in ink"; and, perhaps most in keeping with the absurdity of the riddle's

[1] Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 70-72.

[2] When the second edition was published, the *nevar* which makes the joke (*raven* spelled backwards) was unfortunately "corrected" to *never*; Dennis Crutch discovered the original *nevar* in Carroll's manuscript of the second edition. Carroll, ed. Gardner, *Annotated Alice,* 72.

original context, "because there is a *B* in both and an *N* in neither."[3] That the riddle lacks an answer is part of its point in the context of the mad tea-party and the circuitous, baffling conversation Alice endures there. Yet neither Carroll nor his readers could resist finding one for it anyway. Only in Wonderland can a riddle be answerless; outside the pages of the novel, the consensus in both popular culture and critical scholarship is that an answerless riddle is a contradiction in terms.

A riddle cannot be a riddle if it lacks an answer entirely, though this is not to say that its answer must be established; only that it must be at least believed to exist.[4] Indeed, the most beguiling riddles are arguably those, like the Hatter's, to which the answer has not been or cannot be strictly determined. As a speech act broadly construed, the expression of a riddle implies the existence of not just any answer, but a *correct* one, even if the correctness of any particular answer may be in some sense an illusion, at the very least provisional. As the introductory chapter discusses in greater detail, a core structural element of riddles is that they have two parts: question and answer, problem and solution, signifier and signified. The riddle's illocutionary and perlocutionary functions (the actions a riddle accomplishes being uttered, and the psycholinguistic effects they produce in a hearer or reader) rely on that relationship between the problem posed and the solution suggested, the tension between a strange, often paradoxical description, and the answer that resolves the paradox or makes sense of the question. For

[3] The first two answers above were proposed in Sam Lloyd's 1914 *Cyclopedia of 5000 Puzzles* and the quill answer is from David B. Jodrey. The novelist Aldous Huxley was responsible for the last answer above; see "Ravens and Writing Desks," *Vanity Fair* 30.4 (September 1928): 46, 110. All of these are reproduced by Gardner in the *Annotated Alice,* 72.

[4] See chapter 4 for a longer discussion of the difference between (what I am calling) *riddle* and *enigma*: in sum, that the former indicates the existence of a solution (whether by its form or in its contextual use), and thus motivates the search for specific answers, while the latter simply combines puzzling or contradictory references and invites contemplation rather than solution.

the riddle whose answer remains promised but undiscovered, that tension is extended indefinitely, while the strangeness of its descriptions and the contradictions it suggests are made more tantalizing by the certainty that there must be a solution, if only it could be worked out.

This chapter contrasts the unsolved riddle with its inverse, the riddle to which the answer is known in advance, in navigating the boundaries of riddling poetics. The effect of riddles demands a careful balance between clarity and obscurity: too obvious and they seem uninspired, too difficult and they are merely frustrating. The desired effect of a riddle is the sense of pieces falling into place, an array of baffling signifiers becoming organized around a solution that makes sense of them all. This might be accomplished through a variety of different figurative and formal means. Aristotle saw riddles as a correlate of metaphor, noting that "metaphors imply riddles, and therefore a good riddle can furnish a good metaphor";[5] other scholars emphasize the presence of a contradiction or paradox at the riddle's heart. Metaphor and paradox are often the hallmarks of the most canonical and stylistically satisfying riddles, but there are riddles that use neither, relying instead on limited information or oddly-framed descriptions, to obscure their solution. All of these strategies of obfuscation require readers or hearers to bend their practice of referential interpretation around a deliberately deceptive use of linguistic reference and to re-imagine the categories through which they understand how language approaches the world.

Like metaphors, riddles rely on the resolution of an internal contradiction, both in terms of the interpretive difficulty this creates, and of the satisfaction as the interpretation

[5] Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.2.1405b, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, hypertext compiled by Lee Honeycutt, June 2004, http://rhetoric.eserver.org/aristotle/rhet3-2.html.

becomes clear. Paul Ricoeur describes the semantic structure of metaphor as a (metaphorical) space wherein two ideas or signifiers are drawn into an unexpected, "impertinen[t]" proximity. The metaphor is constructed not only by the incongruence of their proximity, but in the making of that incongruence acceptable, giving the relationship between them a "new pertinence or congruence." The referent is then viewed *through* the metaphorical signifier attached to it, and to understand a metaphor is "to see the same in spite of, and through, the different." Those differences are partially, but never entirely, resolved into revelatory similarities.[6] The metaphor exists as difference and similarity are perceived at once; if we are told that Count Claudio is "civil as an orange" then we both contemplate the ways in which an orange is like Claudio (both are bitter, both show jealousy), and enjoy the unusual light this casts on Claudio's mood, given how unlike an orange he is in most ways. Riddles elongate this process, and a riddle without an answer does so indefinitely, heightening the poetics of the riddle text through the perlocutionary energy it creates but fails to direct or control. Metaphors are only pragmatically successful if the hearer is able to find the congruence within the difference—to see how love is like a rose, how an ocean like a road for whales—and grasp what is revealed about either by the unexpected proximity of the two signifiers; the perlocutionary force of the riddle similarly requires the hearer to work out a way to complete the riddle-proposition that likewise creates such a congruity—to see how, for example, a raven is like a writing desk.

An unanswered riddle thus stalls at the height of its confusion—its impertinence—and in that suspension is able to be not only endlessly confusing, but

[6] Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," *Critical Inquiry* 5.1 (1978): 147-48.

endlessly productive. Its readers can spin solutions in perpetuity, find new revelatory congruencies, because no solution can ever be determined to be *the* right one.[7] A reader who encounters, for example, an unsolved riddle from the Exeter Book, a thousand years old and so unlikely to be resolved by authorial fiat, is faced with a dilemma of genre. If the riddle is indeed taken as a riddle, uttered (in some sense) by the text to the reader, then its expression entails the promise that a solution exists. If the solution is not assumed—if the reader disallows the perlocutionary force that pressures her to look for a solution—then she is engaging the text as, perhaps, a strange and descriptively specific piece of poetry, but not as a riddle. The specter of a solution haunts the reading of the riddle and motivates its shaping into different solutions, different congruencies of reference, different ways of viewing the text and the world. This ability to forge not only new but various metaphoric congruencies, semantic connections between signifiers not naturally aligned, is a part of the poetics of riddling.

I consider here the riddles of the Exeter Book alongside the tradition of Latin *ænigmata* that preceded and influenced them in order to explore the various ways of aligning question and answer that shape the poetics of the riddle. Because riddling poetics arise in and depend on the temporal space between proposition and solution, the shape of that space alters the riddle's poetic contours. If the answer is revealed too soon, as (depending how they were or are encountered) those of the *ænigmata* are in the

[7] Note, for example, that among the plentitude of answers to the Mad Hatter's riddle that have been proposed, none is elevated as *the* correct answer. Having let the riddle remain answerless for the time between editions – and having then explicitly said it was meant to have no answer – even Carroll himself could not convincingly lay down an authoritative solution. The riddle remains so compellingly open-ended that at least two different publications (the Lewis Carroll Society's *Bandersnatch* in1989 and the magazine *The Spectator* in 1991) have sponsored contests to produce solutions. Carroll, ed. Gardner, *Annotated Alice,* 72.

manuscript, the riddles are in some sense spoiled as riddles, or were perhaps meant to be something other than riddles the first place. Though such texts have the formal potential for riddling when read out loud, for the person reading them they cannot function as riddles. On the other hand, riddles for which the answer is permanently indeterminate are poetically extra productive, though only because of the illusion that it is possible to completely determine an answer. What might appear a formal defect—the lack of an answer—allows these riddles to function rather hyperactively as riddles, amassing as many possible answers in response to their exaggerated perlocutionary force as their audience can invent.

The Exeter riddles are an especially striking case for considering the poetics of riddling because as overtly poetic riddling texts without recorded solutions, though still with an array of proposed solutions that are accepted to varying degrees, they have been irresistibly productive of literary meaning. Anglo-Saxon scholars have been no less productive than Carroll's readers in finding solutions for them; indeed, the more challenging the riddle, the greater wealth of answers has been proposed in response to it. Consider Riddle 4, one of the more difficult entries in this often-perplexing collection.[8] The first-person speaker of the riddle describes itself as an obedient servant bound with rings; it clamors and breaks its bed, is roused in the winter by a grim-hearted man or woman, and sometimes its neck-ring is burst by a warm limb, which pleases both its foolish thane and itself. The two solutions "bell" (the "limb" is the clapper) and

[8] Although I use Craig Williamson's more recent edition of the riddles, *The Old English Riddles of the* Exeter Book (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), it has become standard to refer to them with Krapp and Dobbie's numeration, which I follow here. See note 22 below for a longer discussion of how the riddles have been broken down and numerated in various editions.

"millstone" (which breaks its "bed" of grain) were first proposed by Franz Dietrich in 1859,[9] and have remained prevalent among editors and translators of the Exeter riddles, but they are by no means universally accepted. Moritz Trautmann gave the answer "flail," in 1895;[10] Henry Bradley, in 1911, rejected all three of these more prosaic solutions to argue that the riddle describes a necromancer and the dead man he has enchanted.[11] More recently, Laurence K. Shook has solved this riddle as "quill-pen," while Melanie Hayworth reads it as a description of the devil, and Shannon Ferri Cochran proposes "plough-team" as the answer.[12]

This ongoing struggle for new and better solutions is not limited to Riddle 4. Riddle 57 seems to describe a flock of dark birds, leading most scholars into zoological ruminations over whether the riddle's sparse details best describe jackdaws, crows,

---

[9] Franz Dietrich, "Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs: Würdigung, Lösnung und Herstellung." *ZfdA.* xi (1859)*:* 461, cited in Williamson, *Old English Riddles,* 142.

[10] Moritz Trautmann, "Zu den altenglischen Rätsel," *Anglia* xxxvi (1912): 133-38, cited in Williamson, *Old English Riddles,* 142.

[11] Henry Bradley, "Two Riddles of the Exeter Book," *The Modern Language Review* 6.4 (1911): 435-36. As Bradley works it out, the "dead man, attentive to the call of his 'servant,' the magician, comes forth from his grave bound in chains . . . and wearing a magic collar" similar to one in Irish legend that would prove his guilt or innocence of some crime, bursting if the wearer is innocent. Bradley explains: "It is a joy to the magician (who is called a 'foolish man,' for it is folly to lose one's immortal soul for forbidden knowledge) when he knows the truth, and is able to express in words the revelation he has received; the dead man himself also rejoices that he has not been summoned to no purpose." While Bradley's solution meets his own stated goal of accounting for all the details represented in the riddle's description, and indeed more so than do other proposed solutions, it has not exactly caught on, perhaps in part because it is in fact *too* thoroughly accurate to the riddle's description. No leap between metaphorical signifiers, no figurative interpretation, is needed for Bradley's solution; the riddle would merely describe something so decidedly specific that it is both blandly literal and yet not at all guessable.

[12] Laurence K. Shook, "Riddles Relating to the Anglo-Saxon Scriptorium," in *Essays in Honour of Anton Charles Pegis,* ed. Reginald O'Donnell (Toronto: PIMS, 1974): 215-36; Melanie Heyworth, "The Devils in the Detail: A New Solution to Exeter Book Riddle 4," *Neophilologus* 91.1 (2007): 175-96; Shannon Ferri Cochran, "The Plough's the Thing: A New Solution to Old English Riddle 4 of the Exeter Book," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108.3 (2009): 301-9.

swifts, blackbirds, swallows, or starlings, while a few others debate between gnats and flies; meanwhile the riddle has also been solved as demons, musical notes, and most recently, *bocstafas,* the letters of the alphabet.[13] Riddle 31, usually solved as "bagpipe," may instead be a cithara or a feather-pen.[14] Riddle 70a has been read as a shepherd's pipe, a harp, or an organistrum, all of which may be rejected in favor of "nose,"[15] while Riddle 20 may be a hawk, a sword, a phallus, or the "bachelor-warrior" who has both.[16] Riddle 51 has been historically accepted as "three fingers and a pen," but one recent scholar has fine-tuned that answer to the very precise double-solution "Pen and Three Fingers/Scribe (Writing the Gospels) and Priest Performing Mass."[17] Riddle 60, most often solved as a reed flute, a reed pen, or just a reed, might also be "an inscription, most probably in runes, on a rock or boulder which was or had been situated close to the high

[13] See Patrick Murphy's chapter on this riddle for a review of previous solutions as well as a compelling case for the innovative solution *bocstafas*: "A Literal Reading of Riddle 57," in *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2011), 79-108. See also Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, 307-9 for a review of bird and insect solutions; for a discussion of the solution "demons or damned souls," see Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, "Those Damned Souls, Again," *Germanic Notes* 22 (1991): 2-5.

[14] Elaine K. Musgrave, "Cithara as the Solution to Riddle 31 of the Exeter Book," *Pacific Coast Philology* 37 (2002): 69-84; Donald K. Fry, "Exeter Riddle 31: Feather-Pen," in *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, ed. John Miles Foley, J. Chris Womack, and Whitney A. Womack (New York: Routledge, 1992), 234-49.

[15] Colette Stévanovitch, "Exeter Book Riddle 70A: Nose?" *Notes and Queries* 42 (1995): 8-10.

[16] John Tanke, "The Bachelor-Warrior of Exeter Book Riddle 20," *Philological Quarterly* 79.4 (2000): 409-27; see also Williamson, *Old English Riddles,* 193-95.

[17] Scott Gwara and Barbara L. Bolt, "A 'Double Solution' for Exeter Book Riddle 51, 'Pen and Three Fingers'," *Notes and Queries* 54 (2007): 16-19.

water mark, and which might have functioned as a way marker or warning."[18] Or, as John S. Pope has argued, it may have been mis-identified as a riddle in the first place.[19]

With their wealth of possible solutions, the Exeter riddles typify the poetic productivity of unanswered riddles, and the role that perlocution plays in spurring that productivity. While their answers may be lost to history, presumably they at one time had them, and so they irresistibly draw their modern readers to reconstruct solutions. A few can be answered by appeal to Latin analogues, but for the rest, scholars of Anglo-Saxon literature and language are perpetually proposing new and (at least sometimes) improved solutions. Unanswered, though not answerless, riddles such as these are evocative of Roland Barthes' "writerly text," in that they place a demand on the reader to not only read, but participate in the production of the text. Barthes regards interpretation of a writerly text as a means to "appreciate what *plural* constitutes it," how it is woven of complex, polysemic signifiers operating in relation to an interpretive community, which make for a whole cloud of simultaneously resonant meanings rather than a single authoritative one.[20] The "author" is indeed, if not in quite the way Barthes imagined, "absent at every level" of these riddles, and it is up to the reader to make them mean.[21] Unanswered riddles are so poetically productive precisely because the perlocutionary force they exert on readers and hearers leads not to a single solution and circumscribed

[18] Ian J. Kirby, "The Exeter Book, Riddle 60," *Notes and Queries* 48 (2001): 219.

[19] John S. Pope, "Palaeography and Poetry: Some Solved and Unsolved Problems of the Exeter Book," in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts, and Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker*, ed. M. B. Parkes and Andrew G. Watson (London: Scolar Press, 1978), 25-65.

[20] Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 4-5.

[21] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Rustle of Language,* trans. Richard Howe (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 52.

speech act, but to this sort of "writerly" engagement with the possible insights, connections, and metaphorical congruence that might arise with each reading.

The Exeter Book and the *Ænigmata* Tradition

The Exeter Book is itself something of an enigma. Donated to the Exeter Cathedral Library sometime before 1072 by Bishop Leofric, and presumably created under the auspices of the English Benedictine revival, it is an impressive poetic miscellany. Hagiographical poems (*Juliana*) and Christian devotional works (*Christ I, II, III*) appear alongside gnomic verse (*Maxims*), short bestiary allegories (*The Panther, The Whale,* and *The Partridge*), melancholy elegiac poetry (*The Wanderer, The Seafarer*), and the occasional piece of Germanic heroic literature (*Deor)*; there seems to be no particular principle organizing the anthology or determining what goes in it other than, perhaps, one Anglo-Saxon anthologizer's sense of literary merit. The riddles it includes number between 91 and 95, depending on who is counting,[22] and in some ways encapsulate the variety of the Exeter Book in general, as they range in tone and subject

[22] It is nearly impossible to resist speculating that there were originally one hundred in the collection, in keeping with the tradition of composing a "century" of *ænigmata* in Latin, but damage to the manuscript, as well as disagreement among paleographers over where the boundaries between some riddles lie, makes the exact number uncertain. Krapp and Dobbie's 1936 edition of the Exeter Book (hereafter K-D), edited for the ASPR, gives ninety-five riddles, but W. S. Mackie's 1934 EETS edition collapses K-D's riddles 68 and 69 for a total of ninety-four riddles. Craig Williamson's 1977 edition also takes K-D 68 and 69 as one riddle, and further edits K-D 1-3 into one riddle (as did Moritz Trautmann in his 1915 edition), and likewise 75-76 and 79-80; he also breaks K-D 70 into two riddles, for a total of ninety-one riddles. Williamson's edition is the most recent, and the one on which I draw where I give riddles in Old English below. However, Krapp and Dobbie's numbering has been generally adopted as standard, and so where I refer to riddles by number, it is with reference to their numbering in that edition. George P. Krapp and Elliott V. K. Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book,* Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); W. S. Mackie, ed. and trans., *The Exeter Book, Part II: Poems IX-XXXII*, Early English Text Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934); Moritz Trautmann, ed., *Die altenglischen Rätsel (die Rätsel des Exeterbuchs)* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1915).

matter from charming to salacious to numinous. Questions of who composed the Exeter riddles and why are, a little like the riddles themselves, subject to educated speculation; they are written loosely in the tradition of the foregoing Latin tradition of *ænigmata,* even translating or adapting some entries from Aldhelm and Symphosius. Their lack of clear authorship is echoed by the suppression of their answers, in that pragmatically, if we imagine them as speech acts, no answers are directly authorized by the texts (except, arguably, in some of the riddles that include runes suggestive of their answers). In this they stand in marked contrast to their forerunners, the Latin genre of *ænigmata,* which are solved but thus, also, closed down by the determining presence of solutions, as well as the way that they are framed and given meaning by their textual context and the author's stated intentions.

The Exeter riddles stem and borrow from (and outstrip) this Latin tradition, which predates the Exeter Book by several centuries. In particular, Symphosius in the fifth century, and then Aldhelm in seventh or eighth, both of whom composed a century (a set of one hundred) short verse *ænigmata,* have a demonstrable impact on the Exeter riddles. But both of these Latin writers composed very different types of riddles from those found in the Exeter Book. This is not only because the Exeter riddles lack solutions while the *ænigmata* have them, since the latter were composed at least in part for oral delivery, but because the Exeter riddles display a depth of description and affective coherence not found in their Latin predecessors, making much greater use of figurative language to genuinely disguise their referents.

Moreover, as the riddles stand on the page for either a modern or medieval reader, the Exeter riddles are self-consciously textual riddles in a way that the *ænigmata* are not.

Michael Lapidge suggests that both Aldhelm and Symphosius begin each entry with the title/referent because they "did not intend [their] readers to have to guess at the meaning of each enigma; rather, the reader was expected to perceive afresh the mystery of each object treated by Aldhelm, just as the reader of Symphosius was expected to appreciate the verbal dexterity which he handled the object of each enigma."[23] Preceding the riddle-proposition with its solution is an arrangement that is disruptive to the ability of a text to function as a riddle, but it is also therefore illuminating about the boundaries on the genre *riddle*. The pragmatic core of the riddle's structure is neither the utterance of the proposition, nor of the solution, but the space between them, in which the problem has been posed but not solved. Riddles require a certain kind of temporal unfolding, and if that space of perplexity is barred before it was even open—if the answer is known already as the question is asked— then the poetic productivity that comes with weighing possible interpretations is closed down before it begins, as well as the pleasure of recognition that comes with discovering the answer.

Of course, the *ænigmata* have elements of both oral and literate consumption, and whether they are read or heard alters their function as riddles. A reader delivering Aldhelm's or Symphosius's *ænigmata* aloud could certainly skip the title/solution until the appropriate moment of revelation, thus maintaining the functional integrity of a riddle. The preface to Symphosius's century claims that his riddles were composed for Saturnalia, "tossed off extemporaneously at a banquet";[24] regardless of how seriously we

[23] *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works,* trans. Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), 244n21.

[24] Lapidge, *Aldhelm,* 62. The *ænigmata* are usually dated to the late fourth or early fifth century, and nothing is known about Symphosius himself beyond what the text tells us about it author. The argument has been made that the word *symposii* describes the setting of the symposium,

take this conceit, their author clearly imagines an oral context for them. Given their brevity and metrical regularity they would no doubt make for a catchy live performance and guessing game (in a way that would be more difficult with, for example, Aldhelm's 83-line "Creatura"). Aldhelm's *ænigmata*, meanwhile, were used in Anglo-Saxon monastery schools as an aid to students learning Latin, where the *magister* would have read them aloud to his students, presumably without giving away the solution.[25] However, they were written as a part of a treatise on metrics (itself preserved in the even longer *Epistola ad Acircium* to King Aldfrith of Northumbria), and therefore with certain explicit compositional goals in mind—practicing and demonstrating the use of Latin hexameters. Lapidge, quoted above, certainly imagines not just hearers, but readers, of these riddles, and their appearance in the context of a longer treatise does suggest a text that would be studied, in addition to its oral curricular use. And while the *ænigmata* could be used as riddles, they have to be functionally re-arranged in order to work this way:[26]

---

and that the author's name is not Symphosius at all, although it is also possible that he is playing on the "symposiastic connotations" of his own name. T. J. Leary, *Symphosius, The Ænigmata: An Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 2, 4.

[25] For an overview of the use of Latin texts in Anglo-Saxon schools, see Lendinara, "Anglo-Saxon Learning," 295-312.

[26] Of course, for modern editors, a way around what is a joint problem of genre and book design is to resist the manuscript layout and delay the solution after all. While no academic editor takes this approach, it does appear, like so many things, on the internet. For example, the website *LacusCurtius: Into the Roman World* presents all one hundred of Symphosius' *ænigmata* in Latin, with translations from both Elizabeth Hickman DuBois and Raymond Ohl, but with the solutions behind a hyperlink that says "Give up? Here's the answer." Thus separated from their solutions, the verses are able to perform as riddles, complete with the semi-formulaic exchange in which the asker of a riddle eventually asks the hearer if she is ready to have the answer revealed. The blog *The Riddle Ages* makes similar use of the Exeter riddles, offering translations of each riddle followed by a suggested answer, which is blacked out so that it can only be read when it is highlighted. In this case, the translators are making the inverse move, *adding* solutions to texts that in the manuscript lack them, but still a bounded temporal delay between question and answer is created and maintained. Bill Thayer, *LacusCurtius,* September 2006, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman /Texts/Symphosius/home.html; Megan Cavell

the choice in the manuscript to set the answer in the title, not even delaying it until the end of the riddle-verse, reflects a generic goal of these verses that is not the creation of a riddling perlocutionary effect, but something else according to different generic conventions—meditating on the nature and name of a thing, rather than disguising it in order to revel in revealing it later. A closer look at their poetic choices indeed suggests they were not written to disguise a referent, but to contemplate it.

Symphosius's *ænigmata* are quick and clever, one hundred hexametrical tercets which mostly describe commonplace, concrete things: stylus, spider, she-goat, incense, arrow, stone, etc. Only in the last ten of the set does he take on slightly more abstract subjects for his riddling (sleep, echo, shadow), as well as uncommonly specific ones (a gouty soldier, a mother of twins, and perhaps most curiously, a one-eyed seller of garlic, which is considered in greater detail below.) In a particularly somber move, his final riddle describes a tombstone or memorial, allowing him to close his *ænigmata* with a metaphysical gesture to concepts such as life, death, and memory:

> Monumentum
>
> nomen habens hominis post ultima fata relinquor.
> nomen inane manet, sed dulcis vita profugit.
> vita tamen superest morti post tempora vitae.
>
> A memorial
>
> Bearing the name of a man, I am left after his final destiny. The name remains, but sweet life has fled. Yet life survives death after the time of life.[27]

---

and Matthias Ammon, *The Riddle Ages: An Anglo-Saxon Riddle Blog,* updated from February 2013, https://theriddleages.wordpress.com/.

[27] Text and translations of Symphosius are drawn from Leary, *Symphosius,* here at pp. 52, 245.

Absent the title, these lines could certainly make a challenging and evocative riddle. With the title, the verse works instead to highlight an existential paradox in the nature of the *monumentum:* life outlives death even after it has ended. Resolving the paradox requires a figurative understanding of the word *vita,* not only as literal, physical life, but the life of one's identity, encapsulated in the persistence of one's name, both literally on the tombstone and figuratively as one's reputation. This is as much metonymy as metaphor; the *nomen* that stands on the memorial and the *vita* that survives after death are less metaphors for the man's reputation than they are elements of his identity closely bound to it. Paradox is the figure that drives the riddle and is resolved by the solution (rather, the *ænigma* and its title); Aristotle aside, Symphosius most often designs his obfuscation around paradoxes while making little use of metaphor.[28]

Assuming the audience of this *ænigma* encounters it as it is presented here and in the manuscript, answer first and then tercet, the usual perlocutionary force of riddling is subverted. The reader has no space in which to wonder what kind of thing or creature bears the name, but not the life, of a man in a way that allows life to continue, to feel the interpretive pressure of an unresolved paradox. Instead, the *ænigma* becomes a commentary on the title, which thus cannot quite be understood as a solution. We begin with the image of a tombstone, and then gradually unfold a scheme of related ideas that

[28] Here and going forward I use the Latin word *ænigma* to refer to the short, poetic, riddle-like texts of Aldhelm and Symphosius because it is a part of my purpose here to re-consider whether they are in fact riddles. Read with the title first the *ænigmata* are clearly not riddles, since they do not create a perlocutionary force of co-construction, asking for the expression to be completed, nor do they make a referent difficult to identify. Without their titles, many of them are reminiscent of the riddles such as "Red outside, / White inside" from Archer Taylor's collection (discussed at greater length in the introduction)—though they do not meet Archer Taylor's idea of the "true riddle," they do meet my own definition of combining an (even just slightly) obscured reference with a perlocutionary force that pressures its audience to produce a solution.

give meaning to the *monumentum*: a tombstone, then a tombstone with a name engraved on it, then a named tombstone temporally oriented, lingering at the end of its subject's life after his fate has wound down. The *monumentum* comes to stand at an absence and as a remnant, persisting while life is over and destiny already played out; a different sort of *vita*—the story of one's life, one's name and reputation—is indeed all that remains. The *monumentum* itself is endowed with these meanings (appropriately for this final entry, since carrying meanings is precisely what *monumenta* literally do, remind and warn). Not the language of the *ænigma*, then, but the tombstone itself is presented as the enigma worthy of contemplation.

Pragmatically, it is the referent rather than the text to which the *ænigma* calls overt interpretive attention. In a way this is also true in texts that are more properly riddles; the common Exeter riddle formula "say what I am called," after all, makes a deliberate demand to interpret the "I" that is the riddle's referent and solution. But where the referent is initially unknown, the interpretive focus is deflected back to the language of the riddle itself; in the *ænigma*, the known referent is instead described and given new valences of meaning by the terms of the text. A similar interpretive process may happen once the answer to a riddle is known and its terms are revisited, the contemplation of identity replaced with inquiry into what that identity means and the way this riddle constructs it. This is arguably a process elemental to poetry in general, though it is not necessarily a part of the poetics of riddling.

Thus a text like Symphosius's "Formica" (ant) can be almost entirely literal, lacking any opposition or paradox in its description, with no metaphor beyond the

prosopopeia used in most of the *ænigmata.*[29] Instead, the focus is on describing and obliquely moralizing; the ant is described as provident and diligent, gathering a large supply of food for the winter by carrying it off bit by bit. Symphosius's description engages certain cultural codes prone to moralize the ant as hard-working, cautious, and thrifty, and the ant's antly behavior is given the significance it would have if the ant were a human, but there is no other metaphor in the poem; a reader might have difficulty in understanding that this is an ant only because of the *absence* of information (e.g., some mention of size, physical description, or dietary habits, would make it more clear), not because of any particularly misleading information that is present. The riddle might just as well describe a human gleaner storing food against the winter, or even a squirrel collecting nuts, if this were a culture in which squirrels were anthropomorphized as provident and hard-working rather than cute and flighty. The ant is given meaning that reflects human values, and the solution (if it is withheld) is guessable insofar as that meaning is already known—the text itself does not do a particularly good job either specifying or disguising its referent. "Formica" is typical of Symphosius in that, in general, he is interpreting his object rather than asking for it to be interpreted.

While Symphosius' riddles come down to us with minimal generic and contextual framing, Aldhelm's *ænigmata* are explicitly written with other ends in mind than riddling. Beyond his stated goal of demonstrating the use of dactylic hexameters, Aldhelm furthermore explains in the poetic preface to his *Ænigmata* that he wants to

[29] *provida sum vitae, duro non pigra labore, / ipsa ferens umeris securae praemia brumae. / nec gero magna simul, sed congero multa vicissim.* ("I look ahead to my livelihood, I am not sluggish in hard work, carrying off on my own shoulders the prizes for a trouble-free winter. I do not carry large loads all at once, but bit by bit I carry together many things.") Leary, *Symphosius,* 42, 104.

reveal with them *ænigmata… clandestina,* the secret riddles of things. His verses are given as a poetic audition, to show God that he is able to compose adequately in this form and is thus worthy of more significant devotional writing projects. Thus while he is interested in exploring and representing the strangeness of the world, and certainly in the creation of poetic texts using both meter and figure, he is not quite writing riddles; Lapidge suggests that for Aldhelm's work, "we should best render the term *enigmata* as 'mysteries' rather than 'riddles,' as Aldhelm had made a more solemn poetic genre out of Symphosius's playful one."[30] In Aldhelm even more than in Symphosius, the enigma is out there in the world, not here in the language, and his project is to capture some of that external mystery and strangeness in his writing. Where he does use metaphor, it is most often an extension of the text's prosopopeia into bodily human metaphor; thus the "Arca Libraria" (book-chest) describes how its viscera overflow with divine words; the "Fusum" (spindle) and the "Lorica" (mail-shirt) both describe being born; the "Nubes" (cloud) mourns that it has no home either in heaven or earth; the "Calix Vitreus" (glass goblet), the most nearly scandalous of Aldhelm's verses, describes how it kisses the people who fondle its neck and smooth body. These do not create many new or inventive "impertinences" in terms of the metaphorical connections they make, but they do allow for a certain kind of compelling interpretive reciprocity: the referent speaks in a first-person, quasi-human voice, and as a result, the way that referent is described in terms of

[30] Lapidge points out that Aldhelm would have certainly had in mind "the injunction in Proverbs that the wise man will only become wiser if he scrutinizes the *enigmata* of wise men (Prv.I.6), and especially . . . St. Paul's statement that we now see God 'through a glass darkly' (I Cor.XIII.12: *per speculum in enigmate*)." *Aldhelm,* 63. For Aldhelm, enigmatics is not just a language game, nor even a field for rhetorical experiment, but a means to understand the divine.

human behavior and experience reflects back an idea of a human personality interacting with other parts of the world.

Aldhelm's referents are in general not particularly well hidden; instead, their most prevalent details are usually emphasized, and often in straightforward, literal language that leaves little room for confusion on the reader's part. In his "Luna," for example, the speaker states that it both rules the sea and counts out the months, qualities so prototypically associated with the moon that it is difficult to imagine a hearer getting this wrong, even without the referent given in the title. He describes the "Ignis" growing on dry kindling and subdued by water, brighter than the stars while alive, but black once dead; the "Columba" and "Corbus" recount the role of the dove and the raven in the Flood narrative. The "Monocerus" describes itself easily dodging hunters, slaying elephants, and yet being captured by a maiden – all details about the unicorn given by bestiaries, Pliny, and Isidore. In case the identity of the speaker was not clear enough yet, the final lines of "Monocerus" point out that its name comes from its horn in both Greek and Latin. [31] Even without the solution given in the title, anyone a little familiar with the traditions associated with the unicorn would have little trouble identifying it here; Aldhelm makes little of the promising tension between the unicorn's fierceness and the ease with which it may be tricked by a willing virgin, its simultaneous strength and weakness, boldness and gullibility—contradictions that Symphosius or the Exeter riddler would perhaps have played up into a more difficult paradox.

[31] Nicholas Howe argues that a number of Aldhelm's *ænigmata* might be better understood as etymological riddles, challenging the audience to think through the reasons that things have the names that they do. In the case of "Monocerus," Aldhelm is pointing out that "the beast has the same name in Greek and Latin because its horn is its singular feature. He is more intent on teaching the basic principle that the proper name of a thing is so inevitable that it will have the same meaning in two different languages." "Aldhelm's *Enigmata*," 49.

Even where Aldhelm makes the referent less obvious, his *ænigmata* are nonetheless often invested in other kinds of figurative and rhetorical work. "Apis," for example, is allegorically suggestive even though it is not difficult to identify:

> Apis
>
> Mirificis formata modis, sine semine creta
> Dulcia florigeris onero præcordia prædis;
> Arte mea crocea flavescunt fercula regum.
> Semper acuta gero crudelis spicula belli
> Atque carens manibus fabrorum uinco metalla,
>
> Bee
>
> Formed in wondrous ways and engendered without seed, I load my sweet inwards with booty from flowers. Through my craft the food of kings grows golden with honey. I always brandish the sharpened arrow-points of fierce warfare and (yet), lacking hands, I surpass the metal-work of smiths.[32]

The first line refers to the way bees are supposed (according to Isidore) to be created from decaying animal flesh rather than being born; with this in mind, the fact that they collect a sweet substance from flowers and create from it a yellow product, while also bearing a *spicula* (a sting, arrow, or sharp point), makes this *ænigma* still not particularly deceptive. A monastic student confronted with this as a riddle would mostly be proving his ability with Latin (and familiarity with natural philosophy) by answering it correctly, rather than showing off any adeptness with riddle-solving. The point seems not to be the creation of a clever riddle with a disguised referent, but to find meaning in the nature of the bee: it is a warrior, a thief, an artisan, and a miracle all at once, adorning the meals of

[32] The Latin texts of Aldhelm's *ænigmata* are taken from James Hall Pitman, *The Riddles of Aldhelm* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), who reproduces those of Rudolf Ehwald, *Aldelmi Opera Omnia,* Monumenta Germinae Historica: Auctores Antiquissimi XV (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919). Translations are from Lapidge, *Aldhelm,* 70-94.

kings, a worker without hands who nonetheless wields an overpowering weapon. The bee transcends human categories of social role and rank, participating in this array of different occupations. Rather than querying the categories into which language divides things, as more metaphorically dependent riddles often do, Aldhelm's *apis* troubles ideological divisions in the world, by class and occupation, using the bee to expose how the artisan's productivity (and perhaps artistic production as well) operates at an imaginative intersection of labor, class, potential violence, and the marvels of nature. The perlocutionary force of the *ænigma* is much less pronounced than that of a riddle, since there is no interpretive impasse to be resolved, while the interpretive work it does require has as much to do with the reader's apprehension of the world as with her apprehension of language.

The Exeter riddles are by contrast much more invested in the creation of a strong riddling perlocutionary force. While they still invite the reader to an inventive re-imagining of things in the world, this move is only available once the riddle has been solved, a more difficult process than that of "solving" most of the *ænigmata* of the Latin tradition. As in Aldhelm, the Exeter riddles interpret their object even as they represent it, but the two work in inverse ways: In the former the object speaks about itself and the reader—already knowing its identity—imagines it through a metaphor of personhood; in the Exeter riddles, the object speaks (or is spoken of) as if it were something else, often some strange or impossible image, and the reader must recover, and thus reconsider, the object through the strangeness.

This difference is perhaps most clear in those of the Exeter riddles that are based on earlier *ænigmata.* Exeter riddle 35, which translates Aldhelm's "Lorica," is quite

faithful to the basic structure of Aldhelm's, but makes stylistic changes, beyond the obvious removal of the giveaway title, that are characteristic of the Exeter riddles' poetics.

Lorica	Exeter 35
Roscida me genuit gelido de viscere tellus; Non sum setigero lanarum vellere facta; Licia nulla trahunt nec garrula fila resultant Nec crocea Seres taxunt languine vermes Nec radiis carpor nec duro pectine pulsor; Et tamen vestis vulgi sermone vocabor. Spicula non ueror longis exempta faretris;	Mec se wæta wong, wundrum freorig, of his innaþe ærist cende. Ne wat ic mec beworhtne wulle flysum, hærum þurh heahcræft, hygeþoncum min: wundene me ne beoð wefle, ne ic wearp hafu, ne þurh þreata geþræcu þræd me ne hlimmeð, ne æt me hrutende hrisil scriþeð, ne mec ohwonan sceal am cnyssan. Wyrmas mec ne awæfan wyrda cræftum, þa þe geolo godwebb geatwum frætwað. Wile mec mon hwæþre seþeah wide ofer eorþan hatan for hæleþum hyhtlic gewæde. Saga soðcwidum, searoþoncum gleaw, wordum wisfæst, hwæt þis gewædu sy.
Mail-shirt	
The dewy earth produced me from its frozen inwards. I am not made from the bristling fleece of (sheep's) wool; no yarn is drawn (tight on a loom), no humming threads leap about (the spindle); nor do Chinese silk-worms weave me from their yellow floss; I am not gathered from spinning wheels, nor am I beaten by the stiff carding comb and yet, nevertheless, note that I am described as "clothing" in common parlance. I have no fear of arrows drawn from long quivers.	The wet field, wonderfully cold, first begat me from within itself. I knew I was not made of the fleece of wool nor of hairs by high skill, according to my thoughts: There is no woof wound in me, nor have I a warp, nor does the thread resound through the tumults of multitudes, nor shall a reed beat me from any direction. Worms, which adorn the yellow finery with ornamentation, did not weave me. Yet one will widely over the earth call me a pleasing garment for men. Say truly, you with clever insight and wise in words, what this garment be.[33]

[33] Translations of Old English are my own.

In both versions, the speaker describes its birth from a cold earth and then works through a series of negatives—it is not made of wool or silk, not woven—before coming to the contradictory statement that it is nonetheless known as a *vestis* or a *gewæde.* Both emphasize this apparent paradox, that a piece of clothing is not made of cloth. "Lorica" offers its strongest hint in its last line (a move Aldhelm makes often, as in "Monocerus" discussed above). Once we know that this garment does not fear arrows—and that it is thus the kind of clothing one might shoot arrows at—the solution, even if not already known, is difficult to miss.[34] The Old English omits this line, making the riddle more challenging to solve, in keeping with its different generic goals. The *ænigma* is largely concerned with production and naming; most of its imagery has to do with weaving, but because it is weaving that in this case never happened the creation of the *lorica* is made mysterious, as if it arose fully formed from the earth. The fact that in *vulgi sermone* it is called a *vestis* suggests that its mystery is misunderstood; it is given almost an afterthought that it is also impervious to arrows. The mailcoat is itself the unexpectedly remarkable thing, and the poem highlights its strangeness without, as the Exeter riddles tend to do, putting it into metaphorical tension with a cryptic, impossible image. Aldhelm, whose express purpose is to reveal what is hidden, not to make it enigmatic in the first place, seems to see himself as answering, not asking, riddles.

The Exeter version shifts both the metaphoric organization and the pragmatic weight of the verse to make it into a functional riddle. It eliminates the final line in Aldhelm's version, where the referent was made most clear, but instead supplies a

[34] The Latin noun used here, *spiculum,* refers to a dart, a spear-head, or another pointed object, and so is perhaps slightly disguised in that it is not the most canonical word for arrow in Latin (*pinna* or *saggita* would be more immediately recognizable); however, the use of the *faretra* (quiver) in conjunction with *spiculum* removes any potential ambiguity.

metaphorical dimension to the act of weaving, making it more violent: the faint threat of the comb and shuttle in the Latin evolve into a "throng of blows," an attacking shuttle and a reed that acts like a cudgel in Old English. The Exeter riddle thus exchanges Aldhelm's explicit battle image of arrows deflected off a mail-coat for a more subtle, ingrained weaving-as-battle metaphor: I am not, says the mailcoat, subject to the violence of weaving, because the violence I *am* subject to happens elsewhere. This layering of metaphor even beyond the disguise of the referent is typical of the Exeter riddles,[35] as is the greater pathos it affords the riddle-speaker.[36] The more pronounced affect heightens the perlocutionary urgency of the riddle, as the demand for understanding is intensified in the face of these more violent and troubling images.

The Exeter riddle concludes its more richly metaphorical schema of reference by replacing Aldhelm's final hint with two full lines about the intellectual qualities that will

---

[35] Patrick J. Murphy argues that "many of the Exeter riddles are shaped not only by their hidden solutions but also by an unnamed metaphor in a way similar to the so-called obscene riddles" and works to expose "the underlying metaphors that shape the propositions of the Exeter riddles almost as much as their hidden answers" (*Unriddling,* 23). In a similar vein, Marie Nelson points out that Riddle 34, solved universally as *rake,* describes not only its rather mundane subject, but also "an anagogical harrowing. Those 'not fast' could be sinners doomed to destruction, and the 'fair ones firm with their roots' could be the good Christians allowed to remain on the flourishing plain . . . An audience familiar with Scripture and with the multiple meanings of religious poetry might see more in this poem than the description of a common implement of cultivation." "The Rhetoric of the Exeter Book Riddles," *Speculum* 49.3 (1974): 423.

[36] Craig Williamson makes a similar comparison of the poetics of Symphosius's "Ancora" with Exeter Riddle 16, observing evocatively that while "the Latin riddle is a quick succession of controlled steps . . . a rhetorical show," in the Old English version the "eye/I of the creatures draws us in to sustained belief. We rage and struggle, seek a shrouded home, battle the wind- and wave-thieves for a clutch of glory and the ship's hold. The treasure of this riddle is its liberative power: it draws us from the bone-house into an iron body and a battle-storm. We have never been in this imaginative world before—it is a dreamlike mirror of our own war-world. The mind rolls, the anchor glories—it is a strange and heartening synchronicity. What we guess finally is what we have become. There is nothing like this in the Latin of Symphosius." *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 9.

be required to solve the riddle. It not only challenges, but describes, its interlocutor, making explicit the often implicit pragmatic use of riddles to test intellectual merit and display one's cognitive agility, underscoring its perlocutionary force as a riddle. While Aldhelm's version starts with the *lorica* and then gradually makes it seem remarkable, the Exeter riddle gradually constructs a speaker whose shrouded origins and escape from violence paint an ominous, if fuzzy, image, and makes it the reader's problem to discover its identity. It is aggressive toward the reader in a way that the *lorica*, which feels rather detached and abstract by comparison, is not.[37] Where the "Lorica" text is complete on its own, the Exeter riddle needs, demands, and motivates an actively engaged audience, opening a space for the poetics of riddling to spin meanings by negotiating how the imagined, but unrevealed, speaker stands in tension with its possible solutions.

A final comparison of an Exeter riddle with the foregoing Latin tradition highlights not only how the perlocutionary element of these texts shifts between translations and genres, but how interpretation is shaped by generic possibilities. One of the strangest riddles in the Exeter Book appears to be an adaptation of one of Symphosius' *ænigmata,* "Luscus alium vendens":

[37] Indeed, this riddle might be felt as either face-threatening or affirming (see chapter 3) by its explicit address only to those clever enough to solve it, depending on whether the audience believes itself to be included in or exclude from that group.

Luscus alium vendens	Exeter 86
cernere iam fas est quod vix tibi credere fas est: unus inest oculus, capitum sed milia multa. qui quod habet vendit, quod non habet unde parabit?	Wiht cwom gongan þær weras sæton monige on mæðle, mode snottre; hæfde an eage ond earan twa, ond twegen fet, twelf hund heafda, hrycg ond wombe ond honda twa, earmas ond eaxle, anne sweoran ond sidan twa. Saga hwæt hio [*ms:* ic] hatte.[38]
One-eyed seller of garlic	
Now might you see what you might scarcely believe: he has one eye but many thousands of heads. From where will he, who sells what he has, procure what he has not? [39]	A creature came walking where men sat, many at a meeting, wise in mind; it had one eye and two ears, and two feet, twelve hundred heads, neck and stomach, and two hands, arms and shoulders, one neck, and two sides. Say what it is [I am] called.

These two versions of the same central image and referent pairing display a marked difference in perlocutionary force. In Symphosius, the text clearly imagines an interlocutor who will respond in a particular way—incredulity—to the image evoked. The vendor itself is given scant attention. Instead, his thousands of heads and one eye are sandwiched by the audience's reaction and the speaker's (not in this case the *ænigma*'s referent, making it one of only six among Symphosius' *ænigmata* in which the referent does not speak) pondering of a question more contemplative than interrogative: even if he sells what he has, where will we get what he needs? This *ænigma* is unique among

[38] Williamson emends *ic* in the final line to *hio* to accommodate the foregoing lines, on the assumption that the third-person *wiht* in line 1 does not evolve into a first-person *ic* by line 7 (*Old English Riddles*, 115, 378). Wilcox, as discussed below, contests this emendation, finding significance for the type of riddle it is in the pronoun change. Furthermore, as Robert D. Fulk has pointed out to me, it is just as likely that the poet simply used the very common riddle-ending formula here without regard for the use of the third person up to this point, as that the scribe in fact miscopied the pronoun.

[39] Leary, *Symphosius,* 51, 233.

Symphosius' in its express concern with interpretation over paradox. The question it poses is not a riddle question, because it is not answered by the solution, but instead makes explicit that one should think beyond the referent and description and contemplate the larger questions they evoke. Rather than focusing only on the standard riddle-problem of identifying the referent, he instead draws us to ponder the significance of the image itself: what do we talk about when we talk about one-eyed sellers of garlic?

The Exeter version adapts Symphosius' verse to do what the Exeter riddles do best—it calls up a disquieting, inexplicable *wiht,* and then tells the audience to "say what I am called." As a result, its perlocutionary force is more immediately riddling, describing a referent that lacks identification and directing an interlocutor to identify it. The interlocutor is urged to discover what the referent is a referent, rather than invited (at least directly) to contemplate the meaning of that referent. As nearly all editions of the riddles remark, without the foregoing Latin *ænigma* it is difficult to imagine that scholars would have come to the solution "one-eyed seller of garlic." But even with the answer supplied, both "Luscus alium vendens" and Riddle 86 still call for further interpretation, because the solution raises more questions than it answers.

This *ænigma* appears grouped with Symphosius's other riddles describing particular types of people: "Mulier quae gemios pariebat" (mother of twins), "Miles podagricus" (gouty soldier), and "Funambulus" (tightrope-walker). Presumably all of these were familiar cultural tropes in the time and place Symphosius was writing. We might not recognize a gouty soldier as a familiar image now, nor would we likely describe him (as Symphosius does) as having previously been six-footed when astride a

horse, but now having only two feet.[40] Although we might still be able to solve the riddle, it would not be because we had appealed to familiar things in our own culture, so much as because we can imagine tropes from other cultures both preceding and existing alongside our own, e.g., soldiers on horseback. Similarly, whether or not there was a plethora of one-eyed garlic sellers in the fifth-century Mediterranean, the trope must have had some imaginative currency. Some of that must have persisted into the Anglo-Saxon world, or this riddle would not have been appealing as a text to adapt, but it is still curious as a specific image; as Williamson remarks, "The sight of old garlic- or onion-sellers lurching many-headed across the Anglo-Saxon marketplace may have been more common to Old English riddle-solvers than it is to us, but presumably not all of those grisly garlic-sellers were one-eyed."[41]

Symphosius's version remarks on the strangeness of the image, but does not go to great lengths to describe it, perhaps suggesting that this is such a familiar trope that he barely needs to allude to it and is more interested in probing the image for its meaning. But the Anglo-Saxon version is almost entirely occupied with the image itself, such that the solution assumed from comparison with Symphosius is unsatisfying. Although it accounts for all the details of the riddle-proposition, it does not make them cohere into a

[40] Leary (*Symphosius,* 231-32) emends *sex* in the ms to *quinque* in order to repair the meter and contribute to the alliteration of the rest of the line (emended, it reads "quineque pedes habui quod numquam nemo negavit"). On purely riddlic grounds I prefer *sexque* because it makes the neatest riddle, shifting between the once six-footed horse-and-rider now reduced to *vix duo*, hobbled by gout and age as he was once enabled by his mount. Leary's solution, that the five-footed soldier is a centurion with a three foot-long staff, seems uncharacteristically abstruse for Symphosius. But then, as I point out elsewhere, what makes a riddle satisfying now does not have to constrain what made a riddle satisfying a thousand years or more in the past.

[41] *Old English Riddles,* 376-77.

familiar image. It reads today a little like the elephant-in-the-refrigerator joke[42]: the riddle is technically and literally answered, but the problems it raises are not really satisfied. The descriptions build up a riddle-image, this one-eyed thousand-headed creature invading a gathering of the wise, and then refuse to settle it by connection to a recognizable referent. The answerer is thus forced to go on answering, now presented with the image of a garlic vendor who has one eye and sells to wise men, which also demands interpretation. The creature's heads and the heads of garlic are drawn easily into the kind of tense pertinence Ricoeur attributes to metaphor, the initial image of the creature with its many heads imaginable simultaneously with its hidden reference to garlic heads. But the gathering of wise men and the single eye are details that, for modern readers encountering this text at some cultural distance, do not correspond to any clear meaning, drawing the reader to do the kind of "writerly" reading that will produce an interpretation for this solution to this riddle.

This extra layer of interpretive energy is, in the case of this riddle, often directed at a reconsideration of its genre, in order to account for how inadequate the solution seems to the riddle. Jonathon Wilcox suggests this be read as a "mock-riddle," a parody of a riddle which sets up one question but actually poses a different, simpler one.[43] Wilcox rejects Williamson's emendation of the final line of Riddle 86 from the manuscript's *Saga hwæt ic hatte,* "Say what *I* am called," to *Saga hwæt hio hatte*, "Say

[42] How do you get an elephant into the refrigerator? 1. Open door. 2. Insert elephant. 3. Close door.

[43] Wilcox gives an example of a mock-riddle from the *Oxford Book of Nursery Rhymes,* (Opie and Opie, 377), first recorded around 1750: "As I was going to St. Ives, / I met a man with seven wives, / Each wife had seven sacks, / Each sack had seven cats, / Each cat had seven kits: / Kits, cats, sacks, and wives, / How many were there going to St. Ives?" The solution is that only one person, the speaker, is going to St. Ives; everyone else is coming from there. Jonathon Wilcox, "Mock-Riddles in Old English: Exeter Riddles 86 and 19," *Studies in Philology* 93 (1996): 180-87.

what *it* is called." With this in mind, he makes the intriguing suggestion that the trick of this riddle is to avoid being distracted by the riddle's details and answer its actual question, by identifying the riddler him- or herself. A related move understands Riddle 86 as deliberately absurd. Nigel Barley calls it a "joke riddle," arguing that the riddle works precisely by subverting the expectations of the genre, especially as they are invoked "by the ironic introduction which confirms the social setting of riddling in the ale-hall. We are led to expect a deviously-articulated series of metaphors and transformations and are given nothing but a ridiculous syntagm, raised to paradigmatic status for comic effect."[44] Craig Williamson similarly classifies Riddle 86 as a neck-riddle because there is "no hint of any solution in the Old English riddle. Rather it seems intended to defy solution."[45]

Neither of these approaches accommodates Symphosius's version of the text, which does not include the pronoun shift Wilcox makes so much of, nor does it seem to relish the details of its enigmatic description enough to make a deliberately unsolvable reading seem probable. But both versions of the riddle do base their poetics on the push for further interpretation—in Symphosius's case, by consideration of the more broadly applicable conundrum raised by this one evocative (and perhaps familiar) image; in the Exeter riddle's, by centering the riddle-image on a referent so inexplicable that the entire framework of the text asks for re-evaluation. (Whether this is actually the Exeter riddler's

[44] "As far as I am aware," Barley adds, "Anglo-Saxonists still have not seen the joke." Nigel Barley, "Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle," *Semiotica* 10 (1974): 166.

[45] Williamson, *Old English Riddles,* 377. Neck-riddles, a term coined by Archer Taylor, are riddles that are not in fact intended to be answerable because someone's—the riddler's or the answerer's—life depends on the production of a solution. Thus the riddler usually cheats, by designing a riddle no one could reasonably solve without inside information, in order to guarantee the desired outcome. This is a strange place to identify a neck-riddle, as part of a riddle collection rather than as an element in a story, with a pragmatic and narrative context to motivate the unguessable riddle, but Williamson's point that the riddle may be deliberately impossible still stands.

intent is of course irrecoverable, but it is at least one aspect of the way modern readers respond to it.) Furthermore, both ways of re-evaluating the genre of Riddle 86 make the satisfying move of reconsidering this text as a riddle that is in some sense about riddling itself, subverting or exploiting the generic expectations for what a riddle will do, while implicitly accepting as well that the trope available to Symphosius may have degraded to a bizarre riddling cliché in Anglo-Saxon England.

A final way of dealing with this riddle, suggested by Robert DiNapoli, connects the one-eyed man in it to Odin. DiNapoli argues that "the unexpected appearance of a one-eyed man in an assembly of men of wisdom could hardly fail to evoke the figure of Oðinn, the Germanic god who in Scandinavian myth sacrifices an eye in exchange for wisdom, and who is also the patron of poetry and of visionary experience."[46] This does not entirely explain the heads (garlic or otherwise),[47] but it does make the important move of trying to understand this riddle within a specifically Anglo-Saxon context, resisting the assumption that because we find the riddle and its solution inexplicable, the Anglo-Saxons must have done so as well. Perhaps in the end, the most meaningful thing to be taken from this riddle is how it throws into sharp relief the strangeness not only of riddle-language, but of cultural difference; it reminds us that for all that we find

[46] Robert DiNapoli, "In the Kingdom of the Blind, the One-Eyed Man Is a Seller of Garlic: Depth-Perception and the Poet's Perspective in the Exeter Book Riddles," *English Studies* 5 (2000): 453.

[47] In speculating on the significance of the heads, DiNapoli takes this proposition of interpreting the solved riddle's separate parts even further into the territory of meta-riddling: "The riddlic creature's twelve hundred heads, though literally the garlic bulbs he sells (if one knows the solution), are in the literal context of the poem so impossibly strange as to demand interpretation. It is at least possible that this profusion of heads represents the poet's ability to portray the many-layered depths of reality, so-called 'ordinary' reality as commonly perceived by us single-headed types. Could this riddle's little tableau depict, in an almost Chaucerian moment of self-parody, the poet's sense of his own marginality within the Christian milieu that has overtaken his native tradition?" Ibid., 453-54.

accessible in literature a thousand years old, there is a great deal that we may not be able to grasp. The existence of a fortuitous antecedent to Riddle 86 might give us pause as we address other riddles having both less clear solutions, and more of them.

Reading (the Readers of) the Exeter Book Riddles

Only a handful of the Exeter riddles have an answer supplied by comparison with other texts, and even fewer can be answered from the internal evidence of runes within the riddle-text.[48] The majority that are considered solved are so in the sense that virtually everyone agrees upon an extremely educated guess, which significantly does not exclude the possibility of new and better emergent solutions. By contrast, proposing new solutions to the *ænigmata* might be an interesting thought experiment, but would probably not be received as a legitimate scholarly endeavor, nor would new answers be taken seriously as possible solutions. No matter how convincing I am in making the case that Aldhelm's "Salis" better describes ice, steam, or a whale skull,[49] my solutions cannot

[48] Riddles 35 and 40 are certain translations of Aldhelm's "Lorica" and "Creatura," and 47, 83, and 84 are likely adaptations of Symphosius's "Tinea," "Pecunia," and of course, "Luscus Alium Vendens." Beyond that, a number of riddles show some partial overlap with Latin counterparts (e.g., Riddle 88's depiction of an inkhorn shares with Eusebius's "De Atramentorio" a focus on the change from something living and dangerous to a thing carrying something black in its belly, though the much longer Exeter version has so much else to it that it is impossible to be sure this is not just coincidence), but not enough to in most cases be useful in solving the riddles. Four riddles include runes, though only two of them seem intended to supply solutions. Riddle 25 has runes that can be arranged to spell *higoræ* (magpie or jay) which is apparently the answer to the riddle (Williamson, *Old English Riddles,* 207); likewise Riddle 75, where the runes might spell *hund* (Dietrich Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009], 107), or in Williamson's reading, which combines 75 and the fragmentary 76, *hland* (urine). The runes in 19 and 64 add words to the riddle-proposition rather than suggesting answers.

[49] *Dudum limpha fui squamoso pisce redundans, / Sed natura novo fati discrimine cessit, / Torrida dum calidos patior tormenta per ignes : / Nam cineri facies niuibusque simillima nitet;* ("Once upon a time I was sea-water, teeming with scaly fish, but, subject to a new decree of fate, this existence ceased, when in the midst of blazing fires I undergo a searing ordeal: for (now) my face shines bright white like ash and snow." Lapidge, *Aldhelm,* 74. The solution could

hope to challenge Aldhelm's own—authorial intent holds sway where it is available. But a new solution for an Exeter riddle, assuming it is "philologically exact," "comprehensive" of the details of the text, and historically fitting, and aesthetically satisfying,[50] may very well align with the Exeter riddler's intended answer; there is no way to be certain most of the time. The perlocutionary force of the Exeter riddles is dependent on this sense of inaccessible intention—inaccessible *rightness*—and their poetic abundance is in part a result of that perlocutionary tendency. The possibility of a final answer that settles and stabilizes the riddle intersects with the range of interpretive possibilities to grant the riddles a distinctive poetic abundance, as the metaphors of the riddle stand in their (im)pertinent tension with various possible signifies at once. The riddles can be read simultaneously in multiple ways, accommodating not just an array of possibly correct solutions, but of coexisting poetic meanings.

Riddle 11, which has a widely accepted answer alongside a few proposed historically that have largely fallen by the wayside, is a good place to explore the coexistence of meanings in practical terms: with only three solutions to contend with, we can consider the pragmatic and poetic features that give rise to multiple (as well as preferred) solutions, but in terms of a relatively manageable field of possible answers.

---

be "ice" if the *ignes* is taken as metaphorically describing the (already metaphorical) pain of water freezing; it could be steam if the specification of ocean, not fresh, water is assumed to be trivial. It could be a whale skull if we can take its being sea-water as an existential metonym for living in sea water, perhaps a clever twist on the bestiary tradition of whales mimicking islands, deceptively becoming a piece of land. This may seem like a stretch of the imagination, but on the other hand this solution does allow us to take the *tormentum* and the *facies* literally as Aldhelm's own solution does not, maintaining the balance of literality and metaphor in the verse.

[50] These are the criteria for riddle interpretation suggested by John D. Niles, who also adds that a good interpretation should have "an aesthetic appeal to it . . . summed up under the name *elegant*." "Riddle 74 and the Play of the Text," *Anglo-Saxon England* 27 (1998): 184-85.

Hrægl is min hasofag; hyrste beorhte, reade ond scire on reafe hafu. Ic dysge dwelle ond dole hwette unrædsiþas; oþrum styre nyttre fore. Ic þæs nowiht wat, þæt heo swa gemædde, mode bestolene, dæde gedwolene, deoraþ mine won wisan gehwam. Wa him þæs þeawes, siþþan heah bringað horda deorast, gif hi unrædes ær ne geswicaþ.	Grey is my garment; I have bright trappings, red and gleaming, on my apparel. I lead the foolish astray and incite the stupid to ill-advised undertakings, guide the rest from what is useful. I in no way know why they, so maddened, their minds gone astray in deed, praise my perverse ways to everyone. Woe to them for this behavior once they bring the dearest of hoards high, if they do not cease this foolishness.

Dietrich first solved this riddle as night in 1859, John Walz suggested "gold" in 1896, and Trautmann proposed "wine" in 1905. Friedrich Tupper promptly responded to Trautmann in defense of "night," though specifying "night debauch," in effect combining Dietrich's and Trautmann's answers with his suggestion of nighttime revelries, presumably including alcohol.[51] A. J. Wyatt's 1912 edition of the riddles and Mackie's 1934 edition of the Exeter Book both agree with Trautmann on "wine," though Krapp and Dobbie leave the matter undecided, remarking only that "The choice between these solutions is not easy." "Wine" (or cup/flask/beaker of wine) has thus risen to the fore as the widely accepted answer; all published translations that I am aware of give wine, spirits, and/or cup of wine as the solution, only H. H. Abbott mentioning "night" and "gold" as "suggested alternatives."[52]

[51] Tupper explains how he understands the ideas of night and the strong drink coming together to suggest a night of revelry as the solution: "That this problem is clearly a companion-piece to E[xeter] B[ook] R[iddle] 28, 'Mead' is, at first sight an argument for the 'Wine' interpretation; but the meaning, 'night debauch,' is quite as well suited to the vinous lines that suggest the later riddle." "Solutions," 99-100.

[52] H. H. Abbott, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

The solution to which readers come depends not only on how they manage the balance of metaphorical and literal descriptions in the poem, but on how they construe the Old English grammatically and semantically. Riddle 11 proposes a number of problems just on this level of language and translation. For example, in just the first two lines, the color-terms *hasofag* and *reade* have been central to how the riddle is solved, but are somewhat opaque in the semantic range of colors they describe.[53] *Reade* was central to Walz's argument for "gold" as the solution to Riddle 11, because although this is the etymon of Modern English "red," and indeed most often means "red" in Old English, it is also used to describe gold metal in Old English literature.[54] Trautmann rendered *hasofag* as *glänzend* ("shining"), in support of his solution "wine"—the metal cup of wine apparently shining—although Williamson resists this, noting that "The word *hasofag* must mean 'gray' or even 'gray and shining,' but not merely *glänzend*."[55] William E. Mead gives *haso* as simply "grey," elaborating: "*Haso* is used with an apparent definiteness of color-feeling, and is applied to the dove, to the eagle, to the curling smoke, and even to the *herestræta*, the highways with their dusty, dirty-white surfaces."[56] Many translations render this word as "silver," which does not seem to be disallowed by the semantics of the word—its use in *The Phoenix* in particular suggests that "shining" is

[53] In perhaps the tidiest move to deal with these difficult lines, E. G. Stanley simply removes them, arguing that they are lines from a fragment of another riddle which perhaps describes "a scabbard or quiver or an ornamented quiver," allowing the remainder of the riddle, beginning with "Ic dysge," to describe the drink without concern for the cup. "Exeter Book *Riddle 11:* 'Alcohol and its Effects'," *Notes and Queries* 61 (2014): 182-85.

[54] "We have also four passages in which gold is called red. This is a familiar convention in the Middle Ages, which may be due to the fact that the gold of that time was often darker than that of our own, and contained a considerable alloy of copper." William E. Mead, "Color in Old English Poetry," *PMLA* 14.2 (1899): 195.

[55] *Old English Riddles,* 164.

[56] "Color in Old English Poetry," 192.

at least sometimes an element of its meaning,[57] while others give "tawny," perhaps drawing on the application of it to the eagle in *Brunanburh* and to chicken feed in Riddle 13.[58]

Two grammatical/metrical emendations are common in editions of this riddle. Line 2b is incomplete in the manuscript; Williamson, Mackie, and Wyatt all add *hafu,* following Trautmann, though Tupper used *sind* and Krapp and Dobbie complete it with *minum.*[59] Krapp and Dobbie (and, following them, Williamson) emend the manuscript's *bringeð* in line 9 to *bringað,* which is the difference between a singular and plural third person verb.[60] This change assumes an unstated *hie* as the subject; otherwise, *heah* is the likeliest subject of *bringeð*.

These grammatical, paleographical, and semantic uncertainties of the poem are intertwined with the apprehension of literal and non-literal language in the text that lies at the heart of riddle-reading. How one comes to a solution depends in part on how one construes the reading of individual words and clauses, although the solution one comes to undoubtedly in turn influences the way one will read individual words and phrases. Thus *hasofag* is likely to be taken as "grey," or "dusky" under the solution "night," but "shining," "silver," or "tawny" if the solution is "gold" or "wine." *Reade* of course

---

[57] The Phoenix is described as *haswa* at line 121 and *beorht* in the very next line ("swa se haswa fugel / beorht of þæs bearwes beame gewiteð" ["The Phoenix" in K-D, lines 121-22]), indicating at the very least that there must be a more positive aesthetic connotation to *hasu* than the modern "gray" has.

[58] The eagle is *hasewanpadan* (grey/silver/tawny-robed) at line 62 ("The Poems of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" in Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* [New York: Columbia UP, 1942), 16-26). The chickens, however, are eating a *haswe blede,* which could presumably be either some kind of plants or grain.

[59] Williamson, *Old English Riddles,* 164.

[60] Krapp and Dobie, *Exeter Book*, 327-28; Williamson, *Riddles,* 166.

describes the color of gold if Walz has it right, but is usually taken to refer to garnets or colored glass decorating the metal if the answer is "cup of wine." Tupper takes *reade* to describe the stars in the night sky, a usage which is not elsewhere attested, but may be at least faintly plausible given that some stars do, indeed, shine red.[61]

The final line is most often understood with the subject of the emended *bringað* as the men who are led astray by the riddle-speaker, presumably alcohol: in my translation above, "Woe to them . . . once they bring the dearest of hoards high." The *horda deorest*, then, is the soul, brought in death to be judged for its wine-bibbing ways. Walz, however, interprets this unemended so that *heah* is the substantive subject, referring to God, and the *horda deorast* refers to "the Word of God or the heavenly kingdom,"[62] pointedly opposing a divine *hord* to the corruptive gold that is the proposed solution of the riddle. Trautmann identifies a similar rhetorical move when he ingeniously emends *heah bringeð* to *hearm bringeð,* and interprets *horda deorast* as describing the communion wine, allowing him to construe the lines as, roughly, "Woe to them once the communion brings harm," presumably to drinkers of it who are not worthy.[63] Tupper, in his argument for "night debauch," takes *horda deorest* to describe the sun and to be the subject of the verb. He further accepts an emendation of *bringeð* to *þringeð* ("crowd, throng, oppress";

[61] Tupper, "Solutions of the Exeter Book Riddles," *Modern Language Notes* 21.4 (1906): 100.

[62] John Walz, "Notes on the Anglo-Saxon Riddles," *Studies in Notes in Philology and Literature* 5 (1896): 261.

[63] Both Williamson and Tupper note that it seems strange the communion wine should bring harm, but this strikes me as a decipherable irony, given the assumed drinker is depicted as a foolish and misguided sinner—Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11.29 that one who eats and drinks the body of Christ unworthily drinks damnation to his soul. While unconvinced by the communion reading, Williamson still manages to preserve the irony in his own interpretation: "if man persists in praising the jeweled cup and its contents as he lifts the drink high, then the lord will have his just revenge when the dearest of jewels (the soul) is raised high (to heaven on the Judgment Day)." Williamson, *Old English Riddles* 166, 164.

thus, "Woe to them . . . once, high, the dearest of hoards oppresses them"), because it is more "spirited" than Trautmann's emendation, which he finds "tame and prosaic."[64]

Obviously, no solution supports either an all-literal or an all-metaphorical approach to these lines; any solution requires that some, but not all, of the descriptive elements be taken metaphorically. Under all three solutions, lines 3-5a, describing the speaker's corrosive influence, can be read nearly literally, within the framework of personification that of course governs the whole poem. The opportunity that night gives for revelry or crime is imagined as more agentive than the revelers or criminals themselves, led thoughtlessly into their indiscretions, while even those who are less foolish are unable to accomplish anything good at night. Similarly, gold or wine will overcome the will of the stupid and foolish, and draw others away from better behavior. *Won wisan* (perverse habits) is also literal in all three solutions, as the speaker describes its own moral failings. Lines 6b to 8a are perhaps the most difficult fit into the "night" as the solution, as madness and the loss of reason are not clearly aspects of nighttime as they are of drinking to excess—hence Tupper's debauchery. Gold may not directly make a person literally mad, but it may in a metaphorical sense steal one's mind with its capacity to distract and even frenzy.

In sum, the solution "night" uses *hyrste beorhte, hrægl/reaf,* and *horda deorast* as metaphors for the stars, night sky, and sun, respectively. What is *nyt* (useful) becomes a general way of referring to legitimate daytime pursuits, in contrast with *unrædes.* The solution *gold* emphasizes the contrast between wise and foolish undertakings—using money carefully or foolishly—while *dæde gedwolene* becomes crimes committed for

[64] Tupper, "Solutions," 100; the emendation is attributed to Cosijn, *Paul und Braune, Beiträge,* 23, 128.

profit. And the solution *wine,* or *cup of wine,* makes the most literal use of *dysge dwelle* (lead away the foolish) and *mode bestolene* (stolen minds), as wine has the capacity to literally reduce the mental faculties of those drinking it, but might call for a metaphorical reading of *hyrste beorhte* (is the reflective surface of the wine its own adornment, or is it in a cup studded with red jewels?). The *unrædes* in the final line can be taken most literally under the solution *wine,* as the riddle's concern seems to be the kinds of mischief people get up to under the very real influence of this enigmatic speaker.

I have parsed the possible readings of this riddle at length, not because I necessarily find them equally plausible, but in order to consider how, correctness aside, they may interact poetically. For a reader who is aware of all three solutions, the riddle creates a kind of imaginative palimpsest. The literal riddle-image depicts a speaker in a neutral-hued but bright and decorated garment, who remarks on its ability to manipulate and coerce incautious people, as well as its bafflement at how those same people praise it, and forecasts their doom when a treasure is raised high. Even on this level, uninterpreted with regard to the solution, the poem has some pathos as the speaker reflects on its own worthlessness, and the misfortune awaiting those who embrace it. That painful self-recrimination seeps through to whichever of the solutions one accepts, or all of them together. Whatever the solution is taken to be, various of its elements are made pertinent to a range of possible other semantic fields. The speaker's garment is drawn into metaphorical congruence with the appearance of gold, the cup holding wine, and the dark night sky, and for a reader who has thought through all of these solutions, it can evoke all three simultaneously. The partially resolved impertinence that Ricoeur attributes to metaphor is created here not just between vehicle and tenor, but across various further

tenors that may be described with one vehicle. So the night sky, the cup, and the gold are all put into imaginative proximity with one other as well as with the literal garment. Similarly, the hoard raised in the final lines, read as the soul, the sun, the communion wine, or the Word of God, can elicit all these images at one time, allowing the text to negotiate meaning among these images as well as a literal treasure hoard. Souls, suns, and Eucharist are intertwined not in the literal language of the riddle, but in the reader's apprehension of its metaphorical possibilities, and the fact that they can so be made co-referential, all layered behind the literal *horda deorast,* makes them carry meaning for each other—the soul now rising like a sun, the communion wine being raised toward heaven like a soul.

This does not mean that the reader cannot prefer one answer over the others, or that all solutions are equally plausible; only that the rejected answers can never entirely be banished. Once invented and proposed, possible solutions remain attached to the riddle and its reading, and this is as true for Exeter riddle scholarship in general as well as for individual readers; even rejected solutions make the riddle richer and more poetically substantial as they reveal the figurative potential of the poem. Of course, this pertains only for a reader who knows these three possible answers. A reader who does not (yet) know a/the solution can engage the initial riddle-image with as wide an array of possible answering images as she can imagine, and the above analysis serves only as a thin sketch of the way that those poetics play out, the riddle-image composed and then re-shaped relative to the solutions a reader might try. But a reader who knows of only one solution (and who flips to the back of the book to find it out too quickly) may see the metaphorical congruencies only between the literal riddle-image and the image of the accepted

solution. Translators and editors who elect to print only one of the proposed answers to each riddle thus privilege perlocution over poetics: wanting a single clear answer that unambiguously solves the riddle—that co-constructs and completes the speech act—they close down the possibilities for fuller poetic engagement with the tangle of figurative meaning that a multiply answered riddle offers.

From the angle of finding and settling on a single satisfying solution, the final riddle of the Exeter Book is among the most troublesome:

Ic eom indryhten ond eorlum cuð, ond reste oft ricum ond heanum, folcum gefræge. Fereð wide, ond me fremde ær freondum stondeð hiþendra hyht, gif ic habban sceal blæd i burgum oþþe beorhte god. Nu snottre men swiþast lufiaþ midwist mine: ic monigum sceal wisdom cyþan; no þær word sprecan ænig ofer eorðan. Þeah nu ælda bearn, londbuendra, lastas mine swiþe secað, ic swaþe hwilum mine bemiþe monna gehwylcum.	I am noble and known among men, and rest often with high and lowly, renowned among people. The joy of plunderers travels widely, and [having been] first foreign to me, [now] stands as friends, if I shall have glory in cities, or bright goods [*or* God]. Now wise men most love my society: I shall make wisdom known for many; there to speak no word over the earth. Although the children of men, land-dwellers, eagerly seek my tracks, I sometimes hide my ways from all men. [65]

Riddle 95 is often described as "unsolved," but it is not so much *un*solved as *over*solved; much as in Riddle 4, there is no lack of possible answers to this riddle. The number of

[65] As Williamson (*Old English Riddles,* 398) points out, "Any editor's solution depends in large part upon his reading of lines 3*b*-6," which he translates as describing the gold leaf on a book: "The plunderers' joy (gold) travels far, and, once estranged from friends, stands on me (shines from me?), if I should have glory in the cities or bright wealth." Erika von Erhardt-Siebold accepts an emendation of the ms *fremdes* to *fremdum* and renders the lines: "What plunderers rejoice in / travels far, and to me, the stranger, / is closer than my friends, / if I shall have fame and bright reward in the castles. "Old English Riddle 95," *Modern Language Notes* 62 (1947): 558. Murphy (*Unriddling,* 87) rejects Williamson's emendation of *fremdes* to *fremde* (line 4) and *beorhtne* to *beorhte* (line 6), translating it instead: "The plunderer's joy travels widely and stands as a friend to me, who was a stranger's before, if I am to have success in the cities or possess the bright Lord." I have tried to offer a translation that at least emphasizes the significant contrast between *fremde* and *freondum,* since that strikes me as central to the sense of these lines.

solutions that have been proposed is good evidence that the perlocutionary force of the Exeter riddles is alive and well, and Anglo-Saxonists still feel the pressure of the unsettled riddle.

Dietrich solved this riddle as "wandering singer," Tupper as "moon," and Trautmann as, delightfully, "riddle," though he later revised his answer to "soul" or "spirit." Ferdinand Holthausen suggested *gedank* ("thought, idea"),[66] Erika von Erhardt-Siebold has proposed "quill-pen,"[67] and Keven Kiernan has made the case for "prostitute."[68] Williamson solves it as "book" in his edition of the riddles in Old English,[69] although in a poetic translation published a few years later, he adds "dream" to the list of "solutions [that] range from *soul* to *wandering singer* and include *moon, quill, pen, book, prostitute*—even *riddle* itself," and does not choose among them, instead inviting the reader to "Guess what it is!"[70] Helga Göbel specifies Williamson's "book" as "holy text," and Michael Korhammer specifies it further as "Holy Scriptures."[71] Patrick J. Murphy also agrees with Williamson that "it is indeed difficult to see how Riddle 95

---

[66] Ferdinand Holthausen, "Anglosaxonica Minora," *Anglia Beibl* xxxvi (1925): 219-20, cited in Williamson, *Old English Riddles,* 397.

[67] Erhardt-Siebold, "Old English Riddle 95," 558-59. Curiously, F. H. Whitman's edition of the text and translation of the riddles gives only this solution, with no mention that the solution has been contested. *Old English Riddles* (Ottawa: Canadian Federation for the Humanities, 1982).

[68] Kevein Kiernan, "'Cwene': The Old Profession of Exeter Riddle 95," *Modern Philology* 72 (1975): 384-49.

[69] *Old English Riddles,* 398

[70] *A Feast of Creatures,* 218-19. Kevin Crossley-Holland similarly leaves the riddle—and thus the whole collection—hanging on a note of perplexity: "The poem ends . .. 'I sometimes hide my tracks from all humankind.' Because the text is evidently corrupted, those tracks are rather more blurred than the poet intended. What *wiht* or creature, animate or inanimate, can have made them? Who can say?" *The Exeter Book Riddles* (Enitharmon Press, 2008), 117.

[71] Michael Korhammer, "The Last of the Exeter Book Riddles," in *Bookmarks from the Past: Studies in Early English Language and Literature in Honour of Helmut Gneuss*, ed. Lucia Kornexl and Ursula Lenker (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), 69-80.

could refer to something other than writing," though he brings Erhardt-Siebold's quill back into the equation, reading *hiþendra hyht* (joy of plunderers) as a kenning for a quill taken from a bird, which "reascribes the traditional 'joy' of birds in their plumage to the 'plundering' scribes."[72]

As with Riddle 11, the way that one solves this riddle will depend on how the Old English is construed, how the metaphors are parsed, and which descriptive elements are taken as crucial or incidental to the riddle's meaning. Tupper arrived at "moon" by comparison with Riddle 29, in which the sun is described as being known among earth-dwellers, just as the speaker of 95 is *eorlum cuð;* the estrangement from friends is the period of the new moon, the *hiþendra hyht* "the light captured from the Sun," and it is beloved of wise men because "the Moon is the source and centre of Anglo-Saxon 'wisdom' or scientific knowledge."[73] Erhardt-Siebold takes the *hiþendra hyht* to be a kenning for ink, which travels widely over the parchment and, via the parchment, the whole earth; its absent friends are the other feathers of the bird from which the quill was taken. The wise men, reading the marks of the quill, remain silent (ms. *no… word sprecað,* though emended by Williamson above), and however carefully they follow them, "may lose the track and not understand the sacred writing."[74] Williamson's "book" takes *hiþendra hyht* as gold, which he reads as literally standing on the speaker, i.e., gilding the book-cover. Gold travels from its friends under the earth to contribute to the book's glory and value among people, who eagerly seek its teachings, though it

[72] Murphy, *Unriddling,* 87, 91.

[73] "Solutions," 104-5, quotations in notes 12 and 15 respectively.

[74] Erhardt-Siebold cites the Benedictine rule's instruction that *Sibi sic legat, ut alium non inquietet*, noting that silent reading was a monastic innovation regarded with some wonder by those outside the monastery. "Old English Riddle No. 95," 558-59.

speaks no words and its meaning may be lost "in the paleographical obscurity of the new 'tracks' and in the old obscurity of the riddlic word."[75]

Interestingly, "Riddle" has not found much purchase with scholars since Trautmann, though it is a compelling solution for aesthetic if not philological reasons. With this solution, the riddle collection closes on a note of literary self-awareness, suggestive of how these riddles travel among people of all stations and in many places, drawing together communities by appealing to their ways of reading and knowing as well as their shared wealth of orally traded literature; they perhaps carry meaning and wisdom (this is perhaps a strained interpretation of *hiþendra hyht*) if they are to be accorded glory and value, though for all this they are still silent and sometimes indecipherable. Granted that Trautmann had to do some inventive emending to make this solution work, so that he comes off a little as if he believes less that the text truly supports his solution than that he can nudge and trim it to fit the solution he wants, an impression underscored by his habit in his articles of suggesting and rejecting various emendations before settling on the one he wants.[76] Wyatt seems to be the only subsequent scholar willing to entertain "riddle" as an answer, as a "kind of monkish colophon to the collection," but prefers "wandering minstrel," though he also consider the text too bad of a composition and too corrupt in its language to merit much consideration.[77]

---

[75] Williamson, *Old English Riddles,* 398-99.

[76] Trautmann's emendations include *fremdes fær* (stranger's journey) in line 4 and *beorhtne gong* (bright going) in line 6, and he takes *gefræge* as a more literal participle of *fricgan*, "ask," i.e., the speaker is asked to people, rather than famous among them. A. J. Wyatt, *Old English Riddles* (Boston and London: D. C. Heath & Co., 1912), 122.

[77] Wyatt, *Old English Riddles,* 122-23.

The rejection of this solution is telling regarding not just the possibilities, but the limits, of riddle-reading. Neither Krapp and Dobbie nor Tupper go into detail about their rejection of Trautmann's reasoning. Tupper, with characteristic antipathy, finds that "[Trautmann's] interpretation . . . everywhere refutes itself by its academic viewpoint and its consequent failure to grasp the naïve psychology of riddling, by the usual perverted meanings and violent forcings of the text."[78] Krapp and Dobbie make the more measured statement that all foregoing solutions, "except perhaps 'riddle', can be defended, but none seems especially appropriate."[79] Yet the answer "riddle" makes good sense out of much of the text, particularly *eorlum cuð* and *folcum gefræge,* as well as an emended *fere wide,*[80] and arguably grants the clearest meaning to the final lines, in which the speaker's *lastas* are the riddle's clues, pursued by its interpreters with sometimes little success. Erhardt-Siebold, Williamson, and Murphy all read these lines as similarly having to do with the interpretation of language, though they all have to work a little harder to explain why the book or quill's *swaþu* should be deliberately difficult to follow.

However, *hiþendra hyht* and the surrounding lines are widely considered central to the riddle's meaning in a way that these final lines are not. This is no doubt in part because of the appearance of a kenning here, itself something of a riddle in miniature, but also perhaps because construing the Old English has proven such a challenge that these lines *feel* central simply because of the amount of energy expended on them. The interpretation of these lines relative to the solution "riddle" does require some interpretive

[78] "Solutions," 104.

[79] *Exeter Book,* 381.

[80] Benjamin Thorpe suggested this emendation, which was accepted by Tupper, Wyatt, Trautmann, and Krapp and Dobbie, although not Williamson (*Old English Riddles,* 399).

stretches. The kenning might refer to the solution of the riddle that must be "plundered" out of it, though this requires an extra stage of metaphorical unravelling uncommon in Old English kennings (i.e., "plundering" itself is already a metaphor before it is drawn into the implicit analogy of the kenning). And while the speaker, if it is a riddle, may be glorified among those who appreciate its literate composition, it is difficult to say why it would go out in pursuit of either wealth or God.

Thus "riddle" might be generally dismissed for historical reasons, because Trautmann made the case for it poorly with his litany of emendations (to say nothing of his overturning that solution decades later with the answer "der Geist"[81]), as well as because it genuinely cannot accommodate central elements of the riddle's text that are better explained by other solutions. Less precisely, however, I suspect that this solution simply violates our poetic sense of the text. This is a speaker that takes itself seriously and wants respect for its social status—it speaks of nobility, glory in cities, the praise and solicitation of wise men, bright wealth (or, even more seriously, bright God). Riddles may be romanticized, ancient, canny, and consequential, but they are not imaginatively correlated with expressions of institutional power and the accumulation of status. The text establishes an image that, recalling Ricoeur, must be maintained even as it becomes the vehicle through which other images are perceived, the solution seen via the proposition as "the same in spite of, and through, the different." The solution "riddle" seems to require that we partially dismantle that initial image, rather than building meaning onto it, building its meaning onto something else.

[81] This is the solution Trautmann suggests in his 1915 edition of the riddles, *Die altenglischen Rätsel.*

Kiernan's solution, "prostitute," has likewise met with skepticism, for similarly varied reasons. His argument is based on an approach that reads nearly every lexeme in the text for a secondary, less central meaning: e.g., *cuð* becomes "intimate" instead of "known"; *gefræge* is "disreputable" rather than "renowned"; *reste,* he takes as the dative of *rest,* so that the speaker does not just rest often, but is in bed, with both high and low. Kiernan translates *hiþendra* as "ravager" rather than "plunderer," allowing him to make *hiþendra hyht* into "sexual gratification" (though without remarking on the alarming intimation of sexual violence entailed in that reading). He glosses *snottre* as "prudent" (though he seems to mean "discreet"), takes both *blæd* and *god* as further metaphors for sex, and reads the final lines as describing the prostitute's menstruation, during which she uses a *swaþu* (now "bandage") to conceal herself from the men seeking her. Murphy, addressing the last lines in particular, finds that Kiernan "adopts an extremely unlikely meaning for each word in order to support" his reading; Williamson clearly finds this solution so self-evidently absurd that he does not bother to address or refute it, only remarks in a note that the Exeter riddles generally do not use people or professions as their subjects.[82] Kiernan's strategy is a little reminiscent of the joke that spells "fish" as *ghoti,* claiming that the *gh* in "laugh," the *o* in "women," and the *ti* in "nation"—the meanings he ascribes to each word may be available, but are marked, contextually dependent meanings, and the more one stacks up such semantically peripheral readings of words and phrases, the less likely it seems that the text would produce this meaning to anyone not looking to find it.

[82] Murphy, *Unriddling,* 42; Williamson, *Old English Riddles,* 399n. Williamson notes that the only exceptions are Riddle 46, "Lot and his family," which refers to a specific character and story, and Riddle 86, which, as discussed above, adapts a Latin riddle.

But again, even beyond the methodological, philological, and lexical problems with this solution, the semantic outline produced by the riddle-text itself does not seem resolvable into the answer "prostitute": the seriousness and statusfulness of this speaker do not make the speaker *sound* like a prostitute, much less like an Anglo-Saxon monk writing in the voice of a prostitute. Ricoeur, as discussed above, emphasizes that the metaphorical tenor does not displace the vehicle, but that it is seen "through" the vehicle. In riddling we might paraphrase this to say that the literal riddle-image is not erased, but added to, explained, and completed by the solution. But to follow Kiernan's reading, one must either abandon the sense of the riddle-text as its speaker describes itself, with this mesh of elevated images and ideas invested in status and power, or understand the riddle to be deliberately, subversively, elevating the prostitute into a courtly person with civic prestige—a move that may be gratifying for twenty-first century feminists, but does not really seem to reflect the values of tenth-century (or earlier) English culture.

This last problem brings us back to the crucial issue of autochthonous ideology and authorial intent. To what extent is the intended answer the best answer, and to what extent is it the intended answer that we are always trying to recover in the Exeter Book? Does the appropriateness of a riddle to its culture of origin determine the validity of possible solutions—is it still the same riddle if we grant it a solution its creators would not have done? What if Riddle 95 best describes, in purely formal terms with no attention to cultural context, a military airplane? The Lockheed SR-71 "Blackbird," the world's fastest manned aircraft, could be called *indryhten* in that it is expensive and mostly

owned by the government,[83] and is *cuð* and *gefræge* in that it is now retired and so information about it has been declassified. *Hiþendra hyht* could certainly describe recovered intelligence, "plundered" by the plane's reconnaissance technology, and since both the information and the aircraft travel widely, one can take or leave the emendation of *fereð* to *fere.* It has an abundance of civic glory in that it holds records for both speed and altitude, and with its stealth capability, not to mention its capacity to outfly missiles, it both hides its tracks and is eagerly sought by people who want to either shoot it down or collect its intelligence. This solution makes sense of each individual detail of the riddle-text and elegantly aligns with the solemn and slightly mysterious whole riddle-image as well.[84]

An extremely dogmatic New Critic might be forced to accept this solution, given how well it integrates (if I do say so myself) the various descriptive elements of the text, while thoroughly avoiding even a whiff of the intentional fallacy. Furthermore, if we entirely embrace Barthes' position on the reader, the text, and the deadness of the riddler, the anachronism of this answer is immaterial; as the reader encounters the riddle in twenty-first century culture, stealth aircraft are a feature of the world, and the text, in its twenty-first century presentation and reception, might as well refer to a spy plane as to anything more probably medieval. Yet this answer still feels like a joke, though for reasons that lie in the pragmatic, rather than the formal, qualities of the riddle. This comes down to an issue of form and function, of the riddle as an abstracted poetic object

[83] If I can be allowed one Kiernanesque move, Bosworth and Toller give as a meaning for *indryhten, "*befitting one who belongs to a king's body-guard," which certainly seems to apply to a piece of military equipment.

[84] Thanks are due to my colleague Erin Sweany for steering me toward this excellent, if improbable, solution.

unmoored from any particular context of expression and interpretation, versus a riddle as some type of speech act within some type of context.

Dan Ben-Amos argues that pragmatically, a riddle may certainly have multiple answers; the notion of a "correct" answer lies in the judgment—and possibly the whim—of the riddle-asker. He breaks down the riddle as a speech event into three, rather than two, parts: "a message, a decoding, and a feedback"; that is, a riddle-proposition, a possible solution, and the riddler's acceptance or rejection of the solution. The riddler's evaluation of the answer given is "often whimsical or manipulative," in that he may choose in one moment, for reasons embedded in the context, to reject an answer that he might ordinarily accept, or vice versa, just so long as he can maintain his "socially advantageous position" as the asker in the riddle-exchange. Consequently, he suggests:

> There is no single valid answer to the riddle; neither is there a single, objective, true solution to its puzzle. Each question has a range of alternate possible solutions, each of which could adequately correspond to a metaphorical description, and all of them combined would be a set of referents. Such a view implies that, from a broad cultural perspective, there are no "wrong" answers to riddles. Each solution can be valid as long as it is offered by a native speaker of the language who shares the cultural experience of the community and has an adequate familiarity with traditional knowledge.[85]

Ben-Amos goes on to clarify that there are nonetheless limitations on what can constitute a right answer to a riddle, both in terms of "linguistic and cultural constraints upon the generation of solutions" and "distinct logical boundaries and understood relations between question and answer." Nonetheless, his emphasis on the need for judgment from a person native to both language and culture underscores an essential impasse in solving the Exeter Book riddles: The trouble is not that they lack solutions,

[85] Dan Ben-Amos, "Solutions to Riddles," *The Journal of American Folklore* 89 (1976): 249-50.

but that they lack the validation of representative from such a native speaker. What is truly absent from the Exeter riddles is not just solutions (which we have in spades), but the riddler and the riddler's validation. Scholars can to a certain extent fill in for this absent riddler, but neither the affirmation of a right answer, nor the rejection of a wrong one, will ever be available from a truly authoritative source. We are left to our own sense of riddling poetics, which may or may not be align with that of an Old English author; while we may thus produce solutions that are both probable and satisfying, there remains a sense that these solutions are provisional, because the voice that poses the riddle cannot provide the feedback that completes the riddle exchange.

Both Ben-Amos's analysis and my spy-plane solution underestimate the essential *interaction* of form and function in riddling. Ben-Amos seems to imagine a certain amount of allowable arbitrariness in riddling, that the relationship between question and answer is less important than the authority of the riddler to confirm the answer's rightness. But while a riddler in a position of sufficient conversational power may be able to accept or reject answers according to his arbitrary whim in the moment and get away with it, that does not mean that other participants have actually accepted the answers he approved, only that they accept his authority. And on the other hand, while my spy-plane solution may answer the riddle's form, it does not truly respond to its speech act—the entire speech act in the entire speech situation[86]—in which the "speaker" of the riddle is known to be Anglo-Saxon. The riddle is conveyed to us from a manuscript situated historically in a time in and place where books, scops, riddles, and the moon are subjects for riddlic contemplation, but there are no mach 3 jet engines. Thus the "utterance" of it,

[86] See Austin, *Words,* 52.

whether we understand that to occur at the moment when it is recorded or the moment when it is read, includes that cultural and contextual information. While Riddle 95 may have the formal potential to be used as a riddle with the solution SR-71 Blackbird, doing so requires a change in it functionally; in some sense, I have not answered the Exeter riddle, but poached its language to create a new, different, twenty-first century riddle. The criteria for a riddle answer to be "correct" include that it be both formally satisfying and functionally probable—that it both answer the riddle's referential questions, and respond to it as a contextualized speech act.

Reading riddles might be understood as a microcosm for reading literature in general, only with this heightened perlocutionary drive to settle the riddle on a single stabilizing meaning. Barthes argues that literature properly refuses to assign to the text a single, final meaning: "everything is to be disentangled, but nothing *deciphered* . . . there is no end to it, no bottom; the space of writing is to be traversed, not pierced, writing constantly posits meaning, but always in order to evaporate it."[87] The poetics of riddling suggests that Barthes has only gotten it partially right: the space of writing may constantly posit meaning, but the meaning of a text expands and multiplies, rather than vanishing only to be replaced. As we move through texts their meanings accumulate around us as readers, and while these meanings may not be reducible to a single, authorized, "true" meaning, neither is every possible meaning equally satisfying. The solution(s) to the riddle, and the meaning(s) of the text, arise only in the relationship between text and reader, with a firm anchor in both ends. And the Exeter riddles are so poetically productive precisely because of the balance they strike: between an array of

[87] "The Death of the Author," 53-54.

imaginative options, and the promise of some kind of a poetic telos, a conclusive solution, that drives us to continue excavating them for meaning. The multiplicity of their poetics is rooted, paradoxically, in the readers' belief that a single, correct solution might be found if only we continue to delve.

Chapter II
Quests and Answers

Yes, it is a dilemma. Is there an answer? Of course there is: as a wise person said with a smile: "The answer is within the question."

The Log Lady, *Twin Peaks*

The Sphinx is a creature of uniquely linguistic monstrosity, lurking outside of Thebes and waiting for unwary travelers to draw into her riddle game: solve the riddle correctly, or pay for your ineptitude with your life. Her riddle, "What is the creature that walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening?" goes unanswered, and the body count rises, until she meets Oedipus. The young man produces the correct answer – *man* – and the Sphinx commits suicide, while Oedipus continues on to his own unpleasant fate in Thebes.[1]

Among the most celebrated riddles in the Western cannon, the riddle of the Sphinx turns cleverly on the referential collapse of a day and a lifetime, making morning, noon, and night into metaphors for stages in a man's life. But as the riddle turns on the metaphor, the narrative turns also on the riddle; its answer is the saving or losing of Oedipus's life. The Sphinx's riddle resonates with themes that play more generally across the tragedy of Oedipus: the three stages of life described by the riddle reflect the stages of Oedipus's own story, from a helpless infant left on a mountainside die, to the hero's journey that brings him into his own as the liberator of Thebes and its new king, to the tragic deterioration leading to the end of his life. This thematic equivalence of answerer

[1] This is the version of the story made most famous by Sophocles. In Apollodorus, the riddle is "What is that which has one voice, and yet becomes four-footed, two-footed and three-footed?" (3.5.8) but has the same answer for the same reasons. *The Library,* Book 3, trans. J. G. Frazer, http://www.theoi.com/Text/Apollodorus3.html.

and answer lends the riddle an element of dramatic irony, as the audience (knowing Oedipus' notorious fate) knows what he does not—that the act of (mis)interpretation itself, of (mis)understanding the obscured references underpinning a piece of language, will be at the core of Oedipus' downfall, as he proves unfortunately less adept at interpreting prophecy than riddles.[2] In both its form (the fact that, as a riddle, it demands interpretive energy) and its content (the specific riddle which is posed), the riddle of the Sphinx fits gracefully and logically into the narrative that supports it.

Contrast this with another notorious riddle from early literature, the riddle Samson poses to the Philistine guests at his wedding. Thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes are wagered on the Philistines' ability to answer Samson's riddle: "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (Judges 14.14, King James Version). The riddle is so bizarre and so divorced from its pragmatic context that the Philistines cannot answer it; instead, they threaten Samson's bride and learn the solution from her. Samson, discovering that his interlocutors have cheated, responds by slaughtering thirty of them and abandoning his wife. What began as a capricious riddle-game ends like a neck-riddle, where the answerers pay with their lives for having played the riddle-game wrong.[3]

---

[2] In *Oedipus Tyrannus,* Sohpocles has Oedipus brag to the blind prophet Teiresias that "there was need of a seer's help" to solve the Sphinx's riddle, which, he implies, Teiresias must not have been. This line comes, dripping with dramatic irony, as Teiresias is attempting to tell Oedipus the truth about his family, his father, and his marriage, eventually revealing to him his own utter failure to correctly interpret the prophecy which has governed his life. *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles*, edited with introduction and notes by Sir Richard Jebb, Perseus Digital Library, lines 390-95.

[3] A riddle-game is any riddle with a wager – anything from the answerer's life to the asker's kingdom to the sexual availability or marriage of either asker or answerer. A neck-riddle is, specifically, a riddle-game on which the answerer's (or, occasionally, the asker's) life is staked,

Both of these riddle-games are embedded in their respective narratives not just as plot devices, but as minor conflicts of the narrative, where the larger conflict of the whole narrative matrix (e.g., that between Samson and the Philistines) is played out in apparently trivial terms. The conflict of reference inhering in the riddle itself is made into a conflict within the narrative that contains the riddle, and the riddle is given narrative force. But while the Sphinx's riddle enables the progress of an ingenious hero by its answerability, Samson's wreaks narrative havoc by its unanswerability. The Sphinx's riddle is fair, guessable, and dovetails thematically with other aspects of the narrative where it appears. The question-and-answer of its form meets Archer Taylor's definition for what he calls a "true riddle,"[4] in that it hinges on the surprising comparison between a human life and a day; more importantly, it does not demand "special information not capable of being inferred from the question."[5] Knowledge of the pattern of human aging is widely available, and is all that is needed besides cleverness to find the answer. In supplying the answer and thus leading the Sphinx to her death, Oedipus not only solves the riddle, but also resolves the conflict: the riddle is annihilated with the Sphinx, without whom the riddle will not be asked again. With this Oedipus proves his ingenuity and his merit. The Sphinx's riddle is well-formed both in its own form and its relationship to the text surrounding it, and it functions gracefully and exactly as "true riddles" might be expected to function.

---

though the term is often used more broadly to describe riddles that are unanswerable by design because they require information that no one but the author of the riddle has.

[4] See the Introduction for a discussion of Taylor's approach to English riddles, including his distinction between "true" and "false" riddles.

[5] *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*, 145.

Samson's riddle is far less successful, both narratively and formally. The solution is that Samson had earlier killed a lion, and found afterwards a colony of bees nesting in the carcass, from which he tasted the honey. But because he alone has encountered this curiosity of bees building a hive in a lion carcass, his riddle is essentially unguessable. Although it is the Philistines who cheat, it does not quite seem that Samson's part has been entirely principled either; as John Frow argues, "the passage between these predicates and the riddle's highly particular referent . . . is too distant and too difficult for us to feel that [the riddler] is playing fair."[6]

Context and function have as much to do with what is allowable as a riddle as does form. Taylor would surely call Samson's riddle a "false" riddle, and yet the Philistines never object that this riddle was not, in fact, a riddle. Despite its formal failings and the tumult it leaves in its narrative wake, it does not fail to function as a riddle: that is, a riddle-game is successfully built around this riddle, and the Philistines do not challenge its status within the genre even as they are extracting the answer through other means. Yet in isolation from the pragmatic context of the riddle-game, Samson's riddle would be an unsatisfying riddle.[7] A speech act such as Samson's, which would be otherwise merely a question or an odd statement, can be raised to the status of a riddle by the pragmatic weight of the ritualized exchange in which it appears. This chapter aims to consider riddles as speech acts within a pragmatic context that affects not only how they are received as speech acts, but how they are received as riddles. Such an examination of the pragmatic functionality of riddling speech acts contributes to a reevaluation of the

[6] *Genre*, 32.

[7] The Sphinx's riddle is regularly anthologized in books of riddles marketed to children or puzzle-solvers; Samson's, to my knowledge, never has been.

definition of the riddle, troubling in particular the notion of "true" and "false" riddles. An understanding of the riddle as speech act further elucidates those narratives of which riddles are a core element— here, the early English subgenres of the riddle-ballad and the loathly lady tales—as well as allowing us to reflect back upon the nature of speech-act categories themselves.

Riddles as Speech Acts

Here, I wish to shift my focus briefly from riddles in their literary contexts to the speech act theory which allows me to read those riddles performatively, before returning to a reading of two riddle-ballads and three loathly lady tales through the lens of discourse analysis and speech act theory. Speech acts which are performed in fiction have not historically been taken very seriously by linguistics; Austin notoriously describes the speech acts "said by an actor onstage, or . . . introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy" as "hollow"; the language of fiction, he explains, is "used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use."[8] Scholars of discourse analysis and stylistics since Austin have very successfully applied speech act theory to, for example, realist 19th-century literature,[9] but nonetheless linguistics tends to assume the primacy of "natural" over "artificial" language. While the language of literature may be in general more visibly crafted than the language of everyday speech, it is certainly a misconception that

[8] *Words*, 22.

[9] For an excellent example of such criticism, see J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). Miller both reads James's work as a series of speech acts by the author, and as a report of speech acts by fictional characters, recognizing that while a fictional speech act may be governed by the speech act that the author is performing in reporting it, such a speech act nonetheless has force within its fictional universe of discourse.

spoken language in reality is always completely natural and spontaneous while the language of fiction is not. In particular, virtually no riddle uttered in real life is developed immediately on the spot; riddles are most often an oral genre with which speakers are already familiar as pre-crafted pieces of language from other sources before they deploy them in conversation. The fact that these same riddles may appear in a literary text rather than a real-life conversation does not fundamentally alter their function as riddles; they are only "hollow" if we refuse to read them within their own universe of discourse. But perhaps because of a sense that riddles are ritualized and artificial, speech act theory has not thus far been used to understand their performativity. Yet speech act theory can elucidate the function and usage of riddles, attending in particular to the way that they structure power around an exchange of information and a performance of wit, in literary as well as any other language.

As speech acts, riddles are a subspecies of questions, which are themselves a subspecies of directive.[10] They may take the locutionary form of an interrogative or a proposition, either asking a question or offering a description, but in their illocution—that is, their intended effect—

[10] John Searle recognizes five categories of illocutionary acts: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaration. "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts," *Language in Society* 5.1 (1976): 1-23. He notes that "Questions are a species of directives since they are attempts by S [the speaker] to get H [the hearer] to answer – i.e. to perform a speech act" (11). These do not quite line up with Austin's categories, whose "exercitive" category seems to be parallel to Searle's "directives"; Austin's "performative" verbs are the source of Searle's argument for "declarations" (Searle, "Classification," 13-14), and both include the category of "commissives" (i.e., speech acts which commit the speaker to a course of action). However, Austin's verdictives (which pass some evaluation on a topic) do not appear in Searle's taxonomy, and his "behabitive" category only partially overlaps with Searle's "expressive" category (Austin, *Words*, 153-57). But for Austin as well as Searle, questions are evidently a type of exercitive, in that they are meant to motivate the hearer to some action, like the other illocutionary verbs that Austin connects to this category: order, command, direct, plead, beg, recommend, entreat, advise.

they request information. Whether they make this explicit, as in those Exeter Book riddles that end with an exhortation to "Saga hwat ic hatte" (say what I am called),[11] or not, part of what makes a riddle a riddle is the implicature that it is intended to be answered. Any riddle which failed to direct the hearer in this way (whether or not the hearer is compliant, or able to answer) would be, pragmatically, an unsuccessful riddle.

A question such as "What is heavier than lead?" might appear as an ordinary question— that is, both in locution and illocution, the speaker is expressing an interrogative, sincerely seeking an answer. In such a context, the hearer could appropriately give the answer "uranium," without having violated the terms of the conversation. However, if other contextual cues indicate that this is intended as a riddle rather than a regular interrogative (e.g., if the asker were reading from a collection of riddles), then, assuming the speech act had been transacted successfully, the hearer would know "uranium" to be exactly the wrong sort of answer. So when the question appears in the Scottish version of the ballad "Riddles Wisely Expounded" (Child Ballad 1), its context makes clear that this is not meant to be a direct speech act. A young woman has propositioned a strange young knight and received the answer, "Gin ye will answer me questions ten, / The morn ye sall be made my ain."[12] The questions she is asked to answer include "What is higher nor the tree?"; "What is deeper nor the sea?"; "What is heavier nor the lead?"; and "What is louder nor a horn?" The answers she gives are,

[11] Such formulae are not unique to Old English riddles; for example, a similar formula, *hyggðu at gátu* ("guess the riddle") appears in some Old Norse *ofljost* riddles.

[12] "Riddles Wisely Expounded," in Francis Child, ed., *English and Scottish Popular Ballads,* volume 1 (London: Henry Stevens, Son and Stiles, 1882), 1C line 8. Child collects four versions of this ballad. Version A, found in 17th-century broadsides, gives the most complete narrative; version C, drawn from William Motherwell's Scottish ballad collection, gives the largest set of riddles. Version B contains an abbreviated narrative, and version D contains only the riddles with no narrative frame. Text references are to ballad number, version, and verse.

respectively, heaven, hell, sin, and shame (9-17). All of these are true riddles according to Taylor, in that they require a metaphorical reinterpretation of the terms of the question—"heaviness," for example, is to be (re)-read as spiritual or psychological, rather than physical, weight.

What exactly are the pragmatic cues that allow the woman to recognize the knight's riddles as riddles, rather than ordinary questions? For one, the questions make no obvious sense in the context of the story thus far, much less the conversation the two characters are having. They are discursively connected to the foregoing conversation on the level of syntax—the young woman's proposition elicits a response which announces ten questions to come, so the questions fit syntactically into the conversation (as opposed to the strong sense of non sequitur that would result if the young woman made her proposal, and then the knight launched straight into asking her what is higher than the tree). But the questions' content does not cohere thematically with what we have of their conversation otherwise; they are dramatically off-topic. This irrelevance in part marks them as riddles: the topical discord between question and conversational context forces the interlocutor (here, the young woman) to develop an explanation for these questions (*these* question in particular, and not more obviously relevant questions) being asked. The first thing that an interlocutor must interpret from a riddle is to recognize that it is, in fact, a riddle.

The context has made it clear that whatever questions are coming, they will be meant to ascertain the young woman's suitability to be this knight's consort, but if they were meant literally, it is difficult to see how they would be able to do that. The woman recognizes them as riddles, not questions, because she also recognizes that her merit is

being tested, not merely her knowledge. Furthermore, the hearer or reader of the ballad knows to expect riddles, not questions, because of the conventions of the genres in which riddle-games usually appear. Ballads, folk and fairy tales, and romance share in common a trope in which someone, often a mysterious stranger, evaluates the hero or heroine's character by posing riddles.[13] Thus the literary context outside of the text, as well as the pragmatic context within it, contributes to the questions' transformation into riddles.

Some of the woman's answers to the strange knight's riddles might be mistaken for ordinary interrogative questions-and-answer pairs, if they did not appear in this context of a string of riddles. He asks, "Or what is whiter nor the milk? / Or what is softer nor the silk?" and she answers, "The snaw is whiter nor the milk, / And the down is safter nor the silk" (11, 16). These could just as well be answers to the questions *qua* questions, not riddles at all: I may say that snow is whiter than milk without appealing to any figurative understanding of *snow, whiter, milk,* or *is.* Yet even in this context, where the riddle form is wanting, the speech acts nonetheless function as riddles, because the regular felicity conditions are in place to make a question into a riddle.

Felicity conditions are the contextual circumstances under which a speech act may be effective in the way it is intended, a concept first described by J. L. Austin, but

[13] The strength of this expectation is perhaps nowhere more compelling than when it is subverted in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. King Arthur and his band of questing knights approach a bridge guarded by a hunched, wizened old man, who tells them, "Who would cross the Bridge of Death must answer me these questions three, 'ere the other side he see." The viewer expects three riddles to follow, as presumably do the questers, and the episode is therefore humorous precisely because the old man's questions turn out to be prosaic and trivial (""What is your name?"; "What is your quest?"; "What is the capital of Assyria?") rather than clever or abstruse.

named by John Searle.[14] If the conditions are infelicitous, a speech act may fail, or it may accomplish something unintended. But – and this is a quality of the relationship between speech act and context which has not been attended to – the questions-turned-riddles above suggest that the inverse may also be true. A set of conditions which are more than adequate, which are so recognizable that they are formulaic, has the effect of allowing the locution to bring into effect a speech act which it should not ordinarily be allowed. In other words, while felicity conditions allow a speech act to perform as intended, it is evident from the examples given above that felicitous conditions which appear in a certain form regularly enough to constitute a trope allow a locution (such as a question like "What is whiter than snow?") to carry an illocutionary and perlocutionary force (that is, the question functions as a riddle on both the levels of intention and interpretation) of which that locution is not normally capable. Hence, the question "What is whiter than snow?" is able, given its felicitous context, to function as a riddle, whereas isolated from these felicity conditions, it would not be a convincing riddle.

What, then, are the felicity conditions of riddles? John Searle classifies felicity conditions into three types: *preparatory* (that a speaker is in the right position to utter the speech act), s*incerity* (that the speaker really intends the force of the speech act to come about), and *essential* (that a speaker understands the speech act as having the effect that,

[14] Austin does not actually use the phrase "felicity condition" in *How to Do Things with* Words; however, he describes successful speech acts as "felicitous" (22), having already observed that "if we sin against any one (or more) of these six rules [i.e., felicity conditions for a performative speech act], our performative utterance will be (in one way or another) unhappy" (15). The example Austin returns to most regularly is that of marriage and performative speech: in order for the speech act "I do" to cause a speaker to become married to someone, he or she must be a participant in a marriage ceremony, officiated over by a person licensed to marry, and must not already be married to someone else. If any of these conditions is not in place, the act will not "come off" and the speaker will not have successfully gotten married (16).

if felicitous, it will have).[15] Thus, for example, Searle describes the felicity conditions of asking questions:

> *Preparatory:* 1. S does not know "the answer," i.e., does not know if the proposition is true, or, in the case of the propositional function, does not know the information needed to complete the proposition truly (but see comment below).
> 2. It is not obvious to both *S* and *H* that *H* will provide the information at that time without being asked.
>
> *Sincerity:* *S* wants this information.
>
> *Essential:* Counts as an attempt to elicit this information from *H.*
>
> There are two kinds of questions, (*a*) real questions, (*b*) exam questions. In real questions *S* wants to know (find out) the answer; in exam questions, *S* wants to know if H knows.[16]

Riddles are clearly a type of Searle's "exam questions" described above. The riddler must know the answer to the question; otherwise, how will she evaluate the answerer's answer?[17] Searle identifies exam questions as operating outside of the essential condition and then does not explore them further,[18] but there is an evident dimension of power

---

[15] *Speech Acts*, 60.

[16] Ibid., 66.

[17] As I argue in chapter 4, this is the essential difference between a riddle and an enigma. A riddle is a specific language-game with a specific answer, while an enigma might take a similar language-game form, but does not promise such an answer; neither does it need to be framed as an interrogative or a directive. The well-known kōan "What is the sound of one hand clapping?", for example, is not a riddle because there is second component to it, but it is certainly enigmatic.

[18] Hugh Mehan, considering the context of teacher-student interactions in particular, calls this a "known-information question," as opposed to an "information-seeking" question, pointing out that it "calls attention to the questioner's state of knowledge"; literature on second-language acquisition describes these as "display" questions, which emphasizes how they allow the interlocutor to display their knowledge or merit. However, even under such an answerer-

imbalance between asker and answerer in this type of question, which gives it something in common with the directive speech act as well as the interrogative. The speaker's end goal is not actually to acquire information, but to get the hearer to do something, i.e., to give the answer.[19] The felicity conditions for giving orders are, in Searle's account, that "the speaker should be in a position of authority over the hearer"; that "the speaker wants the ordered act done"; and that "the speaker intends the utterance as an attempt to get the hearer to do the act" (preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions, respectively).[20]

"Exam questions" are similar to orders in that they, too, carry a preparatory condition requiring the speaker (such as a teacher) to be in a position of authority over the hearer (a student). A riddle on which nothing is staked does not necessarily entail this condition, but a riddle with death or marriage (or anything else) staked on it is always implicated in an imbalance of power. Moreover, under the essential condition, it is not the information which the speaker intends to have revealed, but instead the meta-

---

centered analysis, the authority in the exchange remains with the teacher or asker. Cited in Irene Koshik, "Questions that Convey Information in Student-Teacher Conferences," in *Why Do You Ask? The Function of Questions in Institutional Discourse*, ed. Alice F. Freed, Susan Ehrlich (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[19] Arguably, all interrogative speech acts include such an element of power imbalance, since being in a position to comfortably and directly ask questions is, much like being in a position to give orders, closely tied to being a position of authority. Joan Cutting points out that "Expressions that are bald [i.e., direct] on record are used by people who assume that they have got power. Thus it is that a lecturer, because of their role and status, is expected to give generalised orders when addressing a class of students, directly and bald on record . . . Conversely, a participant in a . . . meeting has to address the chair using the negative politeness devices of hedges and requests for permission to speak: 'Erm chairman could I ask a question in relation to that?'." *Pragmatics and Discourse,* 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 51. Those with less power in an interaction are likely to compensate with face-saving verbal gestures, lest they come off as aggressive. This dimension of power imbalance embedded in the interrogative speech act is further played for humor in the Jack Handy quotation, "Whenever someone asks me what it means to love, I spin around and pin the guy's arm around his back. NOW who's the one asking the questions?"

[20] *Speech Acts,* 64.

information about whether the hearer can produce the information. Thus, I argue that riddles are best understood as a hybrid of questions and orders, and the felicity conditions for riddle-games might be summed up thus:

Preparatory:	The speaker knows the answer, and is in a position of power.
Sincerity:	The speaker wants the hearer to respond to the question.
Essential:	The speaker intends by the utterance to get the hearer to reveal whether he or she is capable of answering the question.

With Samson's riddle in mind, a further addition might be made to the Sincerity Condition: a "true" riddle ought to be guessable, not requiring specific knowledge but only the answerer's ingenuity. The asker of a "true" riddle ought to sincerely believe the answerer can (or at least that some ingenious answerer could) produce the answer. Yet it is a trope of riddle-games and neck-riddles in narratives that the riddles actually not be intended to be guessable, that they be too abstruse for any interlocutor to work out without special information. Samson succeeds in producing a riddling speech act, and while he may fail in producing a "true" riddle, he makes nonetheless a very effective (whether or not it is fair) entry into the riddle-game. Riddles as speech acts remain riddles whether or not they are true riddles in the senses discussed above. Thus, while the distinction that Taylor draws between "true" and "false" riddles holds to a certain extent, it is a misnomer; those riddles he dismisses as "false" are functionally perfectly sound riddles, given the correct context. A better terminology might be "formal" and "functional" riddles, distinguishing between those riddles that are successful as riddles even in isolation from a pragmatic or narrative context (such as the Riddle of the Sphinx, or the Exeter riddles discussed in chapter 1), and those riddles that depend on the felicity

conditions of such a functional context in order to be identifiable as riddles (such as Samson's riddle, or the Loathly Lady riddles discussed below).

Among those felicity conditions is, as I have suggested above, a certain kind of power imbalance, and the power dynamic in the context and conversational exchange of Samson's riddle is decidedly lopsided, which also contributes the difficulties the riddle causes. It is Samson's wedding, after all, and the Philistines are guests, which puts him in a structural position of superior power relative to them; moreover, as he is the one who suggests the riddle-game and poses the riddle, it will also be up to him to evaluate the response.[21] Samson is the one issuing invitations, both to his wedding and his riddle-game, allowing him a kind of creative agency which his interlocutors do not have—all they can do is react to his actions. [22] He sets the terms of the exchange, and therefore has a monopoly on conversational power. The Philistines, disempowered both by the context and the conversation, can only revert to subversion to recover any modicum of control. Because the riddle is the site where Samson has displayed his one-up position over the Philistines, the moment when the political tensions between them are conversationally reified, it also becomes the target of the Philistine's aggression; in order to save face when confronted by such a threatening reminder of their one-down position, they must

[21] "[R]iddles [may] be regarded here as expressive models or representations of the serious and even formal interrogation of subordinates by superordinates such as occurs within cultures when a parent questions a child, a teacher questions a pupil . . . and so on. Usually in these situations the subordinates are deemed to have relatively little knowledge and power while the superordinates are believed to possess greater knowledge and power, at least within the specific context of any given interrogation." John M. Roberts and Michael L. Forman, "Riddles: Expressive Models of Interrogation," *Ethnology* 10 (1971): 509.

[22] Invitations are a close cousin of orders in both Searle's and Austin's taxonomies, where they are included as types of exercitives (Austin) and directive (Searle).

either defeat the riddler or dismantle the riddle-game. In the right context, merely posing a riddle, regardless of its answerability or relevance, can be an act of aggression.

Gender, Power, and Riddle-Speech

The use of riddles in asserting and maintaining conversational power is similarly at play in most riddle-ballads, though in a way more clearly inflected by the already-imbalanced power-relations between the sexes. In others of Child's versions of "Riddles Wisely Expounded" than the Scottish version, the stakes of the riddle-game are made more explicit. In the broadside version (1A), a knight who is looking for a wife comes across a woman with three lovely daughters. He is let in and given a bed by the first two daughters, and then:

> The youngest daughter that same night,
> She went to bed to this young knight.
>
> And in the morning, when it was day,
> These words unto him she did say:
>
> 'Now you have had your will,' quoth she,
> 'I pray, sir knight, will you marry me?'
>
> The young brave knight to her replyed,
> 'Thy suit, fair maid, shall not be deny'd.
>
> 'If thou canst answer me questions three,
> This very day will I marry thee.'
>
> 'Kind sir in love, O then,' quoth she,
> 'Tell me what your [three] questions be.'
>
> (1A, 7-12)

There is great potential for asymmetry in the distribution of power here, balanced precariously between the young knight's reported desire for a wife and the young

woman's expressed desire to marry him. Previous to the posing of the riddles, several marginal imbalances of power have been resolved: the knight arrives seeking a wife, and this desire puts him in a potentially disadvantaged position relative to the woman and her daughters, though only potentially, because it remains to be seen whether any of these particular women would be a suitable candidate for marriage in his eyes. On the other hand, he is described as "of noble worth" and "of courage stout and brave" (2-3), suggesting he may be desirable as a spouse to these young women, a reading which is bolstered by the daughters' welcome of him into a room and a bed. The moment where "He knocked at the ladie's gate / One evening when it was late" and "The eldest daughter let him in" (4-5) is a decisive moment for the distribution of power which the ballad hardly acknowledges. At the moment in which the knight stands outside the gate asking to be let in, the eldest daughter holds all the power to accept or reject him, to deny his request or accede to it. Similarly, the negotiation of power and desire which usually accompanies the consent to sexual activity slides quietly by as the youngest daughter simply "went to bed to this young knight"— there is no direct statement of who might have asked, offered, invited, entreated, or consented in this exchange, only the indication that it is the woman who initiated the encounter, and therefore presumably the knight who gave consent, in an inversion of the ordinary gender roles of seduction. But when the third daughter asks the knight, "Will you marry me?"—again, a subversion of traditional gender roles—the knight is put in a clear position of superior power, both in terms of the structure of desire, and his conversational position.

"Will you marry me?" is a speech act with a multivalent illocutionary force. On one level, it functions as exactly the interrogative that is its locutionary form: the asker

really wants the yes-or-no information which is the answer to the question. (On this level, the question might be paraphrased as "Do you agree to marry me?") On another level, it is an offer or a commissive: one felicity condition which the question "Will you marry me?" normally bears is that its asker intend to marry the answerer, assuming the answerer says yes. (On this level it is paraphrasable as "I will marry you, if you will marry me.") On another level still, and this may be its primary meaning, it is a request, which might be paraphrased as "I request that you marry me." The dynamics of conversational power between the knight and the woman here are complex, because while posing a question arguably always entails a move to greater relative power, making an offer is most often a concession of power from speaker to interlocutor (in that the interlocutor's response will determine the speaker's action, assuming the offer was sincere), and a request may go either way, depending on the strength of the request and the pre-existing power-structure—is it a quasi-imperative request such as a teacher might make in giving an assignment to a student, or a wholly optative request such as an employee might make in asking for a raise from an employer? Or is it a request between equals, which generally leaves the speaker on slightly lower footing from their interlocutor, given that it then becomes within the interlocutor's power to grant or deny the thing the speaker desires?

The woman has already given up the power that sexual (non-)consent may normally give her in this negotiation, by sleeping with the knight before the possibility of marriage has even been discussed. Whether she plans to appeal to the knight's sense of obligation and propriety after their encounter, or whether she is confident she really was that good in bed—or, for that matter, whether it was she who was auditioning him for conjugal suitability—her asking the question at the moment she does allows the knight to

take a one-up position of power in their conversation. It is now within the knight's prerogative to deny her request and reject her. A "yes" or "no" here from the knight would move the narrative quickly past this moment of exaggerated power imbalance, as the narrative has glossed over such moments previously, but the knight maintains his powerful position by giving neither answer. Instead, he responds with a conditional commissive: "If thou canst answer me questions three, / This very day will I marry thee." His delay in answering not only extends, but exaggerates, the power he holds in this conversation, as he puts himself into the position of evaluator, effectively establishing the back half of the preparatory felicity condition for riddles I have proposed above, that the speaker is in a position of power. The riddles he asks are then used in part to reify the his greater position of power; they demonstrate, tautologically , that he is in a position to ask riddles—but also, they remind both the reader and the young woman that he is the one in a position to decide whether they will be married. Part of what makes the knight's riddles interpretable as riddles is his position of conversational power, which contributes to a felicitous context that enables both the riddles and the power structure.

A similar dynamic of gender and power is organized around the riddles in a related Scottish ballad, "Captain Wedderburn's Courtship" (Child 46), which repeats some of the riddles from "Riddles Wisely Expounded," also applied evaluatively in a courtship context. But here it is the man who asks the marriage question, and the woman who answers his proposal with riddles, though the power dynamic still decisively favors the man. The structure of the encounter between Captain Wedderburn and the "laird of Bristoll's daughter" puts Wedderburn in a physically and sexually threatening position, to

be only partially ameliorated by the lady's use of riddles to negotiate their marriage relationship.

When Wedderburn sees the woman walking in the woods, he says to his livery man, "Wer't not against the law, / I would take her into mine ain bed, and lay her neist the wa" (46A, 1). Both Wedderburn's sexual aggression and the legal restraints on that aggression are made clear in these lines; the only thing preventing him from raping the woman is the illegality of it. [23] The young woman responds to his advances by pointing out that "I'm walking here . . . amang my father's trees," adding a few lines later, "My father he'll na supper tak, gif I be missed awa; / Sae I'll na lie in your bed, at neither stock nor wa"—a reminder that if Wedderburn pursues his desires, he will have her father to answer to. Legal and familial social structures thus mitigate Wedderburn's ability to simply take what he desires, but only initially. Wedderburn, uncowed, responds that "Tho your father and his men were here, of them I'd stand na awe, / But should take ye to my ain bend, and lay ye neist the wa." Despite her objections, Wedderburn puts her on his horse, physically holding her on it, and rides away to his quartering-house in Edinburgh. By the time the lady begins her litany of riddles, she is already well and thoroughly reduced to a position, physically and geographically, of nearly complete powerlessness.

The one source of agency remaining to the lady is her consent, which she has clearly not given thus far. The presence or protection of her father was not enough to prevent Wedderburn from kidnapping her, but it is clear in the first stanza that the

[23] This is in the related sense of carrying her off by force, and of sexual violence; both come from the Classical Latin *rapere,* to seize. See "rape, n.3," OED Online, December 2011, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158145, (accessed February 07, 2012); "rape, v.2," OED Online, December 2011, Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158153, (accessed February 07, 2012).

illegality of his actions does give him pause. Presumably this is why he indulges the riddles, stopping short of raping the lady in any sense but that of kidnapping her, and she uses this hesitation to delay the coming consummation: "I'll na lie in your bed till I get dishes three," followed by a series of evidently impossible demands. The modicum of power she gains in making her consent contingent on Wedderburn's display of merit comes at a high price; she has made her consent available, if conditional. The inverted entailment of a statement which follows the form "I will not do x until y" is "Once y, I will do x"—there is an implicit, if conditional, commissive in this statement. At this point the only avenue of escape available to her is to demand something that Wedderburn cannot answer or provide.

The lady begins by enumerating a few impossible things she would like for dinner (verse 9):

> T'is I maun hae to my supper a chicken without a bane;
> And I maun hae to my supper a cherry without a stane;
> And I maun hae to my supper a bird without a gaw,
> Before I lie in your bed, at either stock or wa.'

While the Lord's daughter does not frame these speech acts directly as riddles, they carry the same interpretive block or descriptive opposition (a thing cannot both be a chicken, and be without a bone) that Petsch and Taylor, respectively, see as essential to the riddle. More importantly, they operate under the felicity conditions which make riddles possible: the woman is enjoying an ever-so-fleeting moment of greater power in the interaction, as she has one thing which Wedderburn cannot simply take from her by force, and these speech acts allow her to emphasize her one-up position by making demands. All of this is in addition to the surplus of illocution which marks the riddles as speech acts—there must more to interpret, because they don't make immediate sense as literal demands.

In any case, it is clear that Wedderburn understands them as riddles, as he responds (verse 10):

> A cherry whan in blossom is a cherry but a stane;
> A capon when he's in the egg canna hae a bane;
> The dow it is a gentle bird that flies wanting the ga;
> And ye man lye in my bed, between me and the wa.

He does not actually bring her an egg, a cherry blossom, or a dove, because the request for these things is not a real request.[24] While the woman's speech acts are directives, they are indirect riddles in the guise of direct demands. Much as the woman in "Riddles Wisely Expounded" knew from context and trope that she was answering riddles, not questions, Wedderburn correctly interprets not only the content of the speech acts, but the illocutionary force of them as indirect speech acts.[25] In the A version of the ballad, the woman then goes on to ask six questions, which are phrased as questions and thus more evidently riddles (and which repeat several of the riddles from "Riddles Wisely Expounded"); in both the A and B versions she then moves on from impossible dinner options to improbable presents she would like, the final of which is "a priest unborn, this night to join us twa, / Before I lye in your bed" (15). Here at last Wedderburn is prepared to meet not only the riddle but the demand, and responds with what the reader can only imagine as a certain amount of glee (verse 17),

---

[24] J. Barre Toelken, in his article "'Riddles Wisely Expounded'," *Western Folklore* 25 (1966): 1-16, finds that these riddles (and all those which follow in the ballad) are quite sexually suggestive, eggs and flowers being the botanical and ornithological products of sexual activity. Such a reading arguably allows the riddles to extend even greater, though still momentary, conversational power to the woman, who could thus be making her own subtextual sexual demands, and asserting sexual agency rather than merely restricting her sexual willingness.

[25] The demand that one perform seemingly impossible tasks is another ballad-trope, usually understood as very closely related to riddling, if not in fact a type of riddle itself. See, for example, John Minton, "*The Fause Knight Upon the Road*: A Reappraisal," *The Journal of American Folklore,* 98 (1985): 436.

The priest is standing at the door, just ready to come in;
Nae man could sae that he was born, to lie it is a sin;
For a wild boar bored his mother's side, he out of it did fa;
And you man lye in my bed, between me and the wa.

So at last the Laird of Bristol's daughter finds herself married to the man who has already carried her off and promised/threatened repeatedly that he will "lay her neist the wa." Indeed, the variations on this burden encapsulate something of what is at stake throughout the ballad, as Wedderburn seems determined to get her not only into bed, but "between me and the wa," the position from which it is even more difficult to dictate when and whether she will engage him sexually, much less to escape. While this line in itself does not necessarily describe a rape, it is at the least *rapey,* especially given its persistence as the ballad's burden. It serves as a consistent reminder of what is at stake in this riddle contest: not only the woman's sexuality, but her agency, which has systematically been compromised from the beginning of the story to the end.

The versions of the ballad disagree on its ending. In all cases she ends up married, but A tells us that "And she man lye in his bed, but she'll not lye neist the wa" (18) while B ends, "now she's Mrs. Wedderburn, and she lies at the wa," and C simply omits the final line. The A version seems to suggest that her riddles had an effect, that while they did not help her to escape a marriage she did not desire, they did help her to negotiate a less disadvantaged position within that marriage. The B version, on the other hand, is perhaps the most disturbing, making it clear that not only did she lose the riddle-game, but the entire marriage negotiation; Wedderburn gets exactly what he wants, while the woman gets nothing. Although it seems the marriage and consummation were inevitable, the woman uses the riddles to delay that inevitability until her consent has been given, although its legitimacy as consent remains suspect as long as we view the marriage as

inevitable. It might be more accurate to say that where the riddles here offer the riddler no real or lasting power, they do offer a potent fantasy. The performance of the riddle-game grants both her and Wedderburn the fantasy of her consent: he is able to pretend that he has proved his merit to win her love, and she can imagine that her consent, via her evaluation of his merit, had anything to do with her "decision" to marry him.

The Riddle of Sovereignty

Riddles are generally used to negotiate sexual power in the riddle-ballads, where they cannot overturn, but may be used to exaggerate, the power imbalance structurally in place already between men and women. However, the riddle-ballads do not regularly gender the riddle-asker or answerer, nor do they regularly take the point of view of either the asker or answerer. But in the popular English subgenre of romance called the loathly lady tales, the riddles as well as their answers are, with one exception, put in the mouths of strange and uncomfortably powerful women, and the subject of the riddles themselves is the enigma of women's desire. Riddles in this genre are a particularly "female problem," in the sense of men having difficulty interpreting and understanding women, just as they do riddles.

The three loathly lady tales I will consider here—Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*; the *Tale of Florent*, from Gower's *Confessio Amantis*; and the anonymous romance *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*—follow the same basic narrative. A knight's life is threatened, but he is offered an escape by his antagonist if he can answer a riddle, which is always some variation on "What do women most desire?" He goes out in search of the answer, but to no avail, until he happens across an old and hideous woman who

tells him that she can give him the answer, if he'll promise to do whatever she asks in return. The answer she provides, that women desire sovereignty over men, is correct and satisfies the knight's accuser, but it comes with the price that he or someone close to him must subsequently marry the loathly lady. He agrees, and on their wedding night the knight discovers that the loathly lady has become young and fair, and she offers him a choice regarding how her beauty will be managed. Unable or unwilling to decide, he allows her to make the choice herself, and is rewarded with the permanent transformation of his wife into a beautiful young woman.

The function of the riddle in these tales is to make esoteric knowledge into power, allowing even socially peripheral figures like grotesque old women, or disenfranchised knights, to exercise a prerogative through their access to this knowledge. The narratives turn on these twin issues of power and knowledge not only in that they first seek and then reveal knowledge about the female desire for sovereignty, but in that the central conflict lies in an imbalance of power which is distilled into an informational imbalance. The queen in Chaucer, the crone in Gower, and Gromer Somer Jour in the *Wedding* all know something which their interlocutor doesn't, and they all ask the question expecting that it will not be answered, at least not immediately. The loathly ladies are similarly able to assert power, despite their abject social standing, not only via their access to privileged information, but because of the knights' lack; their information is empowering precisely because it is exclusive.

The riddle is most plainly a riddle in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, not because Chaucer changes the riddle, but because he adjusts the surrounding narrative and pragmatic context so that the riddle fits into the narrative and thematic concerns of the story.

Chaucer's version begins with a rape, and here there is no ambiguity between sexual violation and abduction: "He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn, / Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed, / By verray force, he rafte hire maydenheed."[26] Male desire, and the male disregard of female desire, is already center-stage before the riddle makes it explicit. Such "clamour" arises over the rape that the case is brought before Arthur's royal court, where the knight is nearly sentenced to death, except that "the queene and other ladyes" beg the king to spare him. Arthur assents, and the knight's fate is turned over to the queen's prerogative. The knight thus passes from male to female sovereignty, in a move that foreshadows the solution to the riddle that will arise later in the story. The queen grants the knight a year's reprieve, in which he must discover "What thyng it is that wommen moost desiren" (905); after a year, he must return either with the solution or to his execution.

Chaucer designs the context in which the riddle is posed, and especially the power dynamic in which the knight is disadvantaged, to reflect exactly the sovereignty riddle's thematic concern with women's power over men, as well as men's knowledge of women's desire. [27] In her first two lines to him, "Thou standest yet . . . in such array / That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee" (902-3), the queen not only reminds the knight of his precarious position, but emphasizes her own position of authority over him: His life hangs in the balance, and she holds the scales. This sets up the preparatory condition for

[26] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition, ed. Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), lines 886-88. Subsequent references references are by line number to this edition.

[27] Jill Mann similarly argues that Chaucer's inclusion of a rape to set the story in motion makes "the female desire for 'maistrye' . . . the just response to male 'oppresioun'," and she sees the Tale as working toward a "visionary glimpse of mutuality in male-female relationships." *Feminizing Chaucer* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer Ltd, 2002), 70-74.

the coming speech acts. Whatever the queen has to say next, the knight is reminded to take it very seriously – and what she does say next, "I grant thee lyf" (904), is serious indeed. This is a strong, direct performative speech act, and if the sentence ended there, his life would be granted. The following "if," however, complicates the performativity of "I grant thee lyf" – she may grant him life, but has not actually done so yet. A more precise phrasing would be to say "I will grant thee life," but its future tense would undermine is performativity (or at least, replace the life-granting performative with instead the performance of a promise), as its conditional mood does anyway. A conditional performative cannot be performative at all, since the whole point of performative language is to "do things with words," and if the performance has not yet happened although the words have been spoken, then they have failed to perform. On the other hand, before the queen says "I grant thee lyf," the knight is condemned to death; after the utterance, he may or may not be so condemned. The utterance has had an effect, but it is the awkward effect of temporarily annulling one state of affairs, while failing to firmly institute another: the knight, for the moment, is neither damned nor saved. The queen reminds him again of his subjection to her will a few lines later when she asks for a "suretee" that he will return, "Thy body for to yelden in this place" (911-13**).** Her semi-performative language appropriately keeps the knight in a position where, although he is not trapped or restricted, his body is not quite his own.

The context of these speech acts, the queen's assertion of authority and the knight's being put into bodily danger, inverts the power structure into which the knight entered with the commission of his crime. With the rape he committed at the *Tale*'s beginning, he reduced a woman to an object for the fulfillment of his own desires; now,

he is required to engage women generally in terms of their desires, while he himself must subject his own body to the queen's sovereignty. If the knight were a more astute reader of riddles, he might have been able to gather up the contextual cues and make a good guess that the answer will have something to do with women, power, and their relationship to men. Chaucer's version of the riddle is potentially answerable, in a way that, as we shall see, Gower's and the *Wedding*'s are not. This is accomplished not by any formal change to the riddle itself, but only to the context in which it appears. Of course, Chaucer's knight is nonetheless unable to produce a solution without outside help, but the point is that Chaucer arranges the context and the set-up so that the solution is available; the theme of female sovereignty is in the air, if the knight only had eyes to see and ears to hear.[28] In Chaucer's version of the story, the effect of the riddle is—or is at least meant to be—rehabilitative. The queen, expecting the riddle to be answerable, offers grace instead of punishment, though that grace is only predicated on his willingness to learn. The riddle in Chaucer's version is a satisfying formal riddle, and a satisfying ethical element of the narrative as well.

[28] Susanne Sara Thomas ("The Problem of Defining 'Sovereynetee' in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale," *The Chaucer Review* 141 [2006]: 87-97) argues that the knight clings to a kind of willful ignorance, that "he doesn't want to know what women want," and thus the quest is never successfully redemptive for him, because "[t]he impossible part of his quest is not finding the answer, but understanding the meaning of it" (87). Throughout the story and up to the ending, the knight "remains resistant to the potential transformation (of himself) that the quest has offered" (96). Other critics, such as Joseph P. Roppolo and Kathryn L. Mckinley, do see the quest and the riddle as transformative for the knight. Roppolo ("The Converted Knight in Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale'," *College English* 12 [1951]: 263-69.) describes him as "morally corrupt or, at best, youthfully blind" at the beginning of the Tale, the loathly lady's lecture on *gentilesse* "work[s] a sort of magic in the knight, to transform him" (266-67). Either way, it is clear even for Thomas that the *intended* effect is that the knight will learn to see the relationship between the riddle and his situation, and mend his behavior accordingly. The riddle is still a riddle – and a didactically useful one at that—regardless of whether the knight ever "gets" it.

Gower's version uses the riddle to more manipulative and punitive ends; in so doing, the riddler of the *Tale of Florent* artfully twists and subverts the pragmatics of the riddle-game. Whereas Chaucer's knight is clearly guilty, Gower's Florent is described as both worthy and chivalrous,[29] the unfortunate victim of a family seeking vengeance for the death of their son, Branchus, whom Florent killed in combat. The grandmother of the dead Branchus, "a lady . . . the slyheste / Of alle that men knewe tho" (1442-43) contrives the riddle as an artifice to set up the revenge-murder of Florent, without bringing upon them reciprocal repercussions from *his* family (he is the nephew of the emperor): "sche schal him to dethe winne / Al only of his ogne grant" (1448-49). She sells Florent on the riddle as a means for him to escape execution – he not knowing that there is no real danger of that – while actually intending it as a means to gain his consent to his own death. Florent agrees that if he cannot answer the riddle within the allotted time, he will return to the castle to die, and it is only as he signs his name to this oath that his life is actually put in danger.

Tellingly, the grandmother avoids using any strong performative language in this exchange; instead she merely cautions him,

> Florent, how so thou be to wyte
> Of Branchus deth, men schal respite
> As now to take vengement,
> Be so thou stonde in juggement
> Upon certein condicioun,
> That thou unto a questioun
> Which I schal axe schalt ansuere;
> And over this thou schalt ek swere,
> That if thou of the sothe faile,

[29] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* Book 1, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, *Confessio Amantis,* Volume 1, 2nd edition, ed. Russell Peck (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), lines 1408, 1414. Subsequent references are by line number to this edition.

Ther schal non other thing availe
That thou ne schalt thi deth receive.
(1465-1465)

Rather than asserting any overt, explicit authority or power, the grandmother's language presupposes, without actually stating, that Florent is in danger of death (which he is not), when she promises that "men schal respite . . . to take vengement."[30] Her language is, at least on the level of locution, predictive rather than directive or performative: "I schal axe" this question, and "thou schalt" swear to answer it, lest Florent be killed. This last is a clever, conditional half-truth, which depends upon Florent actually entering into the contract she has proposed. If he refuses, there is actually plenty to "availe" that he "ne schalt [his] deth receive," but if he agrees to the contract, then there will indeed be no help for him if he proves unable to solve the riddle. The grandmother is aware that she has no real power over Florent unless she can get him to give her that power; thus she avoids any strong performativity in her speech, while demanding it of Florent as he will "wrot his oth" (1487), performing the promise to return. Ironically, it is only as he signs his name to this oath that his life is actually put in danger.

Chaucer's knight was forced to confront, and to submit to, female sovereignty (the Queen's) in advance of his even hearing the riddle; Florent hears the riddle from a woman who has no real power over him at all, but is given the impression that it is the amorphous will of the people which has either condemned or saved him. He has no reason to have thought much about women's desires or sovereignty before the grandmother asks him "What alle wommen most desire" (Gower 1481). Gower's version

[30] The grandmother's manipulation relies on the pragmatic infelicity of supposition error: "They will refrain from killing you" carries the supposition (inherent in the meaning of "refrain") that they are planning to kill you now, which is in this case not true. She does not lie with what she says, but rather with what she leaves unsaid.

of the riddle is meant to be so esoteric that no one could reasonably answer it; it is a ploy, not a sincere gesture – indeed, it clearly violates the Sincerity Condition on what I have above called "formal riddles." And this is so by design; the grandmother does not intend her neck-riddle to be formally successful, as neck-riddles often are not. On the contrary, the function to which she wishes to put it demands that it be a riddle in function only.

But it is nonetheless a riddle. If either the queen's or the grandmother's question in Chaucer or Gower were only a question, and not a riddle, one would expect either knight to have little trouble finding a solution. He could investigate it, conduct a survey of the women he meets, learn whether there is any one bedrock desire common to all women, or what desire the plurality of women consider the greatest. Chaucer's knight in fact attempts something like this (as do Arthur and Gawain in the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*), and comes away with a variety of answers: women desire riches, honor, beauty, fine clothes, lust in bed; jollity, flattery, freedom, respect; and possibly to be widowed and re-married (Chaucer 925-944). Florent, on the other hand, recognizes the question as esoteric, requiring a consultation with specialists rather than popular opinion. He therefore calls upon "The wiseste of the lond" (Gower 1493), but there is no consensus among them, any more than there is among the women Chaucer's knight surveys. Tellingly, it does not even occur to Gower's protagonist to pose this question to women rather than wise men, which perhaps makes a kind of misogynist sense, since even in Chaucer, women themselves are apparently unaware of what it is they most desire. Women's interiority is, after all, enigmatic and unreadable, and women are evidently not capable enough of introspection to know their own minds. This assumption about women's interiority allows the question to function as a riddle, because it does not

have a factual answer, which could be learned by studying the world; instead it must be deduced by studying the riddle, if not learned from a third party. Chaucer's knight appears to makes the mistake, at least initially, of treating the queen's question as an ordinary interrogative (though still of Searle's "exam question" type, as described above), but because it is a riddle, a representative or expressive answer will not suffice; to answer the riddle, the knight should look more closely at the riddle itself, and especially the context in which it is asked. This is in contrast to the riddle Florent answers which, is not meant to be solvable. It is arcane knowledge, too privileged for him to simply work it out, which is why there was never any other way for him to find the answer than from a third party. There are no contextual clues to guide him; he is simply fortunate enough to find someone who already knows the answer.

In accordance with the changes in relevant context, the sovereignty riddle in Gower's version carries all the illocutionary excess which we saw in the riddle-ballads, while in Chaucer's version, the riddle is much less marked, in that it is more obviously relevant to the situation of the knight brought to trial. Thus, in a roundabout way, the failure of Chaucer's knight to recognize this as a riddle makes some sense—there was no pragmatic pressure for him to determine why *this* question was being asked. For Florent, the apparent arbitrariness of the riddle motivates him to make that necessary first, catalyzing interpretive move, to see the riddle as a riddle. Thus Florent approaches the question in a riddlic way, while the Chaucer's knight, though he may recognize that he is supposed to be learning an important lesson from the question, is not given the illocutionary surfeit to marks it as a riddle, and so misses that it is one.

When Chaucer's knight returns with the solution, the court is duly impressed. Interestingly, although it is unclear whether the women of the court knew their own desires before they heard the knight's answer, Chaucer mentions that they all seem to agree he has it right: "ne was ther wyf, ne mayde, / Ne wydwe that contraried that he sayde" (1043-44). Even if the knight could not learn the answer by surveying women, the answer he produces is nonetheless adjudicated by the general opinion of women, who recognize its rightness whether or not they could have produced it themselves. But when Florent eventually returns with the correct answer, the grandmother is furious, castigating the loathly lady: "Treson! Wo thee be, / That has thus told the privité, / Which alle women most desire!" (Gower 1659-61). Women's desire for sovereignty is here a *privité,* a secret, a truth so inaccessible that Florent should not be able to know it. There is something more in the grandmother's rage than disappointment that Florent learned the answer and escaped her revenge; she has been betrayed, someone has committed "treson" against her – or perhaps against all women, by telling a man the exclusive feminine secret of female desire. Recalling Florent's failure to ask any women (before the loathly lady) how to answer this riddle, perhaps it is not simply a question of whether women know the answer, but whether they would tell him if they did. Whether or not women know their desires may be beside the point; if they did know, they would never reveal them to a man. Either way, Florent has had little enough opportunity to see female sovereignty displayed in the world around him; he simply does not have the contextual cues that Chaucer's knight does.

Furthermore, in the ensuing difficulties with the loathly lady, Chaucer's knight is forced to confront, and submit to, the lady's desires in a way that Florent is not. Florent

knew that the price for learning the answer from the loathly lady would be marriage; he was given the choice between accepting her help and giving her his hand, and death. He chose the marriage, even if he did so under duress. While he's miserable at having to go through with it after her answer saves his life, it is the sovereignty of his troth that he respects, not the sovereignty of the woman. The loathly lady in Chaucer requires, more nebulously, that the knight do "the next thyng that I requere of thee" (Chaucer 1010) before she'll give him the solution. Whereas Florent agrees specifically to marriage, Chaucer's knight agrees to something much more vague, to submit to the sovereignty of the loathly lady's desires whatever they are, and while he pleads for "a newe requeste" when he learns that what she wants is marriage (1060), he must nonetheless fulfill the terms of their contract. Both knights end up in the same bind of marrying an undesirable woman, but Florent makes that choice with an intentionality that Chaucer's knight is denied. The loathly lady's sovereignty over the knight has already been exercised and he is, once again publicly and at court, at the mercy of women's desires.

In the resolution of all versions of the story, the loathly lady turns into a beautiful young maiden on the wedding night, and offers her new husband a choice for how her beauty will be managed. Chaucer's knight is asked to choose between a wife who is beautiful but unfaithful, or ugly but true to him; Florent, between a wife who is beautiful by day and hideous by night, or the reverse. Florent struggles to choose, but finds that "yit cowthe he noght / Devise himself which was the beste" and so finally tells the woman,

> I wol that ye be my maistresse,
> For I can noght miselve gesse
> Which is the beste unto my chois.
> Thus grante I yow myn hole vois,

Chos for ous bothen, I you preie;
And what as evere that ye seie,
Rigt as ye wole so wol I.

(1825-32)

Only here does Florent at last agree to be governed by the sovereignty of a woman, but only because he cannot "gesse / Which is the beste"; he defers more to her knowledge (which he has been given reason to believe superior to his) than her desires. Immediately, the woman reveals that her ugliness is the result of a curse, now broken because "ye have mad me soverein" (1834), and so she will be able now to appear in her true form, the beautiful young princess of Sicily. Florent's brief and painful encounter with female sovereignty comes to an end, and he escapes it not by any recognition of its validity, but by luck, desperation, and indecision. He is never truly made to practice what the riddle preaches.

The loathly lady in Chaucer's version is not the victim of a curse, as she is in Gower (and in the *Wedding);* she is a fairy who is evidently able to switch forms, from ugly old woman to beautiful maiden.[31] Kathryn McKinley points out that the loathly lady in Chaucer is not trying to save herself by seeking the knight's sovereignty, as she is in other versions, but is apparently "testing him to prove what he deems of highest worth" – external beauty or internal virtue.[32] When she offers him the choice between a faithful hag or a faithless beauty, she is in fact posing him a second riddle: Which is preferable, more in keeping with the tenets of *gentilesse* she has expounded, more honorable for both

[31] Kemp Malone reminds us that the dancing ladies the knight sees, who vanish to be replaced by the loathly lady, makes it clear that the old woman is a fairy, with "superhuman powers" and "in full control of things throughout, shifting her shape at will and making everything come out right as good fairies always do." "The Wife of Bath's Tale," *The Modern Language Review* 57 (1962): 485.

[32] Katherine McKinley, "The Silenced Knight: Questions of Power and Reciprocity in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale'," *The Chaucer Review* 30 (1996): 363.

of them?[33] Perhaps unwittingly, the knight gets it right by turning the choice back over to the loathly lady, submitting to her understanding of which is the better choice:

> My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
> I put me in youre wise governance;
> Cheseth yourself which may be moost plesance
> And moost honour to yow and me also.
> I do no fors the wheither of the two,
> For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.
> (1230-35)

McKinley points out that this speech made to the lady is suddenly and remarkably more polite than the knight's previous harangues, in which he has called her "my dampnacioun!" (1067) and, when asked why he is being so disagreeable on their wedding night, reminded her angrily that "Thou art so loothly, and so oold also, / And thereto comen of so lough a kynde" (1100-1**)**. With his newfound courtesy and willingness to submit to the lady's "governance," the knight has not only learned the solution and answered the riddle; he has become the answer, turning himself over to his wife's sovereignty. This is certainly not an entirely straightforward gesture. Although both McKinley and Susan Crane attribute this change in tone to the efficacy of the lady's rhetoric,[34] it seems not coincidental that while he is addressing the hag, he is rude; when offered the possibility of her being instead a lovely young maiden, he grows sweet and

[33] McKinley notes, following Robert Meyer, that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* contains "two contrary romances within the fairy tale": first the quest for the answer to the sovereignty riddle, and then the "purely internal, spiritual" quest to solve this second riddle. "The Silenced Knight," 360; see also Robert Meyer, "Chaucer's Tandem Romances; A Generic Approach to the 'Wife of Bath's Tale' as Palinode," *The Chaucer Review* 18 (1984): 221-38.

[34] McKinley ("The Silenced Knight," 364) argues that that the lady's lecture on gentilesse, which precedes the knight's choice, has been taken to heart, and the knight's moral "transformation" which was the point of the riddle-quest is now complete. Susan Crane similarly sees the difference between this and the knight's earlier language as evidence that "the hag has talked him into loving and respecting her." "Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath's Tale," *PMLA* 27 (1987): 27n15.

deferential. Moreover, it is not even sovereignty over himself which he grants his wife, but only over herself and her own identity – although even this is complicated in turn by the lady's response, "have I get of yow maistrie?" (1236), which seems a sly way to expand her sovereignty from this one decision to an undefined scope, as Susanne Sara Thomas points out: "[G]overnance over the question of *her* body immediately turns into a question of her mastery over *him.*"[35] Whether the knight lands in a more equitable, reciprocal marriage arrangement by dint of this choice,[36] or whether his wife is able to assert "total sovereignty,"[37] patriarchy reasserts itself as the lady reveals that she will now be not only both beautiful and true to him, but we are told that "she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (1255). If women desire sovereignty in marriage, it seems, this is only so that they can willingly hand it off again to their husbands.[38]

---

[35] "Problem of Defining," 93.

[36] According to McKinley, the two end up in an state of "ideal married love and reciprocity" because they have each sacrificed for and deferred to the other. "The Silenced Knight," 376.

[37] Thomas argues that the knight in fact remains subject to the no-longer-loathly lady, because she puts herself in a position to define his desires for him, especially when she tells him before she offers the choice, "syn I knowe your delit, / I shall fulfille youre worldy appetit" (1217-18); she can only be certain of her ability to satisfy his desires if she is the one deciding what they are. Whether or not he knows it, he is the one subject to her at the end, despite her promise of obedience. "Problem of Defining," 93, 95.

[38] Elaine Tuttle Hansen summarizes the Tale's resolution as a return to "proper" gender roles, with the mastery returned to the husband and the wife newly-promised to be obedient. "'Of his love daungerous to me': Liberation, Subversion, and Domestic Violence in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale," in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996): 281. Contrasitvely, McKinley ("The Silenced Knight," 370) argues that while the lady's transformation may be evidence of "male wish-fulfillment," it occurs only after the knight has denied himself the beautiful transformed lady, and that her subsequent obedience is thus "less significant than the knight's act of volition which makes it possible." Strictly from the knight's perspective this is true; and yet from the perspective of genre – and the related structure of riddle— it seems somewhat inevitable that such a resolution would be reached. The "riddle" posed by the loathly lady's impossible choice of fair-and faithless or foul-and-true would certainly be solved; it is difficult to imagine a medieval romance in which the

Gower's and Chaucer's adaptations of the loathly lady tale are generally assumed to be based on the same text,[39] such that while their two versions are rife with intriguing ethical and hermeneutic differences, the narrative structure is essentially the same, the cast of characters altered in themselves, but less changed in their place within the narrative structure. The third version I wish to consider, the anonymous romance *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell,* uses the same core conflict in posing the sovereignty riddles as an alternative to threatening a knight's life, but builds around it a very different story, one concerned less with ethics than with honor, and less with power than with regulation of the Other; as Thomas Halm describes it, "how the unknown, the marvelous, or the threatening" may be "brought into line with legitimate, normative, idealized chivalric society."[40] The riddle in *Wedding* appears, when it is articulated, to be an arbitrary and unanswerable question designed to lure the interlocutor into an unwinnable riddle-game (much as in Gower), but here it is an act which is not only personally threatening, but profoundly socially disruptive. As its answer is sought, found, and paid for, that disruption extends to trouble the patriarchy of the court itself.

Wedding splits the main character of the tale into two: King Arthur is put in danger and given the riddle, but it is Gawain who is forced to marry the loathly lady.

---

protagonist knight ends up married to either untenable option. (A *fabliau,* on the other hand, would probably relish such an ending.)

[39] See for example Sigmund Eiser, *A Tale of Wonder: A Source Study of the Wife of Bath's Tale* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1969), 65. Even critics who disagree that the tales are derived from a common source still recognize a close relation between them. Benjamin Willem Lindeboom, for example, argues that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* draws on and adapts the *Tale of Florent. Venus' Own Clerke: Chaucer's Debt to the* Confessio Amantis (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 2007), 208-9.

[40] Thomas Hahn, "Introduction: Sir Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales,* ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 41.

Arthur is hunting with his knights when a hart draws him away from the other hunters. His departure from the group is a significant if temporary fracture, beginning the disruption of the masculine order which the riddle and the riddler will only exacerbate. Leaving the hunting party allows Arthur to be targeted in a way that the king isn't supposed to be targetable, though it is also essential to the testing of a romance protagonist; Manuel Aguirre emphasizes that "one of the textual functions of the [trope of the] Hunt is to introduce the protagonist into an Otherworldly domain," where "the logic of everyday reality often fails" and "the protagonists' abilities are pitted against the logic of the Other."[41] Riddles, which are so often logical paradoxes or demand "an unreasonable answer,"[42] and so often posed by strange, threatening, and otherworldly figures (such as a Sphinx, a Mad Hatter, or a Gollum), often arise in such places.[43] Here, the threatening riddler is a "quaynt grome, / Armyd welle and sure . . . fulle strong and of greatt myghte,"[44] the improbably-named Gromer Somer Jour.[45] Jour greets Arthur and

[41] Manuel Aguirre, "The Riddle of Sovereignty," *Modern Language Review* 88 (1993): 276.

[42] Ibid., 276.

[43] The queen in Chaucer and the grandmother in Gower can also be understood as entries in this category of alarming Other-figures who pose riddles, insofar as this is a story-type that tends to be deeply disturbed by the desire of women for power, and so powerful women are unpredictable Others , and the realms where they hold sway, dangerous Otherworlds.

[44] "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales,* ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), lines 50-52. Subsequent references are by line number to this edition.

[45] Aguirre points out that name Gromer Somer Joure means "The Man of the Summer Day" and that "his name identifies him with . . . the Summer Solstice, a turning point in the agricultural cycle" ("Riddle of Sovereignty," 279); Aguirre thus identifies him with the loathly lady from the Irish forerunner of the loathly lady tales, who turns out to be "the deity representing the land itself" (275) : "[O]stensibly, the land-issue is now handled entirely between him and Arthur, leaving Gawain and Ragnell free to concentrate on the 'wooing' aspect. In other words . . . the figure of woman is being taken out of the field of land-symbolism and relegated to the (more literal) domestic sphere: Sovereignty over land is being displaced in favor of Sovereignty in love" (279).

calls him "Kyng alone," recognizing that Arthur's isolation is the key to Jour's power in this interaction:

> Well imet, Kyng Arthour!
> Thou has me done wrong many a yere
> And wofully I shall quytte the here;
> I hold thy lyfe days nyghe done.
> Thou has gevyn my landes in certayn
> With greatt wrong unto Sir Gawen.
> Whate say thou, Kyng alone?
>
> (54-60)

Jour has already been elbowed out of regular masculine chivalric society, forced to leave his lands and, apparently, take up residence in an enchanted forest. Living resentfully on the margins of Arthurian society, Jour has been waiting for the opportunity that Arthur's questionable decision to leave his hunting party provides.[46] His avowal that "I shall quytte the here" and "I hold thy lyfe days nyghe done" constitute both promise and threat; his intention to kill Arthur is so far uncomplicated by concerns of honor, shame, or chivalry. Yet Jour, who holds a sword while Arthur has only a butchered deer in hand to defend himself, commits the classic evil supervillain blunder of getting distracted with his own taunting conversation, and thus loses his opportunity to exact his revenge. He not only allows but requires Arthur to speak, and Arthur in response invokes the chivalric code to remind Jour of the consequences inhering in slaying an unarmed knight, especially a popular one:

> To sle me here honour getyst thou no delle.
> Bethynk the thou artt a knyghte:
> Yf thou sle me nowe in thys case,
> Alle knyghtes wolle refuse the in every place;
> That shame shalle never the froo.

[46] If we accept Aguirre's argument for Jour as the remnant of a figure representing the land, summarized in the note above, it even seems plausible that Jour is behind the hart which lured Arthur away from the other knights; certainly Jour seems to be waiting for him.

Lett be thy wylle and folowe wytt
And that is amys I shalle amend itt,
And thou wolt, or that I goo.

(65-72)

Arthur reminds Jour here that he, Jour, has more than one desire in his impulse to kill the king. He wants revenge, but he also presumably wants his lands back. He has a lot to lose in killing the king unarmed – his knightly status and his honor – and a lot to gain by not killing him, in that the wrong he has been done in the loss of his lands to Gawain could be righted. But Jour points out that if he lets Arthur go now, Arthur will have to challenge him later for the dishonor of his mockery; Jour will not get another opportunity with Arthur "att avaaylle" (74-78). Arthur reiterates that he will grant Jour whatever he most wants, and that it would be shameful for Jour to kill him while he is hunting and "clothyd butt in grene" (79-83), but he is still missing the point – Jour can hardly be expected to behave according to the ideals of the chivalric culture which has abused and rejected him. Then comes the utterance of the riddle, the crux of the conversation, but also a curious turn for Gromer Somer Jour to take, given what we know about his desires and motivations thus far.

Alle thys shalle nott help the, sekyrly.
For I wolle nother lond ne gold, truly
Butt yf thou grant me att a certeyn day
Suche as I shalle sett, and in thys same araye.
. . .
Fyrst thow shalt swere upon my sword broun
To shewe me att thy comyng whate women love best in feld and town
And thou shalt mete me here withouten send
Evyn att this day twelfe monethes end;
And thou shalt swere upon my swerd good
That of thy knyghtes shalle none com with the, by the Rood,
Nowther fremde ne freynd.

(84-96)

The riddle is used less as a direct threat than as a demand. Arthur's offer to give Jour anything he wants in line 80 hearkened back to his promise to fix the wrong Jour felt had been done him in line 71. Now Jour responds to both by clarifying that he has no desire for gold or land, the kind of things one might expect to gain by threatening a king. Instead, he launches into the legalistic conditions surrounding the riddle: that Arthur will return in a year, similarly alone and unarmed, to tell him the answer to his riddle, "whate women love best in feld and town." As Arthur swears on Jour's sword that he will return, it is the condition that he return with the answer – not the stipulation that he be unarmed – which has primacy, which is first and most clearly the action to which Arthur commits by performing the commissive. Arthur is able to felicitously swear to return unarmed and in hunting clothes as he is today, because that is something he has control over, but he is swearing above and beyond that to return with the answer to the riddle, which the felicity conditions of promises make it impossible for him to do sincerely. He can promise to *try* to answer the riddle, but he cannot promise to actually answer it, because he can't be sure this is something he'll be able to accomplish.

Jour's strange demand, his claim that the thing he really wants is not reparation of capital but instead for Arthur to embark on this riddle-quest, suggests that his desires are actually quite acutely imbricated in the notions of honor and shame which Arthur has already invoked in attempting to dissuade Jour from killing him. Jour has been disenfranchised by Arthur's court, his lands given to a knight of greater reputation and position than he. With this in mind, Arthur's argument that killing him unarmed will only damage Jour's reputation might only be as the proverbial salt in Jour's wounds, as Gromer Somer Jour evidently has no status to speak of – indeed, if he had, he might have

been able to challenge Gawain for his lands in the first place. Arthur hopes to convince Jour by invoking a desire stronger than the desire to kill him, and in a way he succeeds: Jour's desire for revenge is greater than his desire for slaughter. Much as the riddlers in the riddle-ballads use their riddles to tread water at the conversational moment where they had the greatest power, Jour uses the riddle, and the riddle-quest, to expand the space of his power over the king, and thus the both duration and scope of his revenge. Rather than quietly and dishonorably kill Arthur alone in the wood, Jour forces Arthur to swear to something that he believes Arthur will be unable to deliver. He may thus undermine Arthur's own honor, even if only in a small matter, while simultaneously (he hopes) forcing Arthur to consent to his own death; Jour's use of the riddle is in this way quite similar to the grandmother's in *Florent*. Arthur's death will be as disappointing and shameful for him in a year as Jour's murder of him, unarmed and alone, would be now.

Of course, this is not how the story subsequently plays out. Arthur gathers his knights and returns to Carlisle with them, though he remains separated from them by the "hevynesse" that "knewe no man" (133). Eventually, Arthur tells Gawain the situation he is in. [47] At this point the single knight from Gower's and Chaucer's versions is divided and augmented, as Gawain immediately volunteers to undertake the riddle-quest with the king:

> Lett make your hors redy
> To ryde nto a straunge contrey;
> And evere wheras ye mete owther man or woman, in faye,
> Ask of theym whate thay therto saye,

[47] Although Jour has Arthur swear specifically to return, to be unarmed, and to come alone, he never actually extracts the promise from him not to tell anyone about their encounter. Arthur is nonetheless averse to breaking Jour's confidence, telling Gawain that the knight "chargyd me I should hym nott bewrayne; / Hys councelle must I kepe therefore, / Or els I am forswore" (148). Yet there was no actual oath taken in the conversation we saw earlier.

And I shalle also ryde anoder waye
And enquere of every man and woman and gett whatt I may
Of every man and womans answere;
And in a bok I shalle them wryte.
(183-190)

Gawain's suggested course of action – to which Arthur agrees – does not treat Jour's question like a riddle, but like a question with a particularly esoteric answer, which he expects to find by trial-and-error; if Arthur returns to Jour with as many guesses as possible, then statistically one of them is likely to be right. This, too, violates the terms of the riddle-game as it is played by the Sphinx and other more stringent riddlers. Usually the answerer does not have an unlimited number of chances to guess. But when Arthur does return with two full books of answers a year later, "Syr Gromer lokyd on theym everychon" (452) and rejects them all; even Jour does not quite seem to be playing the riddle-game by the rules.[48] In the *Wedding* version of the loathly lady tale, the question's status as a riddle is contextually a little fuzzy: Neither the questioner nor interlocutor seems committed to it as a test of merit, rather than a genuinely impossible task (as Jour intends it) or simply a test of research stamina.

In fact, the very exhaustiveness of Arthur and Gawain's guesses raises problems for the riddle and its answer. The two of them have each spent a full year asking every man and woman they meet what they believe it is that women most desire, and have filled two books with possible answers. Evidently not a single person would even *guess* that women's greatest desire would be sovereignty over men. This seems statistically

[48] In the *Tale of Florent,* too, the protagonist is given some allowance for working through various possible answers, but at some point, after he "tarieth longe and late," the grandmother "bad . . . / That he schal for the dom final / Gif his ansuere" (1645-48). The grandmother thinks she has nothing to lose by entertaining a series of guesses, but eventually she—in keeping with the rules of the riddle-game—wants to know his final answer.

quite remarkable, especially if we are to take the answer as not only correct, but true; not only did no one guess this answer, but (as we saw in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*), there is apparently no woman anywhere in a year's worth of travelling who had an inkling of her own greatest desire. But then, perhaps this only emphasizes that the truth-value of the riddle is only of secondary importance to its being the correct solution. All that really matters for the narrative (so far) is that it be the right answer, not that it necessarily be an accurate description of the world. The answer might be as arbitrary, relative to the question, as the riddle is relative to the context.

The attrition of the riddle's function in the *Wedding* is a consequence, at least in part, of the much more masculine nature of this version of the story. No actual women have appeared thus far, only the specter of women's unknowable desires. In Chaucer and Gower, where it is a woman who poses the sovereignty riddle, she asks something about herself, whether her interlocutor understands this aspect of her as well as women in general, and the very act of asking the question is a gesture toward the answer, of one woman's power, however temporary, over one man. But for Jour, the question is meant to be, among men, unanswerable, just as women's interiority is, to men (and it seems to themselves), unknowable. Until the loathly lady herself enters the story, women and their desires are not only inscrutable, but absent.

The loathly lady, here named Dame Ragnelle, appears only when Arthur returns near the end of the year to Inglewood Forest, the Otherworldly site of his original encounter with Jour. Ragnelle approaches the king, on a horse decked with gold and jewels, and greets him confidently, "Speke with me . . . For thy lyfe is in my hand" (255-256). Arthur unwittingly reiterates the riddle he is seeking to answer, responding to Dame

Ragnelle with "Why, whatt wold ye, Lady, nowe with me?" (258). Ragnelle tells him that none of the answers he has collected are correct, and again says that she can help him, to which Arthur replies (his courtesy failing him),

> Whate mean you, Lady? Telle me tyghte,
> For of they words I have great dispyte;
> To you I have no need.
> What is your desire, fayre Lady?
> (270-273)

Thus the question of what women want, which is otherwise an abstract problem that no real woman can solve, becomes concrete and attaches to an individual: what does Dame Ragnelle want? The answer is of course that she wants what all women want, and that the agenda of her desire will be understood only when the desire of women generally is understood. Until then, given her age and her foulness, her demands seem totally unreasonable, selfish and even cruel: "If myn answere save thy lyf, / Graunt me to be Gawens wyf" (285-86).

When Chaucer's and Gower's knights agree to the loathly lady's terms, they are the ones who make the sacrifice of binding themselves to a hag. Arthur is put in a rather different predicament, since it is not him whom Ragnelle will have, but Gawain, his friend and brother-in-arms. Although he protests the lady's proposition at some length, even when he says "I nott [do not know] whate I do may" (308), it is clear he has already made up his mind.

> . . . I may not graunt the
> To make warraunt Sir Gawen to wed the;
> Alle lyeth in hym alone.
> Butt and itt be so, wolle do my labour
> In savyng of my lyfe to make itt secour;
> To Gawen wolle I make my mone.
> . . .

. . . Nowe woo is me
That I should cause Gawen to wed the,
For he wol be lothe to saye naye.
So foulle a Lady as ye are nowe one
Sawe I nevere in my lyfe on ground gone;
I nott what I do may.
(291-308)

He cannot guarantee ("make warraunt") that Gawain will agree to this arrangement, but he plans to convince him ("make my mone"), and he knows Gawain will be "lothe to saye naye." Arthur has been having small difficulties with his honor throughout the story: promising things he can't be sure he can deliver, forswearing himself (in his own words) by breaking the confidence of Gromer Somer Jour, and now showing himself perhaps a little too eager to pass the cost of the riddle's answer on to his closest friend. The riddle's disruption of masculine norms seems to be getting to him personally, cramping his chivalric style.

Of course Gawain does agree, eagerly telling Arthur that "I shalle wed her and wed her agayn, / Thowghe she were a fend; / Thowghe she were as foulle as Belsabub" (343-345). His marriage to the lady is not really a submission to her sovereignty, but to Arthur's; in promising to marry Ragnelle, he invokes their friendship, Arthur's kingship, and adds that if he failed now to save Arthur's life, he would be "false and a greatt coward" (347-53). Gawain is perhaps more conscious of honor than Arthur is himself, and knows his responsibilities as Arthur's friend and subject. Again, the masculine chivalric code which failed Gromer Somer Jour in the past, and which Arthur tried to invoke to dissuade Jour from his revenge, is turned back on Arthur and Gawain as a tool of manipulation. Much as Jour was less interested in maintaining his own honor than in using the Arthurian ideals of reputation and chivalry to lure him into the riddle-game,

Dame Ragnelle presumably knew that Gawain would not refuse to marry her if it would save the king's life. Both Jour and Ragnelle are disruptive to the chivalric culture which has marginalized them, but Ragnelle's disruption is the more intrusive; rather than luring Gawain to the margins, she imposes herself on him at the center.

Ragnelle is a figure of wild excess, even to the point of monstrosity. On her first appearance, the narrator takes great delight in cataloging every horrible piece of anatomy: a red face with a "snotyd" nose, wide mouth, and broad cheeks, as well as yellow teeth that hang over her lips; large and bleary eyes; hair "cloteryd in an hepe," above a thick neck and a humpback; huge sagging breasts, and the overall build of a barrel (231-242). Later, at her betrothal, we are told that she has teeth like boars' tusks, "The one tusk went up and the other doun" in foul and hairy mouth with lumpish lips (549-554); and at the wedding feast she uses her three-inch-long fingernails to "breke her mete" (608). While Chaucer's knight is married off with dispatch, as the wedding night is far more interesting to this narrator than the wedding itself, and Florent marries his loathly lady by night in quiet secrecy, Ragnelle insists on a public and extravagant wedding, goading Arthur that "Openly I wol be weddyd, or I parte the froo / Elles shame wolle ye have" (507-408), and once again manipulating him through his concerns for shame, honor, and reputation. At the wedding-feast she is ill-mannered and voracioius; here again, the narrator gleefully indexes that she ate three capons and three curlews in addition to "greatt bake metes . . . Ther was no mete cam her before / Butt she ete itt up" (610-614). She cannot be contained or enclosed or even categorized; she defies the boundaries of

humanness, eliciting comparisons with animals, as well as of feminine behavior; she amazes everyone with her ugliness and her appetite.[49]

The sovereignty Ragnelle demands is more public than that desired by the loathly ladies in *Florent* and *Wife of Bath*. She is the inverted non-answer to the cipher of female desire, so outrageous and excessive that even in her repulsive exuberance of appetite, she defies the possibility of understanding what it is women want. Wanting everything and consuming everything, she the embodiment of masculine anxieties about unknowable, and therefore unquenchable, female desire. She is the desire which will not be regulated or interpreted, and which will have its way, flouting the whole masculine chivalric code. Only when Ragnelle's desire for sovereignty in marriage is fulfilled, as she repeats the transformation into a lovely young maiden from the previous two loathly lady tales, is her unbridled appetite sated, and she is recovered by the patriarchy. Aguirre suggests that the political, national, and land-bound Sovereignty of the Irish version of the story, *The Adventures of Eochaid's Sons,* is transmuted to the interpersonal, domestic marital sovereignty which the loathly ladies of the English tales desire,[50] but something of that public sovereignty is still extant in Dame Ragnelle's desire. When she articulates the answer to the riddle, she does not actually tie it explicitly to marital sovereignty:

---

[49] Both Mary Leach and Sue Niebrzydowski see, in Ragnelle's size, excess in appetite and consumption, and repulsive table manners the Bakhtinian grotesque. Thus while her ugliness and behavior are played for humor, they also serve to reiterate the boundaries on femininity, and the only way for the patriarchy to bear her is to reduce her to something small and manageable—before, as Leach points out, killing her off entirely to save Gawain from the emasculation of loving her too much. Leach, "Why Dame Ragnell Had to Die: Feminine Usurpation of Masculine Authority in 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell'," in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs,* ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 213-34; Niebrzydowski, "Monstrous Appetite and Belly Laughs: A Reconsideration of the Humour in the Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell," *Arthurian Literature* 27 (2010): 87-102.

[50] Aguirre, "The Riddle of Sovereignty," 278-280.

We desyren of men above alle maner thyng
To have the sovereynté, withoute lesyng,
Of alle, both hughe and lowe.
For where we have sovereynté, alle is ourys
Though a knight be nevere so ferys,
And evere the mastry wynne.
Of the moste manliest is our desire:
To have the sovereynté of such a syre,
Suche is our crafte and gynne.
(422-430)

Women want the mastery over "alle" – presumably all men, but even that is left not entirely clear – and especially sovereignty over the manliest of men. To have sovereignty over one's "syre" – be that one's lord or one's husband – is to invert the very meaning of the word *syre*, which entails a hierarchy based on gender or class.[51] The public display upon which Ragnelle insists at her wedding becomes much more explicable with an understanding of this public dimension of sovereignty; it was easy enough to read her behavior as simple part of her barely-human nature, but this public dimension is a part of the definition of the *sovereignty* which Ragnelle is seeking. Ragnelle recognizes that a marriage in which she must hide and be hidden will never be a marriage in which she reigns.

The choice that Ragnelle offers Gawain on their wedding night is the same as that given Florent: "Wheder ye wolle have me fayre on nyghtes /. . . Or els to have me fayre on days" (659-61). The indecision in which Gawain is caught has him torn between honor and lust, and between two desires both coded as masculine – desire for a beautiful woman, and desire not to lose face publically. He must choose between valuing his wife

[51] The MED gives both the meaning "A king, lord, ruler, patron; a person of social importance; also used of God" and "a master of a household; a husband . . . the head of our household." Interestingly, under the sub-heading, it also gives the meaning "as a term of disapprobation: wretch, rogue." "sĭr(e (n.)," electronic *Middle English Dictionary,* 2001-2014, University of Michigan, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/medidx?type=id&id=MED40511.

for the public status she will give him if she is beautiful by day, and valuing her for the physical satisfaction he can give her if she is beautiful by night. Of course this is a trick question, as it is in all the versions, but it is only Gawain who articulates clearly what he is choosing between, and recognizes that he should not be choosing at all, because he cannot discern "the best." Instead he turns the choice over to Ragnelle, to "do as ye lyst nowe" (675)—and it is significant that he puts it this way, allowing her not only to make the choice, but specifically to pursue her desires, by making it.[52] It was a trick question because it spoke to only Gawain's desires—what Ragnelle as a wife had to offer him—and not to her own. But the moment of female sovereignty cannot last; as Ragnelle is transformed permanently into a young and beautiful woman, she also promises that "Whilles that I lyve I shal be obaysaunt / . . . never with you to debate" (784) to Gawain. These are the last words she speaks in the poem; she is silenced and brought back into the patriarchal fold not only for their marriage, but for the reader.

In the *Wedding,* as in the *Tale of Florent*, the final twist is that the apparently conniving loathly lady is actually a victim herself, of a stepmother who cursed her to be hideous until "the best of Englond" had married her and given her "the sovereynté / Of alle his body and goodes" (*Wedding* 695-98). Thus she can be forgiven for her manipulations, and she and her knight can live happily ever after. Yet if the story were told from the perspective of the lady, the riddle would not be about women's desires, but about men's. That riddle is implied in the stepmother's curse, but even more so imbricated in the conflict driving the plot: How does a fantastically ugly woman convince

[52] Florent, by contrast, invites the lady to "Sey what you list in my querele" (1822) an invitation which evolves into the plea, "Ches for ous bothen" (1829), but leaving the matter of her desires as a basis for her contribution to his internal debate, rather than for her decision-making.

the best, most manly, most well-regarded knight in the land to marry her? From her perspective, the sovereignty riddle is not really the real, but the *answer,* the solution to the central paradox of Ragnelle's life, and a tool that she is happily able to use to escape her stepmother's curse.

A narrative such as this, which is built around a conflict that seems impassable, mirrors the structure of the riddle: a problem is apparently unsolvable until the narrative elements align to cast it in a different light and make room for the impossible to happen. The riddle in the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* is as deeply imbricated in its surrounding narrative as that in the Oedipus story is in its character and themes. These as well as the other narratively situated riddles examined in this chapter invariably therefore make a pragmatic move beyond that of question-and-answer between characters; they simultaneously pose their riddles beyond the edges of the text, ironically addressing the reader as a meta-interlocutor. The Riddle of the Sphinx has taken on a life of its own to work as a stand-alone riddle or an entry in riddle-collections, but even bound in its dramatic context, the reader will either be drawn into the struggle to find an answer to it, or (more likely) already knowing the answer, engage instead the meta-riddle of considering what this riddle means for this text. Why ask Oedipus to answer this question, and what does the cognitive motion toward its answer do for the reader, or for him? Since the answer is "man," but also, implicitly, "Oedipus," the answer is also the reader, standing in Oedipus's sandals and hearing the Sphinx's riddle, and recognizing that it applies to her as well as to Oedipus, or to anyone else. The reader encountering the loathly lady tales will likely wonder whether she knows what women want, but also (since a good modern humanist and feminist reader will be reluctant to totalize women

into one homogenous category of uniform desire), whether this is really a valid question, and what the effects are of asking it—what kind of thinking, analysis, study, and belief might go into answering it. Even Samson's sly neck-riddle includes this element of meta-riddling. The reader of Judges 14 knows what Samson knows about the lion and the honeycomb, but will probably wonder, even while understanding the riddle's reference, if "the strong" refers to Samson (an irresistible connection), and if that is so, what sweetness comes out of him. Might Samson also be "the eater," as he begins to slaughter Philistines left and right, who had previously offered "something to eat" on the occasion of his wedding feast? To what extent does the balance of violence and nourishment in this riddle reflect the tension between Samson's divine approval and his brutality in the rest of the story?

Riddles in narratives pull their readers out of the story, into a state of more self-conscious reading, as the reader, alongside the interlocutor within the text, tries to interpret the riddle. The reader's task is twofold, however: whereas the character has only to find an answer, the reader expects to find a meaning, to understand not only what the riddle refers to and how it can be solved, but what it does for the story, why *this* riddle in this context. Riddles have a particular kind of rhetorical edge which is not unlike that of allegory, in that they might mean on multiple levels simultaneously, but whatever truth they express, they do in coded terms. The reader who deciphers the riddle will only be able to do so as she not only becomes aware of the answer, but is aware of her awareness.

Chapter III
A Sweet and Bitter Fool

What can promote innocent mirth, and I may say virtue, more than a good riddle?

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

In the first scene in which he appears, the fool Touchstone in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* maligns a knight at the court of the usurper, Duke Frederick, to Frederick's daughter, Celia, and her cousin, Rosalind:

TOUCHSTONE	. . . a certain knight that swore by his honor they were good pancakes, and swore by his honor the mustard was naught. Now, I'll stand to it, the pancakes were naught and the mustard was good, and yet was not the knight forsworn.
CELIA	How prove you that in the great heap of your knowledge?
ROSALIND	Ay, marry, now unmuzzle your wisdom.
TOUCHSTONE	Stand you both forth now: stroke your chins, and swear by your beards that I am a knave.
CELIA	By our beards (if we had them), thou art.
TOUCHSTONE	By my knavery (if I had it), then I were. But if you swear by that that is not, you are not forsworn. No more was this knight swearing by his honor, for he never had any, or if he had, he had sworn it away before ever he saw those pancakes or that mustard.
CELIA	Prithee, who is't that thou mean'st?
TOUCHSTONE	One that old Frederick, your father, loves.
CELIA	My father's love is enough to honor him. Enough. Speak no more of him; you'll be whipped for taxation one of these days.[1]

Touchstone ameliorates his criticism of the unnamed knight with a few different strategies, most of them involving a deferral of reference. The aspersions he casts on the

[1] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre, 3rd ed. (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 1.2.63-84.

knight's honor are indirect, mediated by analogy and paradox—that is, he poses an oblique riddle. A knight swears by his honor, twice, is amiss in both cases, and yet is not forsworn. The solution is that the knight had no honor to begin with, but Touchstone delays that solution through two parallel cases, asking the women to swear by their beards (clearly an infelicitous speech act), which in turn enables him to swear (also infelicitously, by his own assertion and by the logic of the previous oath) by his own knavery, rather than by his honor. The knight could swear by his absent honor to untrue things and thus have been, in a backwards way, honest, just as Celia and Rosalind can swear to an untruth by their absent beards without, in a certain sense, lying. Touchstone's layers of circumlocution have drawn Celia and Rosalind to participate in and accede to his logic, making his conclusion all the harder to resist. All of this he might have gotten away with had he been willing to let the knight remain wholly anonymous, but once he associates him with Celia's father (while referring over-intimately to the Duke as "old Frederick") then he has brought Frederick's honor into it as well. At this point Celia cuts him off before he can go so far as to mention the knight by name; his attack on that knight's honor has become a threat to her father's also, because her father's judgment is impugned as well if the knight is unworthy. But her rebuke is brief and mild, telling Touchstone only to stop speaking, forecasting a possible retaliation in the unspecified future but threatening nothing immediate. She does not even ask him to recant anything he has said—after all, she has participated in the creation and expression of the knight's argument.

Although the target of his wit is not present or known, Touchstone nonetheless here models the use of riddling to diffuse the aggression of his language. His mockery of

the dishonorable knight is not only indirect, but requires an interlocutor (or two) to complete it. His eventual slander of Duke Frederick's honor is softened by the very non-referentiality of his description of the anonymous knight. By framing his accusation as a riddle, Touchstone reduces the aggression of his speech, making its denunciatory content less dangerous, if not precisely palatable.

Medieval and early modern fool characters, in particular, often use riddles in this way, to ameliorate the threat of aggressive language without having to soften its content, but such usage is complicated by the tendency of riddles to be in and of themselves conversationally aggressive. In pragmatic terms, riddles are by default "face-threatening," in that they are potentially degrading to how one or both interlocutors understand their personal and social identities. In narrative contexts like those addressed in the previous chapter, where the riddle provides a crux of the story's conflict, the pragmatic aggression of the riddle is often coupled with the physical threats that force an interlocutor to agree to the tacit contract of the riddle game (e.g., Gromer Somer Jour's riddle to Arthur is preceded and supported by the threat he makes to Arthur's life; Arthur has no choice but to participate in the riddle game, since the alternative is his immediate death). However, even without those more direct and dramatic threats, the posing of a riddle is often wrapped up with various kinds of interpersonal aggression. Riddles carry an element of implicit face-threat, which may be reduced or eliminated by the context in which they are uttered; they also, contrarily, may be used as a strategy to diffuse the aggression of otherwise face-threatening speech content, particularly in contexts where riddles are expected and therefore less likely to be themselves face-threatening. A riddle is

simultaneously an impolite, face-threatening speech act (absent a supporting context which may reduce that threat), and a potent rhetorical device for managing impoliteness.[2]

Much as I showed in chapter 2, riddles used this way are of the greatest rhetorical value to characters who are low-status and marginal, who have a lot to lose by speaking too directly or criticizing too aggressively. More powerful or statusful characters have the latitude to be aggressive directly, at least toward their social inferiors: Celia can threaten Touchstone without fear of retribution (from him) and without needing to couch her threats in indirect speech, but her fool must be more careful of the kinds of conversational aggressions he indulges in. Riddles need an interlocutor who is willing to play along, to respond to the perlocution of the riddle-proposition and co-construct its completed meaning—in other words, riddles make the expression of truth a function of the interlocutor's participation, rather than only the speaker's intent, which allows them to diffuse rhetorical responsibility between both parties. Thus even when riddles are face-threatening, they may simultaneously ameliorate that threat.

In this chapter, I examine the riddling language used by such marginal characters, extending the pragmatic examination of riddles as speech acts to include theories of politeness and impoliteness in order to expose how riddles can be used to negotiate conversational aggression. Because such aggressions typically reflect the underlying

[2] Riddles may also, paradoxically, be face-*affirming,* in that posing a riddle to an interlocutor may communicate that the speaker believes the interlocutor to be capable of answering it, and possibly also that the interlocutor is member of the in-group in which the riddle is traditional and significant. This side of riddling seems to me to have more to do with ritual than power, i.e., with practices that allow members of a community to demonstrate their grasp of the practices of play and testing that inhere in riddling, rather than as a way of shaping the stakes of knowledge between figures already in tension with one another pragmatically. I do not pursue it here, but this consideration of riddles as community-building and face-affirming would be a productive line of inquiry for *Piers Plowman* in particular.

power dynamics of the text, attention to these cruxes of conversation offers insight into how these texts understand their own internal politics and even their construction of meaning. Looking closely at the conversational exchange of riddles, as sites of heightened interpretive demand, allows us to consider the interaction of interpretation and power—the way that creating, withholding, delaying, or obscuring meaning is an act of fractious authority. I therefore elaborate a politeness theory of riddling in the section immediately following, before turning to a range of more-or-less literary, more-or-less fooling characters who use riddling language to negotiate a social and conversational place for themselves, and for the arguments they wish to make palatable.

Politeness and Riddling

Politeness is a term in linguistics that refers to the way possible threats, aggressions, tensions, and insults—in a word, impoliteness—are accounted for or deferred by a range of culturally conventional linguistic strategies. In their landmark book on linguistic politeness, Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson describe politeness as a tool that "presupposes that potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties." By their account, "the problem for any social group is to control its internal aggression while retaining the potential for aggression," and the social and linguistic strictures that circumscribe politeness are rooted in a community's awareness that language can be used to disrupt a community as well as to maintain it.[3]

[3] Brown and Levinson, *Politeness,* 1.

Both politeness and impoliteness are most often conceived around the notion of "face," originally introduced to sociology by Erving Goffman, who defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself . . . an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes."[4] Face is the way we wish to construe ourselves particularly in terms of our interaction with others. As Derek Bousfield points out, face emerges not only from interactions between speakers, but from the way those interactions reflect each speaker's expectations: "When the reality of the socially and interactionally constituted face differs markedly from the individual's (internal and cognitive) expectation of how their face should be constituted—especially where face is constituted at a somewhat 'lower' level than expected—then things can really get interesting."[5] That is, instances of impoliteness (whether perceived, intended, or both) often occur around a disconnect between what an individual believes about herself, and how she is treated in an interaction. Bousfield's description above serves as a working definition of (one kind of) impoliteness event, which occurs in practice when an

[4] Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," in *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face to Face Behavior* (Chicago: Aldine, [1967] 2005), 5. It is widely acknowledged that the notion of face seem to have originated in Chinese culture, and the phrases "lose face" and "save face" predate the adoption of the term into the social sciences. The OED gives its first attestation of "face" in the sense of "Reputation, credit; honour, good name" with a citation to the *Chines Repository* in 1834: "It behooves the present fraternity to have 'a tender regard for their face', lest they should lose their present high reputation for propriety." The phrase "lose face" is attested first in the same year in the *Chinese Commercial Guide: "*To lose face denotes to fall into discredit." "face, n," OED Online, March 2014, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67425? (accessed May 05, 2014).

[5] Derek Bousfield, *Impoliteness in Interaction* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2008), 40. Bousfield's more technically precise but perhaps less user-friend definition is as follows: "Face is individually (internally, cognitively, historically) expected by the Self but is interactionally (externally, mutually, continuously) constituted between Self and Other . . . Following the initial constitution, face is enhanced or threatened/damaged . . . Self's understanding of how Self's face was constituted and developed during this interaction then passes into the self's episodic memory and become part of Selfs' internal expectations of face for future interactions with the immediately recent or a different Other" (42).

interaction construes one participant's face in a less admirable way than she had anticipated.

Politeness strategies are, at bottom, about the threat of impoliteness—ways of negotiating, minimizing, and redressing possible offense. (Indeed, excessive face-affirmation undertaken when no impoliteness seems immanent will be received by most interlocutors with some suspicion, as a case of protesting too much.) Politeness is less the means by which another's face is maintained than the means by which a possible threat to the other's face is averted or rectified. Brown and Levinson established two complementary aspects to face: negative face ("freedom of action and freedom from imposition") and positive face ("the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' . . . including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of").[6] An impolite act can then be face-threatening by two different routes, either threatening negative face by making some kind of imposition, or threatening positive face by being derogatory towards the interlocutor. An interlocutor whose negative face is threatened may feel inconvenienced or underappreciated; one whose positive face is threatened may feel personally insulted or misunderstood.[7]

---

[6] Brown and Levinson, *Politeness,* 61.

[7] Jonathon Culpeper, in *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), rejects this binary in part because he finds it reductive, losing the dimension of "social interdependence" that Goffman's original discussion of face suggested (25) and otherwise failing to account for impoliteness as something other than a "pragmatic failure" to be polite, an absence of politeness rather than a distinct phenomenon (6), but also because he, with a number of other scholars, is skeptical of its claims of universality (21). Yoshiko Matsumoto, for example, has pointed out that Japanese notions of face are more invested in group roles and dynamics than Brown and Levinson's model describes: "Loss of face is associated with the perception by others that one has not comprehended and acknowledged the structure and hierarchy of the group." "Re-examination of the Universality of Face: Politeness Phenomena in Japan," *Journal of Pragmatics* 12.4 (1998): 405. Nonetheless, Brown and Levinson's model clearly has heuristic value at least, and while it may or may not be

More recently, Helen Spencer-Oatey has established a model of "rapport-management," which understands that management of face as only one half of the maintenance of social harmony.[8] Spencer-Oatey specifies positive face into the aspects of quality face and identity face, and effectively replaces negative face with the concept of sociality rights. Quality face in Spencer-Oatey's paradigm reflects the "fundamental desire for people to evaluate us positively in terms of our personal qualities" and is thus "concerned with the value that we effectively claim for ourselves . . . [and] closely associated with our sense of personal self-esteem." Identity face is concerned instead with "our sense of public worth" and our value within social roles, arising from the "desire for people to acknowledge and uphold our social identities," such as "group leader, valued customer, close friend."[9] A manager who compliments an employee on his cheerful demeanor has upheld his quality face, but if that employee is subsequently honored as Employee of the Week, his identity face has been supported as well.

Sociality rights are social entitlements that we believe are due to us in interactions with others—the way we expect to be treated, rather than the way we construe our worth—and consist of equity rights and association rights. Equity rights arise from our feeling of entitlement to fair treatment, not to be "unduly imposed upon . . . [or] unfairly ordered about," and that we should be inconvenienced only with some consideration of

---

universally applicable, it has been applied with some success to texts that arise from the same English-speaking western world in which Brown and Levinson's assumptions are likely grounded; see for example Roger Brown and Albert Gilman, "Politeness Theory and Shakespeare's Four Major Tragedies," *Language in Society* 18.2 (1989): 159-212.

[8] Helen Spencer Oatey, "Rapport Management: A Framework for Analysis," in *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport Through Talk Across Cultures,* ed. Helen Spencer-Oatey (London: Continuum, 2000), 11-46.

[9] Ibid., 14.

reciprocity. Association rights reflect our expectation of an "association with others that is in keeping with the type of relationship that we have with them," both in terms of type and affective depth; "we feel, for example, that we are entitled to an appropriate amount of conversational interaction and social chit-chat with others," and that we will be expected or encouraged to share personal concerns or feelings in keeping with the type of relationship we have with someone.[10] An impoliteness event may thus occur in terms of an attack on face, but it may also infringe on sociality rights, which Spencer-Oatey argues does not directly constitute an attack on a person's personal or public worth (though such an attack may be implied), but instead a violation of that person's entitlement to certain types of interactions. Returning to the exchange with which I began the chapter, Celia eventually reacts to Touchstone's threat to identity face, in that she is insulted on behalf of someone with whom she identifies, in her role as Frederick's daughter. However, she likely feels her association rights tested as well, since while it is certainly Touchstone's role to push boundaries, play games, and insult powerful people, she may feel she has a right not to hear her father defamed to her face by anyone, even a jester.

Given that face-threating speech acts are inevitable, language users must find a way to strategically communicate such a speech act's content with, ideally, a minimum of offense, (unless of course their aim is not politeness but impoliteness). Brown and Levinson give two strategies for ameliorating potential face-threat: *redress*, i.e., combining the face-threatening act with other speech acts that either lessen the threat or promote the hearer's face in other ways; and performing the face-threatening act *off-*

[10] Ibid., 14-15.

record, as an indirect rather than a direct speech act.[11] However, Touchstone's approach suggests a third ameliorative strategy. His insult is paired with no accommodating redress, but neither is it strictly speaking off-record—at the end of his riddling he asserts quite baldly that the knight "never had any" honor. Instead, Touchstone makes his interlocutors complicit in his impoliteness, not only by demanding they perform the same type of infelicitous speech act of which he accuses the knight, but by his use of riddles in the first place. Riddling can be a way of performing a face-threatening act off-record, but it also works by exaggerating the perlocutionary burden on the riddler's interlocutor. As I have defined the riddle, its utterance entails the expectation of a contribution from the riddle hearer, and the hearer's participation is thus endemic to how it both creates and expresses meaning. If the interlocutor concedes to participate in the riddle-exchange, then she concedes to the logic by which the face-threatening act is produced—indeed, by interpreting the impoliteness as impoliteness, she has arguably helped to create it.[12] As Michael Adams argues, speech acts such as these, with a potentially face-threatening element, offer hearers a bundle of illocutionary options among which they make a perlocutionary selection in deciding how to understand and respond to the possible illocutions of a speech act.[13] Riddles, which are so generically dependent on perlocution

[11] Brown and Levinson, *Politeness,* 101, 211-23. In keeping with my point about perlocutionary bundles below, Brown and Levinson add that "A communicative act is done off-record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act" (211).

[12] Geoffrey Leech makes a similar point: "The indeterminacy of conversational utterances . . . shows itself in the NEGOTIABILITY of pragmatic factors; that is, by leaving the force unclear, S may leave H the opportunity to choose between one force and another, and thus leaves part of the responsibility of the meaning to H." *Principles of Pragmatics* (London: Longman, 1983): 23-24.

[13] "Power, Politeness," 86-87.

anyway, and which vex the whole project of interpretation even on the level of reference, thus give hearers a great deal of latitude to interpret them as rhetorical acts, and the interlocutor who is offended by the speech act of riddling is in some degree sense responsible for the perlocutionary selection of offense from among that bundle (although of course that might be a perfectly reasonable selection, and indeed the one intended by the speaker).

On the other hand, if an interlocutor refuses to engage in the riddle-exchange, then the face-threat of the riddle's utterance is likely to be compounded with any further face-threating content the riddle contains. Consider a conversation early in the second season of the neo-medieval television show *A Game of Thrones,* in which two characters share a goblet of wine and a conversation about power:

> VARYS: Power is a curious thing. Are you fond of riddles?
>
> TYRION: Why? Am I about to hear one?
>
> VARYS: Three great men sit in a room: a king, a priest, and a rich man. Between them stands a common sellsword. Each great man bids the sellsword kill the other two. Who lives? Who dies?
>
> TYRION: Depends on the sellsword.
>
> VARYS: Does it? He has neither crown, nor gold, nor favor with the gods.
>
> TYRION: He has a sword. The power of life and death.
>
> VARYS: But, if it's swordsmen who rule, why do we pretend kings hold all the power? When Ned Stark lost his head, who was truly responsible? [King] Joffrey? The executioner? Or something else?
>
> TYRION: I've decided I don't like riddles.[14]

[14] Bryan Cogman (writer) and Alik Sakharov (director), "What Is Dead May Never Die" (episode 2.2), *A Game of Thrones*, HBO; original air date April 15, 2012.

In posing a riddle, and then needling at Tyrion's answer with his further questions, Varys is risking his own subtle expression of power. As I discussed in chapter 2, the utterance of a riddle normally entails the felicity condition that the speaker know the answer, and be in a position of power relative to the hearer. Yet neither is necessarily true of Varys here, who is no more powerful or high-status than Tyrion, and who moreover never actually offers an answer to his riddle, only further meditations on the nature of power. Both interlocutors are socially marginal yet influential political actors—Tyrion, a dwarf, looks the part of a medieval fool and has the glib wit of one, but as the second son of a wealthy and well-connected family has a position at court; Varys is a eunuch, has no title or family status, but has worked his way up politically as a spymaster. Both are thus in precarious enough positions to be conscientious of how power is amassed and expressed, including within the power dynamic of this very conversation. With his riddle, Varys claims a temporary conversational edge, acting as if he is in a superior position from which he is licensed to pose riddles to his interlocutor and evaluate their possible solutions—and as if he knows more about power than Tyrion does. Tyrion's answer and his justification for it are dismissed with Varys's further questions, a series of small conversational aggressions that effectively put Tyrion in the role of student, with Varys his instructor, until Tyrion grows impatient and opts out of the whole exercise.

At this point the riddle's threat to quality face (its growing implication that Tyrion does not know much about power) is overwhelmed by its violation of equity rights, in that Tyrion has concluded that entertaining riddles is an imposition not worth his trouble. Varys's riddle offers several different possible perlocutionary forces. Tyrion responds initially to the most central perlocutionary force of riddling, the compulsion to produce an

answer, but when his response is rejected without an answer forthcoming, he instead responds to the face-threat of the riddle's didactic posture. "I've decided" in the final line above signals that perlocutionary shift, while "I don't like riddles" represents the perlocution he has settled on.

Tyrion's rejection of the riddle is followed by a moment of quiet tension, after which Varys goes on to expound his view that power is "a shadow on the wall," assuring Tyrion that "a small man may cast a very large shadow." His minor conversational power grab has resulted in an impoliteness event that forces him into redress, not only backing off from his didactic/riddling rhetoric, but further promoting Tyrion's positive face. The conversation is a reminder that riddles are an effective rhetorical device only if one's interlocutor buys into them; otherwise, they are likely to compound precisely the impoliteness which they were intended to avoid.

Furthermore, this conversation serves as a meta-commentary on the show's general interest in the kinds and expressions of power. The two characters engage in a brief, microcosmic power struggle that plays out its own thematic interest in power as a performance, implicitly asserting to the audience that the kind of power wielded by a man with a sword is less than that wielded by the man who thoroughly understands the man with the sword. A conversation in riddles, which is also about riddles, serves to reiterate the way that power is itself a riddle, better solved by someone clever and manipulative, willing to embrace alternative versions of truth and re-frame ways of making meaning, than someone with merely "the power of life and death." The very act of riddling brings the power dynamics of conversation to the fore, especially for two characters who are smart, enigmatic, and whose troubled masculinity makes more violent assertions of

power unavailable to them. Having and withholding information becomes a source of power both in the larger story and in this brief exchange, so that all the actions that gesture toward, assume, and exploit that imbalance of knowledge become inextricable from matters of (im)politeness.

The politeness strategies I have outlined, and their relevance to riddling, play out in literature with the added wrinkle of representation. While the literary conversations I consider in this chapter are obviously not empirical real-world data for an analysis of politeness negotiations, they are linguistic evidence of another, metalinguistic, kind. Literature that has any dialogic element to it effectively advances a theory of linguistic pragmatics, by representing the way that language is used according to some set of underlying beliefs and assumptions about how language works and how speakers negotiate its use. This linguistic theory may be more or less deliberate in its relationship to real usage, depending on how mimetic of the world the text is meant to be (e.g., a story by Donald Barthelme may suggest some kind of theory of conversation, but does not do so by attempting to realistically represent people talking in the world in the way that a story by Flannery O'Connor or James Joyce does). Thus, just as this linguistic analysis exposes the rhetorical power dynamics at play within a text where characters ask and answer riddles, the use of literature for linguistic analysis exposes the unstated theory of language that shapes how literary texts distill conversational practices into literature.

Riddling Fools

The role of the medieval and early modern fool is most often understood as an instantiation of the carnivalesque: fools are agents of upset, who challenge boundaries in

order to do the cultural work of reaffirming them. The fool's identity is established particularly in relation to (and tension with) that of his employer:

> The curious double-act of king and fool, master and servant, substance and shadow, may thus be seen as a universal, symbolic expression of the antithesis lying at the heart of the autocratic state between the forces of order and disorder, of structured authority and incipient anarchy, in which the conditional nature of the fool's license ("so far but no further") give reassurance that ultimately order will always prevail. The fool, though constrained, continually threatens to break free in pushing to its limits whatever freedom he is given.[15]

Impoliteness is a primary method by which the fool pushes against these limits. The role of the fool is to make explicit the anxieties about interactional aggression suggested by Brown and Levinson, to uncover the lurking potential for disruption inherent in a community, and by performing it in a safe, licit manner, dull its claws. Indeed, an element of the carnivalesque is to expose and explore such dynamics in a conventionalized, unthreatening way. However, in order for the fool's performance to remain safe, he must ultimately be governed by an authority substantial enough to absorb his transgressions—lest he become genuinely subversive.

Perhaps the most famous among historical fools is Will Sommers (d. 1560), the beloved and popular fool of Henry VIII's court. Purported anecdotes from Sommers's life are given in Robert Armin's 1600 account of various fools, *Foole upon Foole*, reprinted in an expanded version, *A Nest of Ninnies*, in 1608; while there is no particular reason to assume these are (or are not, for that matter) true stories, they nonetheless depict the kind of antics a fool might get away with in the Tudor court, and more importantly, the way that such a fool was imagined by someone like Armin to engage with the court and the people. Most of the figures that Armin describes are "natural"

[15] John Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court* (Stroud: Sutton Publishers LTD, 1998), 3.

fools—"holy innocents," individuals with genuine mental deficiencies—and the humor in the anecdotes told of them is at their expense. Sommers, however, both generous and intelligent, perhaps best represents the mode of foolery that Armin himself performed: that of the "artificial" fool who is clever rather than simple, and who entertains by his wit rather than by his fatuity.

Although Sommers is in a few moments aggressive with his fooling, he is for the most part an agent of ritual and innocuous entertainment. Armin tells one story of "How this merry Fool Will Sommers, to make the King merry asked him three questions:

> "Harry," says [Sommers], "I'll go behind the Arras and study three questions and come again. See therefore you lay aside this melancholy muse and study to answer me."
>
> "Aye," quoth the King, "they will be wise ones no doubt."
>
> At last out comes William with his wit, as the fool of the play doth with an antic look to please the beholders. "Harry," says he, "what is that the lesser it is, the more it is to be feared?"
>
> The King mused at it, but to grace the jest the better he answered he knew not. Will made answer it was a little bridge over a deep river—at which he smiled, [knowing it was fearful indeed].
>
> "What is the next, William?" says the King.
>
> "Marry, this is next: What is the cleanliest trade in the world?"
>
> "Marry," says the King, "I think a Comfitmaker, for he deals with nothing but pure ware and is attired clean in white linen when he sells it."
>
> "No, Harry," says Will, "you are wide."
>
> "What say you then?" quoth the King.
>
> "Marry," says will, "I say a dirt-dauber."
>
> "Out on it," says the King, "that is the foulest, for he is dirty up to the elbows."
>
> "Aye," says Will, "but then he washes him clean again and eats his meat cleanly enough."
>
> "I promise thee, Will," says the King, "thou hast a pretty foolish wit."
>
> "Aye, Harry," says he, "it will serve to make a wiser man than you a fool methinks." At this the King laughed and demands the third question.
>
> "Now tell me," says will, "if you can, what it is that, being born without life, head, lip, or eye yet doth run roaring through the world till it die?"
>
> "This is a wonder," quoth the King. "No question, I know it not."

> "Why," quoth will, "it is a fart." At this the King laughed heartily and was exceeding merry.[16]

Although this is a riddle-game, the threats such a game would normally carry are in this setting dulled—they are there, but made "hollow" by the context.[17] The game is explicitly for the amusement of the King, and is in every way a performance, Sommers preparing "off-stage" and then coming out "as the fool of the play does." The King's responses are not completely authentic confessions of ignorance, but instead his participation in the performance of the jests, and the narrator in fact makes a gesture to save the King's own face—though he "muses at" the first question, he knows that it will "grace the jest better" if he does not really try to answer; the King, as well as the narrator, is aware that the riddles are not being asked to him so much as performed for him. The second riddle-exchange is given much more potential for offense, as the King makes a guess and the fool responds, "No, Harry . . . you are wide." From nearly anyone else, this would presumably be face-threatening, as Sommers both calls the king by a familiar nickname, and tells him bluntly that he is wrong, then continues to challenge the King's disagreement with his solution. On the surface of it, the King's identity face should be threatened by this exchange: Sommers is not affirming a king/subject relationship with him, but is assuming a familiarity and equality that would be offensive in most

[16] Robert Armin, *A Nest of Ninnies, A Nest of Ninnies and Other English Jestbooks of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. P. M. Zall (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 59-60.

[17] I mean this with reference to the way that Austin (*Words,* 22) calls speech acts "*in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy." Will's face-threats are both performed in the speech act sense, and performed in the theatrical sense, which makes the most prominent perlocutionary option entertainment, rather than offense.

contexts. [18] But the setting and context accommodate Sommers's face-threat, so that the King loses no face at all by failing to respond.

Riddles such as these, which are not only ritualized, but ritualized for entertainment, are unlikely to be face-threatening so long as the hearer/answerer has the same generic expectations as the riddler. The scene structures the exchange as only superficially a riddle-game; in reality they are a performance, and the king is an audience and co-performer, not a proper interlocutor. Furthermore, in this context, the king can tell Sommers he has a "foolish wit" and Sommers can respond that "it will serve to make a wiser man than you a fool methinks," with no evident threat to quality face on either side. The acknowledgement of the riddles, and the relative foolishness of the individuals telling and hearing them, is subsumed into the performance.

Compare this with another anecdote Armin tells about Sommers, in which he finds the king dining with Cardinal Wolsey, and asks the king for ten pounds on the Cardinal's behalf, supposedly to pay the Cardinal's creditors who have come to collect. [19] Wolsey avers that he has no creditors, assuring the king that "I'll give your Grace my head if any man can justly ask me a penny." Sommers requests that Wolsey lend him ten

[18] Robin Lakoff's rules for politeness include the necessity of observing some harmony of "formality/distance" and "equality/camaraderie"—the polite speaker aims to treat others as equals without imposing on them. "The Logic Politeness; or, Minding Your P's and Q's," in *Papers from the Ninth Regional Meeting*, Chicago Linguistic Society, ed. Claudia Corum, T. Cedric Smith-Stark, and Ann Weiser (Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, 1973), 292–305. This balance becomes fraught with greater weight in favor of formality when the speaker and hearer are not, in fact, equals. Both Touchstone's reference to "Old Frederick" above and Sommers's address of the king as "Harry" run the risk of impoliteness by excessive familiarity, observing too much camaraderie and not enough distance, though Sommers here is able to spin that risk to his advantage, i.e., by getting away with the nickname, he has therefore successfully asserted himself as a person who can use such a nickname, and thus stands in a familiar relationship to the king. See also Adams ("Power, Politeness," 85-86) for a more comprehensive explication of the interaction of pejoration and familiarity that may take place in nicknaming.

[19] *Nest of Ninnies,* 60-61.

pounds anyway, on the promise that "If I pay it not where thou owest it, I'll give thee twenty for it." While this is not a discrete, direct riddling speech-act, Sommers has nonetheless created a riddling situation. Wolsey believes he owes no one any money, but is directed by the king to give Sommers the money asked for anyway. The interpretive paradox persists at the core of the conversation despite the absence of an explicitly expressed riddle: if Wosley owes no one money, then who are his creditors?

Sommers takes Wolsey's ten pounds and distributes it to the poor outside the gate, and then returns to tell Wolsey that his debts have been satisfied. To explain, he asks the Cardinal, "To whom dost thou owe thy soul?" Wolsey answers, "To God," and Sommers goes on, "To whom thy wealth?" to which Wolsey replies, "To the poor," and on this Sommers pounces: "'Take thy forfeit, Harry,' says the Fool. 'Open confession [is] open penance. His head is thine, for to the poor at the gate I paid his debt, which he yields is due. Or if thy stony heart will not yield it so, save thy head by denying thy word and lend it me."

Armin tells us from the beginning of the anecdote that Sommers is there "to disgrace him [Wolsey] that he never loved," and indeed Sommers succeeds with a veritable whirlwind of face-threatening acts. By asking the king instead of asking Wolsey directly, Sommers moderates the infringement of sociality rights (both equity and association rights, since he is both imposing on the Cardinal's time and attention, and acting outside of the expected range of interactions appropriate to their relative roles) that would result from demanding Wolsey give him money for the poor; his closer relationship with Henry makes this interaction less likely to be received as face-threatening. However, he instead exaggerates the threat to the Cardinal's identity face by

asking someone else for money to pay his supposed debts, suggesting that the high-ranking Wolsey cannot be relied upon to keep track of his debts or pay his creditors, and needs the intervention of a fool with the king to manage the situation for him. And of course the suggestion that Wolsey has either forgotten, or is lying about, his own indebtedness is a threat to Wolsey's quality face.

Were Sommers to simply assert that Wolsey is insufficiently charitable towards the poor and demand money to distribute to them, his behavior would be baldly impolite, obviously threatening to both positive and negative face, and as likely to damage Sommers's own face as Wolsey's, since he would come off as aggressive and insensitive to the discursive context with its structures of rank and privilege. However, Sommers uses the riddling quality of his challenge to draw Wolsey into participating in it, and the strategy works so well that Wolsey almost immediately volunteers his own execution, "if any man can justly ask me a penny," which Sommers will of course argue that many poor men can reasonably do. When Sommers returns, having paid out the money, the tension of the unanswered riddle is heightened, since Sommers has materially demonstrated by having gotten rid of the ten pounds that there is indeed someone he can call Wolsey's "creditor," and so despite the increasing disadvantage of this interaction, Wolsey must answer Sommers's questions to learn the solution. Thus with his quasi-catechistic answer Wolsey is led to provide the riddle's solution himself; Sommers does not have to make the claim on-record that Wolsey's wealth is owed as alms, because Wolsey himself has been led to say it. Only then does Sommers become explicitly aggressive, reminding both Wolsey and the king that the Cardinal's head is, by the fiat of Wolsey's own performative

language, forfeit, and accusing Wolsey of having a "stony heart" if he will not pay his debt to the poor.

The riddling strategy is highly effective; when all is said and done, "The King laughed at the jest and so did the Cardinal for a show, but it grieved him to jest away ten pound so." Whereas Sommers' riddles in the earlier anecdote, used only for amusement, were not truly face-threatening given their context, his riddle to Wolsey is at his expense and entails face-threats on a number of levels. Yet precisely because Sommers uses a riddle, constructing a paradox and obligating Wolsey to try to resolve it, both the accusations he makes against Wolsey (a threat to quality and identity face) and the money he extracts from him (an infringement of equity rights) are allowed to stand. Sommers mitigates his aggression by using the riddle's particular capacity to ameliorate face-threat, specifically by implicating his interlocutor in the production of face-threatening meaning from the indirect language he uses.

Moreover, this anecdote shows how riddling used in this way can be ethical in its subversion of established power imbalances, as Sommers exploits his bad relationship with Wolsey, in which we might expect Sommers to be at a disadvantage, to call Wolsey out morally and make a just point about the care of the poor. While they are not by any means intrinsically ethical, riddles, with their perlocutionary force that heightens self-conscious interpretation, often have this rhetorical effect of commenting on the situation in which they are uttered. Precisely because they are face-threatening they are also likely to be verdictive—the face-threat arises because the speaker effectively claims the right to evaluate the hearer via her (ability to) answer, a structure further complicated when the

riddle's content is itself also verdictive.[20] Verdiction as a speech act always proceeds from some axiomatic basis, so that the object of the verdictive finds herself subject to comparison with some standard, and naturally in texts that care about ethics, that standard tends to be a moral one.

Sommers's relationship with Henry generally lacks this verdictive edge, which emerges only when Sommers finds an interlocutor he feels deserves it. As H. F. Lipincott points out, "Will's traditional relationship with Henry is the entirely acquiescent one . . . of banishing the king's sorrow,"[21] in contrast to the much more fraught relationship between Shakespeare's Lear and his Fool, whose "principal function" is to be a "truthsayer."[22] The consequences Lear faces for his dubious choice to divide and hand off his kingdom, and with it his royal status and power, also encompass his Fool. *King Lear* is in many ways an exploration of the fallout when powerful people lose (sometimes willfully) social identities, as Lear, Kent, Edgar, and eventually Gloucester are all forced to re-negotiate their construction of social identity and identity face, now without the institutional prerogative that made their relative status previously a given. This is perhaps a part of the reason that *Lear* is such a remarkably insulting play, the eponymous king and his daughters equally vicious in their conversational assaults on one another. The

[20] Verdictives are one of the five types of speech acts that Austin identifies; Austin describes them as "typified by the giving of a verdict . . . they may be, for example, an estimate, reckoning, or appraisal." *Words,* 150.

[21] H. F. "King Lear and the Fools of Robert Armin" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26 (1975): 248. Lippincott makes the point that even if the addition of Robert Armin to Shakespeare's company influenced the kind of fool characters that Shakespeare was thereafter able to write, this was due to Armin's style and abilities "*as actor,*" not as writer (252); Armin's portrayal of Will Sommers does not, in Lippincott's estimation, forecast anything in Shakespeare's later fool figures.

[22] Lippincott ("King Lear," 249) suggests that while Lear seems to be expecting a Fool more in line with the type exemplified by Sommers, an entertaining distraction, he instead gets an irrepressible truth-speaker, and thus his irritation with the Fool grows across Act I.

Fool, however, with his reliance on riddling and enigmatic language, has access to a conversational strategy especially suited to navigate the disrupted, and thus volatile, interactional situation where he finds himself.[23]

The difference in Lear's responses to Kent and to the Fool is instructive in considering the value of indirect speech for the latter's rhetorical strategy. As Lear is engineering his own destruction in the play's opening scene, Kent eventually calls him out over the exile of Cordelia, for which Kent earns the loss of his title and exile from the kingdom. Lear is actually pretty slow to react to Kent's bald face-threat, which assaults Lear particularly in terms of social identity face—such aggressive criticisms, especially on-record as Kent makes them, should not be permissible given the social identity Lear claims for himself. Yet once Lear's Fool appears, in 1.4, he takes to repeatedly mocking Lear's choices, at one point asking, "Dost thou know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and a sweet one?"[24] The Fool's answer subsequently emerges:

> That lord that counselled thee to give away thy land,
> Come place him here by me; do thou for him stand.
> The sweet and bitter fool will presently appear,
> The one in motley here, the other found out there.
> (1.4.137-140)

The riddle-question is framed in a conventional formulation, but the answer, rather than offering a tidy equivalence/difference formula as we would expect for this

[23] The Fool's interactional performance is in some ways vexed further if we read him as allegorical, a projection of Lear's own foolishness, as Judith H. Anderson does in *Reading the Allegorical Intertext: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 188-89. The Fool thus disappears in Act III as Lear's evolution from folly to madness makes Tom o' Bedlam a more apt figure for his internal state. In this case, the Fool's verdictive speech acts to Lear may be relatively acceptable because they are an expression of what Lear, on the level of an internal wisdom he has disguised by folly, believes about himself.

[24] *King Lear,* ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997), 1.4.134-35. Subsequent quotations are by act, scene, and line number to this edition.

type of riddle (as appears, for example, in the various raven/writing desk comparisons offered as solutions to the riddle with which I began chapter 1), is itself constructed to again defer the solution. The interlocutor is asked to think through a second round of veiled references—the theoretical lord responsible for the idea that Lear should give away his kingdom becomes also a figure whose identity must be parsed relative to the two fools of the riddle. By answering a riddle with another riddle, the riddler sacrifices the moment of revelation, which is usually the crux of the riddle's pleasure for both riddler and audience, as the riddle's clues and their interpretations make a satisfying alignment into a sensible solution. But instead of allowing his audience to enjoy his initial riddle's cleverness, the Fool presses forward into another round of enigmatic speech, itself demanding interpretation. "That lord that counselled thee to give away thy land" must refer to Lear himself, if to anyone, since as far as we know the abdication was his own idea; the reference of the noun phrase is further twisted as Lear is told to "for him [that lord] stand," a linguistic reference that points nowhere but to itself, since Lear is being told to "stand for" himself. By this logic Lear represents not himself, but instead the "lord," who is in fact Lear, and is as well the bitter fool of the riddle. As the riddle's interlocutor, Lear must read himself through the riddle, to understand what he represents, and what represents him. It is understandable that Lear has to ask at this point, "Dost thou call me fool, boy?" (1.4.141).

Lear thus takes no action against the Fool, not even to resist or disagree with what he has said. The Fool is (at this moment and throughout the scene) able to express a similar critique of Lear's abdication to the one that got Kent exiled, the self-disavowing language of the Fool's speech used to soften his point. When Kent calls Lear "old man"

and accuses him of "hideous rashness" (1.1.147, 52), he does it in the midst of the court, with an audience of Lear's (former) subjects looking on. Certainly as an earl, Kent is much closer to Lear in political status, and thus better able genuinely to threaten his face, than is a character with no rank or title. But it is also this multi-layered riddling speech that allows the Fool to criticize Lear's choice to give up his crown, and to make face-threats much more substantial than Kent's were by calling him a fool, without suffering the consequences.

The Fool's use of riddles further forecasts the crisis of identity that lies at the heart of the play. In the riddle above, the Fool makes Lear co-referential with one kind of fool, a thematic refrain of the play in which the categories of fool and king steadily collapse. The Fool also makes a habit of interpreting Lear's own language as if *he* were riddling, offering riddle-solutions even where no riddle is intended—another rhetorical move that treats Lear as if he, too, is a fool, disposed to the indirections of fooling speech. Conversationally, the Fool treats Lear precisely as if he were on his own level. When Lear responds to Goneril's censure with a series of rhetorical questions alluding to the damage that has been done to his royal identity—"Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes? . . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?"—the Fool responds, "Lear's shadow" (1.4.217-22). Lear is feeling the identity face-threat of having been demeaned in his relationship with his daughter, and also denigrated (again) in terms of his erstwhile role as king. Interestingly, the speech of Goneril's that provokes this reaction has much more to do with the behavior of his retinue (including his Fool) than with Lear personally, except insofar as Lear has defended them. Goneril attacks him very pointedly in terms of his social role and his associations, making it clear that she is now

within her rights to censure both him and his knights. Lear's ranting questions in response seem rhetorical, since of course he is still himself, Lear, but in fact they raise a riddling conundrum which only the Fool (and the audience) hears: who is Lear if he is no longer King Lear? The Fool's devastating solution, that the substance of Lear is gone and he has been reduced to vestige of himself, goes unmarked by anyone else in the scene, in part at least because the Fool is not so much making an assertion about Lear as distilling the significance of Lear's own self-questioning. The Fool only makes explicit what Lear has already implied. This is perhaps the most savvy means by which a riddle may be used to threaten face—the riddle itself is imputed to the interlocutor, and the "riddler" is only supplying the solution, for which he evidently cannot be held accountable.

Because Lear's Fool is the prototypical wise fool, usually witty and occasionally pathetic but not often truly foolish, it is unsurprising that the play includes a range of other characters who are in one degree or another given as fool-like: Edgar as Tom Bedlam, Lear himself, and of course Cordelia. The loose identification of Cordelia with the Fool stems from the possibility that the part was played by the same actor,[25] as well as Lear's sorrowful exclamation, "My poor fool is hang'd!" upon discovering Cordelia's death in the play's final scene.[26] Certainly Cordelia brings measures of both foolishness and wisdom to the action of the play, and the foolishness of her falling-out with Lear is generated by her insistence on hearing his opening question, about which of his daughters loves him best, as a riddle.

---

[25] See for example Thomas B. Stroup, "Cordelia and the Fool," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12 (1961): 127-32.

[26] Bruce Shapiro argues that Cordelia, when she returns at the end of the play, does so "in disguise as the enigmatic iconic character of the Fool," and in the moment of her death Lear, having recovered his sanity, makes explicit the duality of Cordelia and the Fool's identities. *Reinventing Drama: Acting, Iconicity, Performance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 120.

It is a habit of fools to not only ask riddles, but to willfully misinterpret others' questions as riddles—that is, to give riddling answers to questions not intended as riddles, as I have shown the Fool doing with Lear's rhetorical questions about his identity. The question Lear asks as he is dividing the kingdom among his daughters, "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" (1.1.51) is received differently by Regan and Goneril than by Cordelia. The first two hear the question accurately as a ritual performative, not a sincere question. Lear is not really expecting to find out who loves him the most (as the kingdom's division is literally already on the map before the play begins), but requiring that his daughters perform their love, and his older two children are willing to comply. Claiming that "I do love you more than word can wield the matter" (Goneril; 55) and that "I profess / Myself an enemy to all other joys" (Regan; 72-73), both rely on hyperbole to express their supposed love for their father. Goneril, having claimed to love Lear beyond her linguistic capacity for expression, can only use language to gesture toward the depth of her love, not to depict it. She describes her love comparatively, claiming it to be indescribable; she claims to love her father *beyond* how much "child e're loved . . . / A love that makes breath poor and speech unable" (59-60). Cordelia wishes she could "Love, and be silent," but in a way, Goneril's speech does just that, gesturing apophatically (if insincerely) to a depth of love that cannot be plumbed by mere language. Even if *she* is not silent, her speech points to how language, in the end, fails, falls silent, in the face of love.

Cordelia responds to the question not as ritual or performative, but as a riddle. When Lear turns to her, asking, "what can you say to draw / A third [piece of the kingdom] more opulent than your sisters? Speak" (85-86), Cordelia answers, "Nothing,

my lord." "Nothing?" says Lear, and Cordelia re-affirms, "Nothing." Told to "Speak again," she elaborates on nothing: "I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more or less" (87-93). Whereas Goneril and Regan interpreted the pragmatic situation (correctly) as one demanding a certain kind of performance from them, Cordelia chooses to take this question seriously, neglecting its context, and engages the real unanswerability of it. "Which of you loves me the most?" is not a question that can be satisfied by speech acts; neither sister can proclaim herself the lovingest daughter and thus actually be that (its answer will *not* be felicitously performative), though the ritual context here pretends it and Lear's indulgence demands it. Neither is there any necessary correlation between one's depth of love and one's facility in describing that love. Cordelia recognizes the contradictions contained in the question itself, the fact that it is a riddle in that it belies the production of its own solution, even as she willfully ignores context and illocution, and thus takes Goneril's apophatic gesture to its natural conclusion: There is nothing she can say that should convince her father she loves him more than her sisters do, even if she does. There is no real way to answer to this question.

Forced to elaborate, she changes tactics and gives him the most literal answer possible, that her love is no more or less than "according to my bond." Eschewing the hyperbole of her sisters' answers, she goes on to describe her love in terms of balance and exchange:

> You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I
> Return those duties back as are right fit,
> Obey you, love you and most honour you.
> Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
> They love you all? Haply when I shall wed,
> That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry

Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters
To love my father all.
(1.1.97-106)

Lear has demanded that love be expressed in measurable terms, and Cordelia takes this, too, to its natural conclusion. If love is quantifiable, then it is also divisible, and by his own logic her father should only merit half of a married daughter's love. She negotiates the impossible question by, implicitly, turning it back on her father: she loves him *in return,* loves him as he has loved her, according to the filial bond between them. Were Lear interested in a real answer to a real question, he would be forced by this to consider the strength and depth of their bond, the degree of his own love and how much he has earned by being her father, and the kind of father he has been. He would hear in Cordelia's answer his riddle turned back on him. But he was looking for a performance, not an answer, and certainly not a solution.

Between Cordelia and the Fool we see how riddles might balance aggression and amelioration, used to threaten face or to soften face-threats. Neither speaker, however, has much success rhetorically, although they are both endeavoring to say something worth saying; they are not merely jesting, but pointing out an uncomfortable truth with their riddling. The Fool escapes punishment (at Lear's hand anyway) while Cordelia invites it, and so their riddles are effective in that they have such effects, but Lear is unable to hear or absorb either of their critiques until it is much too late.

Cordelia has a particularly incisive point to make about the nature and demands of love, but the very harshness of her ethics, her unwillingness to play along even marginally with a performance that she views as bankrupting the meaning of love, deafens the ears on which her argument should fall. Riddling that is rhetorically

successful, as well as ethically astute, needs a softer touch than either Cordelia or the Fool accomplishes. In my final section of this chapter, I turn to Langland's riddling pilgrim Patience, who uses his riddles to didactic ends in a way that is as verdictive as it is ameliorative, and thus echoes the larger text's reliance on difficult questions and variable answers to come to a profession of meaning.

The Riddle of Salvation

The character of Patience in *Piers Plowman* can be read as another kind of fool entirely: as Curtis Gruenler has argued, he is a version of the enigmatic and wise "holy fool." Patience is a central figure at the Banquet of Conscience, where his participation in the riddle-game initiated by Conscience works to re-cast the questions of the poem, particularly the Dowel question, in riddling terms.[27] I follow Gruenler in reading this scene as a riddle contest, in which special authority is given to enigmatic discourse, "on its way to becoming the poem's dominant, most far-reaching voice," [28] though I focus here on the pragmatic intricacies of Patience's subtly aggressive riddling and the rhetorical effects it has both for the immediate scene and, in retrospect, the previous action of the poem, rather than the broader tradition of riddle contests that inflect this scene.

---

[27] Curtis Gruenler in fact regards both Will and Patience as fool figures, the latter "both mystic riddler and holy fool," while "the more comprehensive and perplexing folly of Wille mediates and models" the reception of "enigmatic authority." "How to Read Like a Fool: Riddle Contests and the Banquet of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum* 85 (2010): 592.

[28] Gruenler reads the Banquet scene in light of other tales that incorporate riddle contest and riddle dialogues, particularly the *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolphus* and the legend of St Andrew and the Three Questions (602-11), to argue that the characters at the riddle contest can ultimately be read as "representations of modes of discourse. The winner is the enigmatic mode itself: this scene uses riddling as a form to intensify the poem's focus on a pervasive poetic mode oriented toward open-ended interpretation of mystery" "How to Read," 592.

The dreamer Will's quest for Dowel has been—and continues to be here—mostly realized conversationally, as he asks the various figures he encounters, both in the dream and in his waking life, if they can point him to Dowel. The further Will pursues the issue, though, the more this question takes on valences beyond simple information-seeking, and at the Banquet it is deployed as a riddle, a shift in speech act marked further by Patience's curious response to the Dowel question's use of a definitive riddle, a word puzzle, to answer the Dowel question.

Patience's riddling is didactic as well as clever, a way of drawing his interlocutors to more thoroughly contemplate truth and mystery, and to expose the ethical freight of their hermeneutic practice. Because he is a "povere hermyte" of low status,[29] riddles are of particular use to Patience in managing the face-threat that inheres in his attempts to speak authoritatively at a gathering where his status is marginal. Didacticism carries its own risks of being received as face-threatening, primarily in terms of identity face if the hearer does not appreciate being put into the role of a student relative to the speaker, but also infringing on association rights if the hearer does not consider didacticism an appropriate or expected mode of interaction in this encounter. Riddling exacerbates these potential aggressions, precisely because it highlights the distance between speaker and hearer, those who have information and those who lack it, and Patience's riddle furthermore serves as a shrewd verdictive: the hearer who is too distracted by the riddle's

[29] William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd edition (London: Everyman, 1995), 13.30. Subsequent citations are given by passus and line number within the text, to this edition. While a version of this scene appears in the C-text of *Piers Plowman* as well, it is shorter, lacks Patience's riddle or the Doctor's response, and adds the interesting wrinkle of Piers himself drifting through the conversation, answering the Dowel question with some of the same language that Patience uses in the B-text version, and quietly disappearing. Clearly more could be said about this version of the scene, but for reasons of space and focus I have limited my discussion to the B-text.

infringement of sociality rights to absorb its meaning is condemned by his own pragmatic and hermeneutic insufficiency, just as the hearer who understands and acts on it is compelled forward on the quest for understanding, and salvation.

The Banquet of Conscience occupies the first half of Passus 13. Will, after his encounter with Imaginatif, has spent several waking years wandering "In manere of a mendynaunt" (3) and contemplating his dreams so far. When he sleeps again he meets Conscience, who invites him to come dine at his court with Clergy. They are joined by a Doctor of theology, as well as Scripture, who is hosting the gathering, and find Patience begging in the courtyard in the guise of a pilgrim. Conscience invites Patience in and sets him and Will at a side table, where they eat a sour loaf and look on as the Doctor enjoys a feast of much richer food. Enraged by the Doctor's hypocritical indulgence, Will mutters, ostensibly to himself, but "so Pacience it herde" (64),

> "It is nought foure dayes that this freke, bifor the deen of Poules,
> Preched of penaunces that Poule the Apostle suffrede:
> *In fame et frigore and flappes of scourges.*
> . . .
> "Ac this Goddes gloton," quod I, "with his gret chekes
> Hath no pite on us povere; he parfourneth yvele
> That he precheth, and preveth noght," to Pacience I tolde,
> And wisshed witterly, with wille ful egre,
> That disshes and dobleres [this ilke doctour biefore]
> Were molten leed in his mawe . . .
>
> (13.65-83)

Having raged thus over the Doctor's greed and hypocrisy, and wished uncharitably for him to be injured by the meal he has consumed, Will adds that he now intends to ask him "what penaunce is, of which he preched rather!" (85). Patience good-naturedly encourages him to bide his time and suggests that once the Doctor has eaten (and especially drunk) his fill, he will begin attempting to justify himself, using scholastic-

style arguments that these rich foods are in fact suitable to a penitential lifestyle. While Will's impulse was merely to frame his attack on the Doctor's face as a question to make it off-record, Patience offers another turn of the screw by suggesting Will use his question about Dowel to needle the Doctor: "[T]hanne is tyme to take and to appose this doctour / Of Dowel and of Dobet, and if Dobest be any penaunce" (97-98). Patience thus draws Wil's (and the reader's) attention back to the Dowel question, while also apparently encouraging Will's desire for passive-aggressive retribution.

In his own way, Will has in this scene as much trouble with the moral disconnect between meanings—said and meant, spoken and enacted, locutionary and illocutionary—as does the Doctor. He pretends initially that he is speaking without an audience, as if his speech is only for himself, but the pretense itself is a part of the speech act, conveying his unwillingness to take responsibility for what he is saying. If he truly kept his judgment of the Doctor to himself, he might escape being subject to the same standards of evaluation, but his attempt to draw Patience into his anger only serves to emphasize his own hypocrisy in the face of the Doctor's. His animosity towards the Doctor, characterized "with wille full egre," manifests the worst side of his own allegorically significant identity, willful unkindness, a deliberate desire to see others hurt, and underscores the ironic perversion of his once sincere question about the nature of Dowel. Originally a question so serious that it became a quest, here the Dowel question is—at least as far is Will is concerned—reduced to a petty verdictive, a means to judge and shame the Doctor.

While it is Patience who recommends using the Dowel question this way, he clearly has, appropriately to his name, a longer game in mind than chastising the Doctor's minor wrongs against them; he is initiating a discussion of Dowel in which he can

eventually assert his own knowledge of the subject, a riddle-game to accommodate his riddle. Encouraging Will to use his question in this aggressive way both captures the attention of the group, which gives Patience the larger audience he presumably wants, and makes Will rather than Patience responsible for the face-threat that the question will produce. By maneuvering Will in this way, Patience makes Will both able to accomplish what he wants right now—calling out the Doctor—and also, even though he's become temporarily distracted from it, to hear perhaps the most complete answer he will get to the question about Dowel that he's been asking for the duration of the *Vita* so far.

As Curtis Gruenler observes, "The question of Dowel . . . becomes more of a riddle as it keeps getting asked."[30] Wil's question is, by the time he comes to Conscience's court, no longer felicitous as a direct speech act. For a direct question to be felicitous necessitates that the speaker lack information, and believe that the hearer is able to supply it, but it is not true that Will lacks an answer to his question about Dowel.[31] He is posed his question to and received answers, often more than one, so far from Thought, Wit, Study, Clergy, Scripture, and Imaginatif, as well as a pair of friars in his waking life. The friars claim that Dowel dwells with them (8.18-19); Thought locates Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest "nought fer to fynde," attending whoever is true, sober, and industrious (8.78-83); Wit puts Dowel "In a castel that Kynde made" (9.2), but further describes Dowel as

[30] Gruenler, "How to Read," 621.

[31] As discussed in chapter 2, the felicity conditions Searle (*Speech Acts*, 66) suggests for a speech act include: that S does not know the answer to the question, does not expect H to provide the answer without being asked, wants to know the answer, and is attempting to get H to provide the answer by asking the question. Searle acknowledges, however, the existence also of an "exam-type" question in which the speaker is not seeking information directly, but to find out whether the hearer is able to supply that information. Patience's use of Wil's question here has perhaps more in common with that type of question, as he is certainly beginning to develop opinions about what the answer might be, and puts the question to the Doctor to see *how* he answers, not because he is sincerely interested in the content of the answer itself.

"Trewe wedded libbynge folk" (9.108); "to doon as law techeth" (9.200); and "to drede God" (9.204); Study assures Will that until he lives according to Dowel, he will not figure out Dobet and Dobest (10.133-35), and tells him to "love lelly, if thee liketh Dowel" (10.189), but also to avoid alchemy (10.215); Clergy frames Dowel in terms of belief—in Holy Church, the articles of the faith, and in the Trinity (10.232-8). Most tellingly, on his encounter with Imaginatif, Will answers his own question, waking from his dream-within-a-dream to declare that "Now I woot what Dowel is . . . To se muche and suffre moore, certes" (11.407, 410). Will may or may not have settled on any, all, or none of these as the correct answer to his question (and in any case, he still has not *found* Dowel; as he complains to Study, "litel am I the wiser! / Where Dowel is or Dobet derkliche ye shewen" [10.371-72]). But by the time he arrives at Conscience's banquet, while his question may not be a riddle precisely, it is also impossible for him to pose it as a completely straightforward, sincere question. Any answer he receives now will be evaluated on balance with his other answers, the speaker likewise evaluated relative to other speakers—the question is already, at least in part, a verdictive.

Moreover, the answers he has gotten have clearly helped to evolve the way he understands the question, and what it means to be looking for Dowel, because the grammatical and referential structure of the question have changed from the beginning of his quest to this point in the story. The question comes about in the first place because of the phrase "do well" used in the Pardon sent to Piers by Truth, which instructed that "Do wel, and have wel, and God shal have thi soule" (7.112). Setting aside for the moment the contested value of this statement as a pardon, Will hears in it an instruction to pursue Dowel, which he, perhaps mistakenly, understands to be a reference to an allegorical

person named Dowel; as Maureen Quilligan describes it, this is a case of Will reading badly, over-literalizing the Pardon and fixating on its words rather than its sense.[32] This misunderstanding of the verb phrase "do well" for a proper noun "Dowel" spurs Will on his quest, but his grasp of the Pardon's language changes as he progresses through conversations with various dream-figures, a shift reflected in the changing forms his question about Dowel takes. He asks both the friars and Thought where Dowel *dwells*, and the answers he gets to that version of the question vary in referring to Dowel as a person, a behavior, or an allegorical conceit. Eventually Will begins to accommodate the slipperiness of the term "Dowel" into the form of his question: the third time he asks it, to Study, he wonders if she can "kenne me kyndely to knowe what is Dowel" (10.148). As the predicate following a copular verb, Dowel could grammatically be anything – noun, verb, adjective, person, behavior, idea, or thing-in-the-world. Wil's question about Dowel has become much more general, but this actually reflects a slight increase in his understanding: though still lacking a firm answer to the question of what, or where, Dowel is, Will is nonetheless coming to understand the shape his ignorance has, and the kind of question he should be asking.[33] It is clear that Will is not only amassing possible answers; he is learning from them.

By the time Will asks the Doctor his question, then, it is as a speech act already unable (for him) to work as a straightforward interrogative. Especially given Will's

[32] Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1992), 70-71.

[33] As Robert Fiengo discusses in his pragmatic treatment of questions, a speaker must have a certain amount of knowledge in order to even pose a question—one must know that there are things one does not know; "if one has no acquaintance with some thing in the world, *and* has no bit of language, no name or predicate to use to refer to it, then one has no attachment to the item at all. In this case, one does not know enough to know that one is ignorant." *Asking Questions: Using Meaningful Structures to Imply Ignorance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 158.

confessed displeasure with the Doctor, the Dowel question here works, initially, only to make Will's aggression off-record. Moreover, this is the first time that Will has phrased his question directly; he asks—not quite rudely, but directly in a way that may test association rights—"What is Dowel, sire doctour . . . is Dobest any penaunce?" (103). Earlier iterations of the question always took on a more polite work-around; speaking to Study, for example, Will promises that, "youre man shal I worthe / As long as I lyve, bothe late and rathe, / And for to werche youre wille the while my lif dureth, / With that ye kenne me kyndely to knowe what is Dowel" (10.145-48). Will is anxiously courteous in these earlier interactions, accommodating the possible infringement of sociality rights by vigorously upholding his interlocutor's quality and identity face, and here especially by promising reciprocity, that he will be indebted and committed to Study for life if she can give him an answer. The actual request for information is subordinated to Wil's commissive speech act, which requires his, rather than his interlocutor's, action.

Will's more aggressive speech does not yield greater knowledge here. The Doctor's answer, "Do noon yvel to thyn evencristen – nought by thi power" (13.105), is a half-hearted kind of response, a negative version of the salvific good action that the Pardon demanded—less a resounding "do good," than a hedging "don't be actively evil, at least to other Christians, at least if you can help it." Whether or not he has heard the question as face-threatening, the Doctor seems not to have given it a great deal of thought, or to be very ethically rigorous in his thinking at the moment. Will's retort is more obviously impolite:

> . . . [T]hanne be ye nought in Dowel!
> For ye han harmed us two in that ye eten the puddyng,
> Mortrewes and other mete – and we no mussel hade.
> And if ye are so in yowre fermorie, ferly my thinketh

> But chest be there charite shulde be, and yonge childern dorste pleyne,
> I wolde permute my penaunce with yowre, for I am in poynte to Dowel.
> (13.106-11)

The question is a set-up, if not precisely (yet) a riddle, and Will is using it for similar perlocutionary effects, leading the Doctor to make a statement that Will knows he will be able to contrast unfavorably with his behavior. Will's enthusiastic threats to both quality and social identity face, alluding to the Doctor's selfishness and greed and furthermore denigrating any hospital of the Doctor's affiliation, reminds us that he is hardly on the ethical high ground at the moment, but line 111 in particular is revelatory of Will's ethical irresolution in this scene. Patience has delighted in his penitential meal of moral and scriptural phrases, claiming that no prince could eat better than they do, but Will lacks Patience's desire for penance. He is "in poynte to Dowel," a precarious position: at the moment and the place where he can and should do well, but still netted in his own desire to spare himself the work of Christian penance and adopt instead the Doctor's "penance" of indulgence and self-satisfaction. At the point of doing well, of translating his change in understanding to a change in heart and action, he is equally on the point of *not* doing well, of failing, backsliding He is pointed toward Dowel, and yet here he stumbles, allowing his "wille" to be "egre" in its anger, and ironically hypocritical in his condemnation of the Doctor's hypocrisy.

At this point, Conscience takes over the Dowel question, and with the injection of his authority into the posing of the question, Will's verbal scuffle with the Doctor is subsumed into a more smoothly ritualized riddle-game. Conscience asks the Doctor the question again, before trying Clergy, and finally Patience. In Conscience's mouth and the communal context, the question leaves behind entirely the expression of Will's individual

ignorance and need, his personal quest for salvation; it becomes, as Gruenler argues, the focus of an academic riddle-game, in which Conscience allows each character an opportunity to answer and reveal not only what they know, but their preferred mode of knowing.[34] The Doctor's second attempt at an answer is only a little more developed, and mostly aimed at maintaining the status of his institutional authority: Dowel is to do as clerks teach; Dobet, to teach others; Dobest (ironically, given the accusations of hypocrisy already in the air), to preach and do as one preaches (114-16), rounded out with an appeal to Latin scripture. Perhaps of greater interest is the fact that the Doctor is even willing to answer the question a second time—while he seems not to have taken Will's question especially seriously, when Conscience asks it he is able to set aside the various face-threats incurred in his brief interaction with Will, and focus on an interlocutor apparently more worthy of his attention. Of course, he will not be the only speaker to answer more than once, but this reluctance to engage with the question when it comes from Will forecasts his inability to hear the answer when it comes from Patience. The question becomes not just a test of knowledge, but of hermeneutic ethics, disguised as an academic game precisely to ensnare and condemn an interlocutor like the Doctor, who is more concerned with (though he would obviously not put it this way) the performance of his association rights than with the search for truth.

[34] Gruenler further points out the folktale quality of the scene: "When Conscience repeats the question more courteously, he turns the confrontation into more of an academic game, which then follows a variant of the common folktale pattern of three questions by asking the same question of three people, who give increasingly riddling answers." He connects this episode to the stories of St Andrew and Solomon and Marcolf, arguing for similarities with the former particularly in the way that the protagonist-host (Conscience) is saved, while a dubious authority figure (the devil in the saint's tale, the Doctor here) is exposed, by the asking and answering of riddles. "How to Read," 614-16.

Clergy demurs to answer until his seven sons, the seven liberal arts, can agree on what Dowel means; instead, he plans to follow Piers Plowman's mandate to "set alle sciences at a sop save love" (125), a non-answer which is nonetheless consonant with the conclusion that Patience will come to. Conscience turns at last to Patience, who answers the question first quite clearly: "'*Disce*,' quod he, '*doce*, *dilige inimicos*. / *Disce*, and Dowel; *doce*, and Dobet; / *Dilige,* and Dobest" (137-39). This is at first glance not so different from the Doctor's answer: learn, to do well; teach, to do better—knowledge and understanding, and the perpetuation of knowledge and understanding, are essential to the Dowel triad. But where the Doctor then emphasized the institutional role of the cleric, Patience goes on to emphasize a particular mode of love, loving and forgiving one's enemies:

> . . . [T]hus taughte me ones
> A lemman that I loved – Love was hir name.
> "With wordes and with werkes," quod she, "and wil of thyn herte
> Thow love leelly thi soule al thi lif tyme.
> And so thow lere the to lovye, for the Lordes love of hevene,
> Thyn enemy in alle wise eveneforth with thiselve.
> Cast coles on his heed of alle kynde speche;
> Bothe with werkes and with wordes fonde his love to wynne,
> And leye on hi thus with love til he laughe on the;
> And but he bowe for this betyng, blynd mote he worthe!"
> (13.139-47)

Patience's immediate answer was brief and to the point, a Latin verb for each do-phrase. His elaboration, however, concerns only the injunction *dilige inimicos*, and rather than offering an explanation on his own authority, he credits what he knows to a conspicuously absent allegorical figure, Love. Love's explication of what it means to love is itself tri-partite: love with works, with words, and with will, and she describes an aggressive kind of love, grounded in work and reconciliation: keep at your enemy, "lay

on him," until he laughs with you, bows to the "beating" of your love. This is not some abstracted, metaphysical kind of love; it is love as a concrete insistence, even violence, requiring companionship, work, and the willingness to overcome another's will with one's own. The goal of *dilige inimicos*, in Patience's and Love's account, is not to be endlessly loving one's enemies, but to love them into friendship – to make friends of them, and eventually to be therefore without enemies. Patience's account of Dowel and Dobet are academic, intellectual activities, but *Dobest* is a very practical, active, and telic verb. Furthermore, Love herself has manifest the qualities of Dobet by teaching Patience, who has himself exhibited the qualities of Dowel by learning from her. Patience's authority is thus not only experiential (Conscience cited his being well-traveled as a reason for expecting a good answer from Patience), but is grounded in his actually practicing the Dowel qualities as he describes them. He has an ethical authority which, despite his low status in this company, exceeds that of any other figure Will has asked his question.

If Patience left it at this answer, he would have responded sufficiently, adding to and expanding on what Will has so far been told about Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, and emphasizing love as the culmination of these virtues. In terms of the riddle-game Conscience is playing, Patience's answer is the best of the three given, certainly more thorough and convincing than the Doctor's apathetic, self-serving response, or Clergy's deferral of the question. But he goes on to pose a riddle, remarking as a segue that "Kynde love coeveiteth noght but speche" (151):

> With half a laumpe lyne in Latyn, *Ex vi transicionis,*
> I bere therinne aboute faste ybounde Dowel,
> In a signe of the Saterday that sette first the kalender,

And al the wit of the Wodnesday of the nexte wike after;
The myddel of the moone is the myght of bothe.
. (13.152-56)

Scholarship on this riddle has displayed a remarkable propensity to arrive at nearly the same general solution to the riddle (as Gruenler sums it up, "all of these solutions share the notion that Dowel is a change of heart toward charity"), but via differing interpretations of individual phrases.[35] Andrew Galloway solves it by understanding both the phrases "half a laumpe lyne in Latyn" and "myddel of the moone" to refer metonymically to the beginning of a riddle attested elsewhere that describes, letter by letter, the word *cor*, while taking "*Ex vi transicionis* to refer to the process of decoding that allusion, and the rest of the riddle's abstruse, allusive wordplay.[36] Other scholars have understood the "myddel of the moone" as a reference to full moon of Easter, and thus to salvation history with special emphasis on the Resurrection, a reading taken further by interpreting the Wednesday and Saturday of the riddle as metaphorical elements of Holy Week, or of the space between the Creation and Incarnation.[37] "*Ex vi*

[35] Gruenler, "How to Read," 619.

[36] Galloway makes his convincing argument by comparison with the riddling methods described in the *Secretum Secretorum*, as well as a riddle attested in Harley 3362: "Lune dimidium solis pariterque rotundum, / Et pars quarto rote: nil plus deus exigit a te. (Half a moon and equally the round of a sun, / And the fourth part of a wheel: nothing more does God demand from you)." The half-moon describes the letter *c,* the full sun the letter *o,* and one of the four letters in *rota* is *r*. Galloway suggests that the middle of the moon in Patience's riddle also describes a half-moon (as the middle part of the moon's cycle, or the moon cut off at the middle), and thus as well the letter *c.* Andrew Galloway, "The Rhetoric of Riddling in Late-Medieval England: The 'Oxford Riddles,' the *Secretum Secretorum*, and the Riddles in *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum* 70 (1995): 87.

[37] Walter Skeat explained the references to Wednesday and Saturday as liturgical allusions to baptism and the Incarnation, giving the passage "a general reference to the great events of Christianity," while reading the riddle as a whole as describing love and patience, as qualities exemplified by Christ in the Incarnation and thus identified with the Christian upon her baptism. *The Vision of William Concerning Piers Plowman in Three Parallel Texts,* ed. Walter Skeat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1886), 2: 196-97. Ben H. Smith makes an analogous

tranisionis" has elsewhere been read as a reference to grammatical transitivity,[38] to the crossing of the Red Sea, or as a further reference to the Paschal moon.[39] But regardless of how any particular line is parsed, all scholars seem to agree that the answer is some permutation of patience and love, especially given the surrounding context of Patience's speech in which the riddle is spoken.[40] Accepting this as the solution, the content of the riddle here is actually striking in its superfluity – Patience has already offered *love* as a gloss on Dobest, and moreover, he continues through two more riddles (though they might also all be read as one riddle in three parts), elaborating in a way that eventually makes the solution explicit:

> Undo it – lat this doctour se if Dowel be therinne;
> For, by hym that me made, myghte nevere poverte,
> Misese ne mischief ne man with his tonge,
> Coold, ne care, ne compaignye of theves,
> Ne neither hete, ne hayl, ne noon helle pouke,
> Ne neither fuyr, ne flood, ne feere of thyn enemy,
> Tene thee any tyme, and thow it take it with the:
> *Caritas nichil timet.*
>
> (13.158-64)

---

interpretation of Saturday as referring to the seventh day of Creation, when God rested, and Wednesday as referring to the Passion, making the "myddel of the moone" the full Easter moon. *Traditional Imagery of Charity in Piers Plowman* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), 40–55.

[38] Cynthia Bland points out that the phrase *ex vi traniciones* is used in late medieval school texts and so would likely have been familiar to Langland in such a grammatical context. "Langland's Use of the Term *Ex vi transicionis*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 2 (1988): 1245-35.

[39] J. F. Goodrich makes a similar connection to baptism, but via the phrase *ex vi transicionis,* which he views as a reference to the crossing of the Red Sea, and thus "a Christian's passing from the Old Law to the new life of grace" symbolized with baptism. *Piers the Plowman* ed. J. F. Goodrich, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, 1966), 294. Edward C. Schwytzer argues that Langland uses the grammatical phrase *ex vi transiciones* to make a punning reference to *transitus,* the Latin gloss for *phase, pascha* in the Vulgate, "so that 'ex vi transicionis' is equivalent to 'ex vi Paschae'," (315) while the "laumpe lyne" of the riddle refers to the candle presented at baptism. "'Half a Laumpe Lyne in Latyne' and Patience's Riddle in 'Piers Plowman,' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 73.3 (1974): 315-17.

[40] See Gruenler, "How to Read," 617-19, for a more detailed review of foregoing scholarship on Patience's riddle.

The "it" of lines 158 does not have a clear antecedent, but seems likely to refer to the riddle itself, the conundrum to be unraveled in order for Dowel to be revealed, and the imperative verb here recalls riddle formulas such as the Old English "say what I am called." Indeed, this second riddle (or continuation of the first) reads more like a riddle in the Exeter tradition than the esoteric riddle that precedes it; it works not by clever allusion to the parts of some hidden term, but by an evocative description that refrains from naming its object. In its solution is promised an impossibly powerful thing, efficacious enough to save the bearer from unease, mischief, cold, thieves, hate, the fiends of hell. But Patience allows little time for his audience to contemplate what thing could meet these criteria, giving immediately the solution that *caritas* fears nothing. His third riddle (or the third part of this riddle) proceeds in similar terms, as he claims that "thorough myght of this redels" (168) one will be made "Maister of alle" by pope, patriarch, emperor and empress (167-68), and he rounds out this final enigma, as well as his whole speech, with the assertion that "*Pacientes vincunt*"—the same phrase with which Conscience invited him to answer the Dowel question to begin with. Patience has, by his own pronouncement, won the riddle-game.

By the time Patience offers *Caritas nichil timet* and *Patientes vincunt* as summary solutions to the Dowel question—giving his central point, it should be noted, in the Doctor's "own" language of scholarship and liturgy—he has answered the question so many times over that his riddles do not offer much that is new to the discussion, only reframing answers already supplied. Yet their superfluity is in fact a part of their meaning. While the Doctor answered the question only briefly and Clergye deferred it, Patience wants to have it both ways, giving an answer that is sufficient accompanied by a

speech act that is not. Patience first answers Will's question as if it were a completely felicitous, sincere, "real" question; with the riddle, he responds to the way that the question has become riddling, face-threatening, illocutionarily indirect. His riddles, coming after his more straightforward answer, have the pragmatic effect of *un*-answering the question, undermining his interlocutor's sense that it has been answered, that the riddle has been solved, because there are riddles still on the table.

It is telling that while modern scholars cannot resist the riddle's perlocutionary force, and so possible meanings abound for the modern reader, none of the riddle's actual interlocutors—Conscience, Clergy, Will, and the Doctor—attempts to answer it. The Doctor immediately dismisses Patience's answer as "but a dido . . . a disours tale!", adding out that no combination of wit and strength can bring peace between the Pope and his enemies, nor between kings (173-76); and with that he pushes the table aside, signaling the end of the discussion and the game. For him, the riddle works as a distraction, an excuse to ignore everything else Patience has said. The Doctor allows the infolding of the riddle's language to close down interpretation for him, retroactively extending his interpretive deafness even to Patience's more direct first answer. Unwilling to approach its language with either patience or love, and having failed to hear the riddle with Patience's caution that "Kynde love coveiteth no catel but speche" (so speech might likewise want *kynde love*, in order to be meaningful), the Doctor, by design, misses the point. The riddle is face-threatening precisely because it is a riddle, demanding both intellectual energy and the submission to someone else's evaluation before it will yield its truths; caught up as he is by the aggression of the form, the Doctor is unwilling to make sense of the content. Wil's desire to see the Doctor's hypocrisy exposed takes a more

thoroughgoing shape than his original irritation could have anticipated, as this Doctor of Divinity not only fails to answer the fundamental moral question, what does it mean to Dowel?, but worse, fails to understand the answer when he hears it. He is offered an excuse to turn away from this solution, *patience* and *love* as the means to salvation, by the off-putting form in which it is presented, and he takes that excuse willingly. Conscience, meanwhile, a much better reader of both riddles and speech acts, is so intrigued by Patience's speech, solutions, and evident knowledge that he immediately declares his intention to join Patience's pilgrimage "til I have preved moore" (183), a response that shows an openness to other kinds of knowledge and ways of learning, in sharp contrast to the Doctor's.

As a crux of self-conscious interpretation in the poem, Patience's riddle raises the stakes for interpretation throughout it. We see the insincere, testing, riddling qualities that Will's once-earnest question has acquired all the more clearly in light of Patience's enigmatic answer, as well as the pragmatic engagements of asking and answering questions, of insisting on one's ignorance while literally, across an allegorical dreamscape, pursuing truth. Wil's question about Dowel is itself a reformulation of an interpretive problem that he was earlier posed: the Pardon came promising salvation, but Will was unable to understand even its straightforward imperatives, its injunction to "do well" and thus commend one's soul to God. His over-reading of that text, coming as it does after Piers's furious rejection of it, seems concerned that this, too, is a riddle—that the Pardon cannot merely mean what it seems to mean and be in fact a Pardon, and therefore some element of its language must be otherwise interpretable.

The Pardon, much like Patience's riddle(s), comes in multiple iterations that only make things progressively less clear to its audience (both Piers and the reader). We are told first that Truth, having heard how Piers's pilgrimage was stalled by the half-acre in need of his attention, "purchaced hym a pardoun *a pena et culpa*" (7.3). Truth tells Piers to stay home and labor, promising those who have labored with him a part, too, in his pardon. Various estates or professions are then described in terms of what they must to do to merit pardon: effectively, we are told how each must "do well" according to their social and economic responsibilities, with the emerging theme of diligent labor that avoids hypocrisy and is generous towards the poor. Much as the Pardon itself when it comes, this intermediate passage makes no promise of extenuation to those who in some degree fall short of its prescriptions, although it does not either explicitly condemn them. Attention then turns to the actual text of the Pardon, which, once it is codified as language becomes consequently less stable, more contestable, in its interpretation; indeed it is introduced *as* an interpretation, as the priest offers to "construe ech clause and kenne it thee on Englissh" (106). Only now do we realize that the Pardon has not yet been heard at all, and that everything that goes before is either an extrapolation from the Pardon's terms, or a vaguer description of socioethical law generally. The Pardon itself is opened and revealed to contain only two lines: *Et quia bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam / Qui vero mala, in ignem eternum.* Righty confused, the priest grumbles that he cannot find any pardon in this, translating it to:

> "Do wel and have wel, and God shal have thi soule,"
> And "Do yvel and have yvel, and hope thwo noon other
> that after thi deeth day the devel shal have thi soule!'"
> (7.111-14)

Indeed, as multiple scholars have noted, this seems not to be a pardon, only a nearly tautological statement of moral law quoted from the Athanasian Creed—do well and be rewarded; do evil and receive punishment.[41] No provision is made for those who, having done evil, are therefore in need of a pardon, while the person who perfectly follows the injunction to do well does not, in the end, need a pardon at all. Yet, much as Conscience will radically transform his way of living after hearing Patience's riddles, leaving behind the comforts of his court to follow Patience's pilgrimage and learn as he learns, Piers, having heard and ruptured Truth's so-called Pardon, decides to shift from a life of labor to one of penance and contemplation, replacing the labor of the plough with the labor "of preires and of penaunce" (7.120).

If we take Truth at his word (and it seems a last resort to assume Truth is lying) that the Pardon is indeed a pardon, then its paradox—that this speech act which clearly fails to perform a pardon claims nonetheless to be a pardon—must be resolvable, which is to say that the Pardon is a riddle. It is so not only because of its internal contradiction and simultaneous reference and misreference to the idea of *pardon*, but because (as per

[41] The critical disagreement on whether this is indeed a pardon and what we should understand from both the Pardon itself and Piers' tearing of it only contributes to my coming contention that it can be read, pragmatically, as a riddle, and that it is supposed to be both opaque and potentially solvable, in the tensions of its meaning as well as the way it is received within the text. To offer only a sample: Alan Lupack argues that Piers tears the Pardon not in rage at the text, but in righteous anger ("pure tene") at the priest, who in his desire for easy forgiveness that makes no demands on him, fails to understand how this is document, indeed, a pardon. "Piers Plowman, B.VII.116," *Explicator* 34 (1975): item 31. James Simpson sees the Pardon as an expression of the strict justice of the old law, before any pardon is offered by grace, and its troubling ambiguity Langland's way of leaving open the question of how works and grace are balanced in the attainment of salvation. *Piers Plowman: An Introduction,* 2nd, revised edition (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007). Timothy Asay, meanwhile, understands the Pardon as able to offer only a simulacrum of pardon, which can do no more than critique the very desire to be pardoned. "Image and Allegory: The Simulacral Logic of Piers's Pardon," *Exemplum* 25.3 (2013): 173-91.

the definition I proposed in the introduction), it exerts a perlocutionary force that demands it be solved. Because the Pardon alludes to a central salvific difficulty of Christianity—how will those who sin be saved?—the contradiction it suggests creates a pressing need for interpretive resolution. This is perhaps what lies behind Piers's decision to turn from a laboring to a penitential life, and is certainly what is at stake as Will sets out on the quest for Dowel: if he can understand Dowel as something other than, *more* than, it seems to be, entailing some possible valence that allows it to incorporate a clear avenue for pardon within its system of works and condemnation, then he can solve the riddle of salvation.

And yet there is no solution forthcoming, at least none expressible in a single discrete speech act. Throughout the third vision Will accrues a litany of possible answers to his question, culminating with Patience's directive to patient love, and finally abating with Conscience's promise to Hawkyn that Dowel, with the aid of a confessor, will wash the filth from his coat (14.18). Yet while all of Wil's answers may be in part satisfactory, none of them emerges as a clearly correct explanation of Dowel, nor of what precisely doing well does for salvation. Instead, the riddle of the Pardon fades as Piers re-emerges into the poem as the human incarnation of Christ. If not a linguistic answer to the Pardon's paradox, then Piers produces nonetheless—by becoming—a solution for humanity's damnation, promised by the Pardon's merciless logic. *Piers Plowman* is a poem in which riddling is instructive, in which pointing out the riddles that undergird salvation theology exerts the perlocutionary force of a riddling speech act, but less for the purpose of producing clear answers than just of drawing the hearer into contemplation and seeking, an effect I consider in greater depth in chapter 4.

Chapter IV
The Riddle of Truth

> *"Maybe He didn't raise the dead," the old lady mumbled, now knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her.*
>
> *"I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't," the Misfit said. "I wisht I had of been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady," he said in a high voice, "if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now."*
>
> Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

During the 1958 papal conclave following the death of Pius XII, participants and spectators apparently told each other that Cardinal Francis Spellman, the former archbishop of New York, was sailing up and down the Tiber in a boat full of sheep.[1] Spellman's papal ambitions were notorious, and the joke was that he was trying to solidify himself as the fulfillment of a twelfth-century prophecy that said the next pope would be "pastor et nauta"—a shepherd and a sailor. His aspirations were in any case thwarted when the conclave elected Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who became John XXIII. The Patriarch of Venice at the time of his election, Roncalli was perhaps a better fit for the prophecy anyway—a spiritual shepherd over a maritime hub.

The prophecy in question is that attributed to St. Malachy, an Archbishop of Armagh in the twelfth century, who journeyed to Rome in 1139 and there purportedly received a vision of all the popes from Celestine II (next to rise to the papacy in that same year) to Doomsday, one hundred and twelve popes later. Malachy recorded his vision in a series of short Latin mottos, one to describe each coming pope, and presented the

[1] Peter Bander, *The Prophecies of St Malachy & Columbkille* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd., 2005), 93n.

document to the sitting pope, Innocent II, "to console and strengthen him in the midst of his tribulations."[2] The prophecy then apparently disappeared into the Vatican Secret Archives for four centuries. It emerged in the late sixteenth century and was published by Arnold Wion in 1595, as a part of his long history of the Benedictine Order, *Lignum Vitæ.* Wion provided, alongside the list of mottos, a brief gloss for each showing how Malachy's prophecy had accurately predicted the last four hundred years of the papacy. Of course, there is actually no evidence that Malachy was the source of this text, or that it existed prior the sixteenth century. It is possibly a forgery created to support Girolamo Simoncelli, a papal candidate prominent in the 1590 conclave. The motto relevant to the 1590 election was *Ex antiquitate Vrbis*, and Simoncelli was from Oriveto, called in Latin *Urbs vetus*—old city.[3] If the prophecy was intended to bolster Simoncelli's cause, however, it was no more useful to him than it would be to Cardinal Spellman three hundred and fifty years later; Niccolò Sfondrati instead became the short-lived Gregory XIV.[4]

Each of the prophecy's mottos reads as a concise riddle alluding to elements of the pope's (or antipope's) identity. Those attached to popes before 1590 tend to describe birthplaces, family connections, and coats of arms with relative clarity. For example, the

---

[2] Abbé Cucherat of Paray-le-Monial, *Prophetie de la succession des papes*, quoted in M. J. O'Brien, *A Historical and Critical Account of the So-Called Prophecy of St. Malachy Regarding the Succession of Popes* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1880), 95.

[3] This theory appears first in Louis Moréri's 1674 *Le grand Dictionaire historique*; see O'Brien, *So-Called Prophecy,* 97-8.

[4] Bander, a staunch defender of the prophecy's legitimacy, points out that Sfondrati's father and grandfather were Milanese senators, and the word "senator" comes from the Latin *senex*, "old man," so the motto *ex antiquitate urbis* might be translated instead as "from the ancient [i.e., the old men, i.e., the senators] of the city." Furthermore, "it could also be said that Milan is an old city having been founded in 400 B. C." *Prophecies,* 71.

first motto given is *Ex castro Tiberis* (from a castle of the Tiber),[5] and the next pope elected after Malachy's visit to Rome was Celestine II, previously Guido di Castello, born in Città di Castello on the banks of the Tiber.[6] (Wion's gloss reads simply, "Typhernas.") The eleventh motto is *Sus in cribro* (pig in a sieve); the eleventh pope following Innocent II was Urban III, formerly Uberto Crivelli, whose family name meant "sieve" in Italian, and whose family arms displayed a sieve with two pigs. The final motto that Wion interprets is *De rore coeli,* "from the dew of the sky," which reads as a description of Urban VII, *qui fuit Archiepiscopus Rossanensis in Calabria, ubi mana colligitur* (who was Archbishop of Rossano in Calabria, where mana is gathered). This final gloss seems like the greatest stretch Wion makes in his interpretations, and it seems probable that he broke off glossing the mottos here because the relationship between pope and motto and grown so much less clear. [7] After Urban VII, Wion aligns mottos with Innocent IX and Clement VIII, the latter of whom was pope when the *Lignum Vitæ* was published, though without providing an explanation of either. The remaining thirty-seven mottos stand

[5] The text of the prophecies is drawn from the Google Books digitization of Arnoldo Wion, *Lignum vitae, ornamentum, & decus Ecclesiae, in quinque libros diuisum*, Liber Secundus (Venetiis: apud Georgium Angelerium), 307-11. Translations, where given, are my own.

[6] J. N. D. Kelly and Michael J. Walsh, *A Dictionary of Popes*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 171.

[7] Urban VII (Giovanni Battista Castagna) was Archbishop of Rossano in Calabria, southernmost on mainland Italy, which is indeed known for the production of sap from a tree called the manna ash, and the manna miraculously provided to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness does, in scripture, arrive at night with the dew (Numbers 11.9). However, the phrase "dew of heaven" is not used here, but in Genesis (27.28, 39), describing first the abundance of blessings promised to Jacob, and then the blessings not promised to Esau. Moreover, Castagna had left the see of Rossano to take up positions in Venice and Bologna, and eventually the cardinal-protectorship of San Marcello in Rome (Kelly and Walsh, *A Dictionary of Popes,* 276). A better interpretation of the motto might connect the ephemerality of dew with the brevity of Urban VII's twelve-day stint as pope, the shortest in history ; however, since Wion does not gloss it this way, neither does anyone else, and no one ever asks me to interpret their forged medieval prophecies for them.

uninterpreted in Wion's text, and it has been up to subsequent readers to map them onto subsequent popes.

Subsequent readers have certainly been up to the task. The eighty-first motto, *Lilium & rosa,* corresponds chronologically to Urban VIII (1623-44), and thematically to him either as a reference to his native city of Florence (from the Latin participle *florens,* "blossoming"),[8] or because of his "interest in the affairs of France (fleur-de-lis) and England (the rose)."[9] *De bona religione,* motto number 90, could arguably apply to any pope ever, so its application to Innocent XIII (1721-1724) is as good as its application to anyone else; *Vir religiosus,* number 99, makes this move even easier. *Lumen in cælo* (102), is convincing as an allusion to the family arms of Leo XIII (1878-1903), which show a comet over a tree, but *De medietate lunæ* (109), connected to John Paul I (1978), is difficult to interpret at all. Is this a reference to the brevity of John Paul's reign, to a lunar eclipse that occurred during his reign, to the precise duration of his reign—just over a month, i.e., from one half-moon to the next?[10] Or could it allude, as Peter Bander argues, to the failure of the peace talks at Camp David to deter war in the Middle East?

[8] O'Brien, *So-Called Prophecy,* 66. O'Brien furthermore asks rhetorically, if inaccurately, "do not the bees gather honey from the *lilies* and the *roses*?"

[9] Bander, *Prophecies,* 75.

[10] One enterprising internet writer pulls all of these lunar interpretations together, noting that John Paul I took office during the half-moon, was Pope for one month, saw a lunar eclipse at the "apogee of his reign," and died ("according to some, assassinated") at the next half-moon. Mike Hebert and Zoltan, "List of Popes with References to St. Malachy's Prophecy," accessed February 2015, http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/vatican/esp_vatican14g.htm.

"The thirty three days of the Pope's reign were eventful days, and the half-moon which then rose on the horizon may well overshadow many decades to come."[11]

Malachy's prophecy tends to re-emerge into public consciousness whenever an impending papal election inspires speculation about potential candidates, never more dramatically than with the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013. Benedict coincides with the penultimate of the prophecy's mottos, *Gloriæ Oliviæ,* which leaves Pope Francis to manifest the final entry: *In p[er]secutione. extrema. S.R.E. sedebit. Petrus Romanus, qui pascet oues in multis tribulationibus : quibus transactis ciuitas septicollis diruetur, & Iudex tre medus iudicabit populum suum.* (In the final persecution of the Holy Roman Church, Peter the Roman will sit, who will provide for his sheep in many tribulations; which things being accomplished, the city of seven hills will be destroyed, and the dreadful Judge will judge his people.) The good news for those concerned about the coming apocalypse is that Francis, born Jorge Mario Bergoglio, is neither named Peter, nor comes from Rome, although armchair prophecy enthusiasts on the internet point out that Bergoglio took the name Francis in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, whose father was Pietro (and Assisi is relatively close to Rome, on a global scale), or that *berg* in *Bergoglio* could mean "mountain" (though in Norwegian rather than Spanish),[12] which is not unlike "stone," the literal meaning of *petrus* in Greek.[13] Furthermore, Francis is of Italian

[11] Bander (*Prophecies,* 95-96) seems to identify the moon of the prophecy with the crescent moon loosely associated with Islam and predominantly Muslim nations, although he does not make this explicit.

[12] The Old Norse word *berg* actually does mean "stone," but this generally goes unremarked. Perhaps doomsday prediction and Germanic philology are not commonly overlapping interests.

[13] See, for example, Emmet O'Regan, "Pope Francis - The Bishop of Fatima and the 'Glory of the Olive'?" *Unveiling the Apocalypse*, March 16, 2003, http://unveilingtheapocalypse.blogspot.com/2013/03/pope-francis-bishop-of-fatima-and-glory.html.

descent, and while no pope has ever had to the audacity to call himself Peter, one could argue that any pope is standing in for Peter, which makes Francis in some sense Peter the Roman (though along with all other Italian popes).[14]

Interpretation of this prophecy is clearly overwhelmed by confirmation bias. If one believes that the Prophecy of the Popes is real, reliable, and indeed, prophetic, then the work of interpretation is not to evaluate *whether* these mottos successfully refer to a pope, or determine which one they refer to, but to decipher the referential connection between the next motto on the list and the next pope in history. That is, the credibility of the prophecy is never in question; it is rather the premise upon which it is interpreted. (To be fair, this goes both ways; for a reader such as myself who assumes the prophecy is a sixteenth-century forgery, even the evidence of *Lumen in cælo* alongside Leo XIII's shooting star seems only happenstance.) The prophecy does not come true because it unambiguously predicts the papal succession, nor because it is self-fulfilling, as it would be if Cardinal Spellman's apocryphal paschal boat tour had gotten him elected pope after all. It comes "true" as it is aggressively decoded to mean what its reader needs it to mean, a process that would not be available if its language were not enigmatic.

An essential premise of interpreting this prophecy is to assume that its epigrams are not merely enigmatic, but effectively, that they are riddles—that is, that they have single, intended, correct solutions. I argued in chapter 1 that riddles gain their momentum from their interlocutors' belief that a single correct answer is producible, although this does not always mean that such an answer will be identifiable. While not all possible

[14] This point is made at "A Twist in Malachys Prophecy? Will Pope Francis be the Last Or Will it Be The Pope After Him?" *Before It's News,* Feb. 14, 2014, http://beforeitsnews.com/prophecy/2014/02/a-twist-in-malachys-prophecy-will-pope-francis-be-the-last-or-will-it-be-a-pope-after-him-2458796.html.

answers are equally probable or satisfying, the existence of multiple possible answers is nonetheless essential to the poetics of riddles. Here, I wish to turn to enigmatic speech acts or discursive expressions, such as prophecies, that may not be intended to have an answer, raising similar interpretive challenges but often without the perlocutionary focus of the search for a determinate solution. "Enigma" and "riddle" are roughly parallel terms arising from different languages, the Greek word *αἴνιγμα* describing a type of speech analogous to the Old English *rædels*.[15] But in modern English, "riddle" (in its central meaning) describes a speech act with a perlocutionary force that requires not only interpretation, but a co-constructive contribution—as a genre, the riddle assumes and promises the existence of an answer. An enigma, on the other hand, is an expression of deliberately obscure meaning, lacking that assumption of a solution; the obscurity itself is central to the meaning, rather than the movement toward an answer.[16] Thus, in what follows, I distinguish between "enigma" and "riddle" in that those speech acts intended or interpreted as riddles are understood to have at least one clear, satisfactory solution, while enigmatic elements of discourse are intended or interpreted to open the hearer/reader to a broader contemplative field, rather than a single particular solution.

The Prophecy of the Popes provides a stark illustration of this difference. At the moment of its creation the text is both perfectly interpretable (for all the papal mottos

[15] Greek *αἴνιγμα* comes from *αἰνίσσεσθαι,* "to speak allusively or obscurely," from *αἶνος* apologue, fable. Modern English *riddle* comes from Old English *rædels,* "counsel, consideration; debate; conjecture, interpretation; imagination; example," from the Germanic base *read*, "to interpret, discern." See "enigma, n.," OED Online, December 2014, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/62382 (accessed March 10, 2015); "riddle, n.1," OED Online, December 2014, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/165631 (accessed March 10, 2015).

[16] Carroll's famous raven-and-writing-desk riddle, discussed in chapter 1, is a subversion of the riddle category rather than an enigma, because it leads the hearer to expect there is an answer and then denies its existence, leaving the field open for readers to provide their own.

referring to popes prior to the prophecy's date of composition) and perfectly uninterpretable (for everything after). Those mottos written with a particular pope in mind are convincing as riddles, encoding meaning that can be unpacked to reveal a reference to an individual in history; those written to forecast the popes of the future are enigmatic, deliberately unstable and legible in terms of whatever referent a reader wants to attach to them. (Thus one finds in the later mottos both some which are specific images that require some hermeneutic creativity, but a number as well like *Peregrin[us] apostolic[us], Crux de cruce,* and *Fides intrepida,* any of which could be mapped onto practically any pope without taxing the imagination.) For modern readers arguing over how to gloss the text's meaning on internet fora, interpretation is an act of faith, not only in the prophecy's truth and its capacity to deliver up meaning, but in themselves as interpreters. If you believe the prophecy to be legitimate and thus interpretable, you also must believe in yourself as someone with the spiritual insight—the authority—to decipher its riddles. Thus the struggle over the prophecy's meaning, which is itself a struggle for the authority to make meaning, is played out in terms of an implicit struggle over genre: are these lines broadly enigmatic, or are they specifically riddles? And of course, as the meaning of the Latin lines emerge in interpretive practice, they could be either. A reader could conceivably view the prophecy as a series of enigmatic meditations on papacy in general, none of them meant to be tied to any particular individual or event (though this would require a reader to reject Wion's introduction and glosses, imaging the text as it would pre-exist him), just as a reader could (as many readers do) understand all of them as riddles, with solutions waiting to be discovered. The difference between riddle

and enigma then lies, like so much else, at the conjunction of form in the abstract and its concrete, contextualized iteration.

This final chapter addresses enigmatic language as an extension of riddling speech acts, though still with effects akin to those of riddles. Enigma incorporates a claim to a kind of affective truth that cannot be expressed in mere truth value, only alluded to via the form that language takes. It brings an aura of metaphysical depth and esoteric weight to an assertion; as Stephen Colbert might put it, it is not only true, but *truthy*. The use of enigma suggests that a subject's real (even, platonically, Real) nature exceeds language, carrying a weight of metaphysical significance that can be gestured toward but not directly conveyed. In so bending language to evoke a truth that it cannot precisely refer to, a speaker furthermore claims and performs authority over that truth, as well as over the community of interpreters presented with the enigma and compelled to interpret it. Speakers who make use of enigma display not only their access to esoteric knowledge, but practice the social authority to limit their audience, making their privileged knowledge available only to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Prophecy in Time

The most obvious, if also cynical, reason for prophecy to be written enigmatically is that it is thereby made difficult to falsify. A referentially direct proposition can be true or false, but riddles, without their solutions, have no truth value. Beyond this, however, the use of enigma, with its perlocutionary force that heightens the demand for interpretation, can encode multiple possible meanings into one utterance precisely because there is no single clear referent to that utterance, in addition to the suggestion

that there is more truth to prophetic language than can be conveyed just by referential accuracy. Prophecies in enigmatic form make a claim to authority because their speakers claim not only to know the future, but to know how to communicate that knowledge in a shape that will convey these extra layers of truth.

Because the meaning of the prophecy is so often difficult to access, the prophecy in context often carries a concomitant verdictive force, setting up if not actually performing a judgment on its interlocutor. Much as the Doctor in *Piers Plowman* was implicitly condemned—or allowed to condemn himself—by his unwillingness to hear a truth spoken in riddling terms and the voice of a beggar, prophecy implicitly sorts those who are able to hear, interpret, and understand from those who are deaf to truth or closed to figurative meaning. The medieval concern that *littera enim occidit, spiritus autem vivificat* adds a moral dimension to the interpretation of even secular texts, and those who are too quickly dismissive of prophetic language either because they mistake it for literal language or they distrust the source unwittingly expose their failings of not only intellect but character.

One example of this plays out in an anecdote told about the storied Scottish prophet Thomas of Erceldoune, or Thomas [the] Rhymer. Thomas Rhymer was in fact a real thirteenth-century Scottish lord, although that is nearly all that can be said about him with confidence. His name appears in a few contemporary documents, in particular a charter from 1294 in which either he or his son turns his lands in the northern village of Ercildoun over to the Trinity House of Soltra.[17] A half-century after his death, Thomas

[17] See James A. H. Murray's Introduction to *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune* (London: EETS, 1875), ix-xiii, for a discussion of the limited historical record of Thomas Rhymer's life, which Murray estimates falls roughly between 1210 and 1290.

Rhymer's name emerges in a few Scottish chronicles as that of a prophet, with a patina of mystical Scottish nationalism comparable to the significance of Merlin in England; Thomas Grey's Anglo-Norman *Scalacronica* in fact refers to "Thomas Erceldoune, whose words were spoken in figure, as were the prophecies of Merlin."[18] In the 1430 *Scotichronicon,* Walter Bower's continuation and completion of an earlier history by John of Fordun, Thomas makes what is arguably his most famous prophecy, concerning the death of Scotland's King Alexander III.[19]

According to the chronicle, Thomas is one night at Dunbar Castle asked by the Earl March, somewhat in jest, what the next day will bring. Thomas, sighing heavily, answers:

> Hedu diei crastine, diei calamitatis et miserie, quia ante horam explicite duodecimam audietur tam vehemens ventus in Scocia quod a magnis retroactis temporibus consimilis minime inveniebatur; cuius quidem flatus obstupescere faciet gentes stupidos reddet audientes,e xcelsa humiliabit et rigida solo complanabit.
>
> Alas for tomorrow, a day of calamity and misery! Because before the stroke of twelve a strong wind will be heard in Scotland the like of which has not been known since times long ago. Indeed its blast will dumbfound the nations and

[18] Quoted in Murray, "Introduction," xviii. Thomas also appears to prophecy the military career of William Wallace in Henry the Minstrel's ("Blind Harry's") 1477 *The Wallace*. The earliest extant prophecy attributed to him, however, appears among the Harley Lyrics (in MS Harley 2253, dated to the first half of the fourteenth century), a complaint prophecy that describes the various disasters awaiting Scotland, most likely with reference to its ongoing war with England. "Introduction," xv-xix.

[19] The anecdote also appears in Hector Boece's *Historia Gentis Scotorum* and John Bellenden's translation of the same; in this version, the Earl has actually just asked about the next day's weather and gets Thomas's response that "on the morrow afore noun, sall blaw the greatest wynd that euir was her afore in Scotland." Bellenden remarks at the end of this shorter version of the story, "Yis Thomas was ane man of gret admiration to the people, and schew sundry thingis as they fell. Howbeit yai wer ay hyd uvnder obscure wourdis." Murray, "Introduction," xiv-xv.

> render senseless those who hear it; it will humble what is lofty and raze what is unbending to the ground.[20]

His audience finds this all very worrisome, and the Earl tells his men to pay close attention to the weather the next day. But when no great wind arrives, they deem Thomas a lunatic and break for lunch. Of course it turns out they mocked too soon; the Earl is sitting down to eat just before noon when a messenger arrives with the news of Alexander III's unexpected death the night before. Those who had dismissed Thomas's prophecy are now forced to acknowledge his prophetic ability.

This prophecy is particularly satisfying because it can be taken to describe the terms of its own fulfillment. The *ventus* that it predicts is understood too literally by its audience, who look for dangerous weather rather than overwhelming news. Their quickness to scorn the prophecy and the prophet, coupled with their deafness to figurative meaning in the prophetic language, ironically sets them up to be a part of the prophetic future: not only will they be overwhelmed by the coming news of Alexander III's unexpected death, but they are confounded by the realization of Thomas's prediction, humbled from their lofty pride. The prophecy is self-authorizing, describing not only the future but the future of its own effects, a circular underwriting of its rightness.

Moreover, Thomas's prophecy both answers the Earl's immediate question about the events of the next day, when the news of Alexander's death will arrive at Dunbar Castle, and the impending crisis that this death will trigger. Nations may be not rendered senseless by Alexander's death exactly, but the ensuing civil wars that will eventually

[20] Text and translation are taken from the dual-language edition: Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon,* vol. 5 (Books IX and X), ed. Simon Taylor and D. E. R. Watt with Brian Scott (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1990), 428-29.

draw in England and France will certainly have a widespread effect of humbling and razing. In particular, Thomas's forecast of a sound not heard *a magnis retroactis temporibus* marks a temporal break—an era of relative peace and stability ends with Alexander's death and another, more tumultuous and violent, begins. His prophecy thus looks simultaneously to the coming day, to the broader future, and to the distant past, drawing all three together in one moment of figurative simultaneity, and the enigmatic nature of his language allows him to refer to all of this at once.

On one level, Thomas's speech act fails to produce the generically appropriate perlocution—that is, if as enigmatic or riddling speech it is meant to provoke its interlocutor into self-conscious and careful interpretation, it does not do that, since its audience interprets it literally and watches only the weather. But this failure produces a successfully verdictive side-effect: those hearing the prophecy make the wrong choice among perlocutionary options, believing in the literal, referential, accessible meaning of Thomas's language, rather than recognizing its wide-ranging enigmatic significance and their own expected interpretive contribution to the speech event. They thus expose themselves as lacking the interpretive acumen to appreciate prophecy, to manage meanings that exceed the baldly literal. Here they are actually exposed and forced to recant their mockery, saying that Thomas is in fact a credible prophet, but even in cases where this is not done explicitly, enigmatic prophecy forces a hearer to recognize her own inadequacy of understanding. The prophecy, like riddles in chapter 2, tests the merit of its hearer, forcing its audience to reveal whether they are capable of correctly responding to prophecies.

Thomas is already an established figure of authority by the time these events are supposed to have happened, but his authority is contested and must be re-asserted even here. The use of enigma in this case serves to delay and dramatize the moment when Alexander's death is announced, but also to add depth to its meaning, and demonstrate Thomas's interpretive authority to convey that depth. The essential news is not that the king has fallen from his horse and died—presumably Thomas could have made that explicit if it were—but the coming unrest in wake of Alexander's death. Thomas exceeds his knowledge of the event to instead communicate his knowledge of its significance, what it means and why it matters. He displays not only his knowledge of the future, but his authority to say what that future means.

The legendary source of Thomas Rhymer's authority is itself a figure of prophetic enigma. The story of how he came by his oracular talent is told in a fifteenth-century romance in three fitts, *Thomas of Erceldoune,* as well as a related ballad which evidently evolved either out of or congruent to the romance. [21] James A. H. Murray's impressive parallel-text edition of this romance, which remains the most complete available, aligns five extant manuscript versions of the romance from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. None of these gives a complete text; in what follows, I draw primarily on the Thornton and Cambridge versions, which are two of the oldest.[22]

---

[21] "Thomas Rymer" is Child Ballad 37 in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (London: Henry Stevens, Son and Stiles, 1882); Murray also includes in his edition the two versions of the ballad given by Robert Jamieson and Walter Scott ("Introduction," liii-lv). A sixth version of the romance, from a seventeenth-century manuscript, has been published in an edition by William Price Albrecht; Albrecht suggests it is a cognate of the Sloane version. See *The Loathly Lady in "Thomas of Erceldoune," With a Text of the Poem Printed in 1652* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954).

[22] The three fifteenth-century manuscripts are the Thornton, Cambridge, and Cotton. The Thornton (MS Lincoln a. 1. 17) is collection of romance, religious, and medical texts written in a

The romance begins (though it does not persist) in the first person and a little like a dream vision. The speaker describes how he went out "In a mery mornynge of Maye" to walk "By huntle bankkes," in the Eildon hills in the Scottish Marches (27-8).[23] "Allonne in longynge" (33), he lies down beneath a tree, and soon after catches sight of a beautiful and mysterious lady. The May morning, the use of the first person (unusual for a romance), and the pastoral setting make comparisons to *Piers Plowman* and *Wynnere and Wastoure* irresistible, as well as the speaker who feels "longynge"—a word which can mean weariness as well as sorrow or yearning—and lies down beneath a tree to rest. One might well expect him to fall into a visionary dream at this point, and as he catches sight of the beautiful, richly-dressed woman out hunting and runs to her, calling her "Qwene of heuene" (88), it seems possible for a moment that he has indeed been favored with a visitation from Mary—he certainly seems to think so. At this point, however, the romance (now in the third person) takes a left turn from the Christian to the uncanny, as the woman replies that she is not the queen of heaven, but "of ane oþer countree" (93) and is here, alone in all her finery, hunting wild animals with her dogs.

Northern dialect in 1430-1440 by Yorkshire landowner Robert Thornton. Murray argues for this as the oldest version in part because of the preservation of Northern forms; unfortunately, much of the latter half of the poem is badly damaged in the manuscript. The Cambridge (CUL, MS. Ff 5. 48) includes a "Southernized version of the original" while the Cotton (MS. Cotton Vitellius E. x) dates to around 1450, but the manuscript was badly damaged in the Ashburnham House fire, and now consists of re-bound fragments; "scarcely one line of the poem is perfect." The remaining two versions appear in sixteenth-century manuscripts: MS Landsowne 792, which is relatively undamaged though it cuts off abruptly before the end of the romance; and MS. Sloane 2578, which includes only Fitts 2 and 3, in keeping with the remainder of the manuscript's prophetic contents. See Murray, "Introduction," lvi-lxi for a thorough description and comparison of the manuscripts.

[23] Citations are by line number to the Thornton version in Murray's edition, except where otherwise noted.

The balancing act that this introduction performs at the overlap of genres allows it to be read with a kind of double sight: the things Thomas experiences from here will be inflected with a visionary edge—perhaps it is all a dream (though perhaps a visionary one), perhaps it is all real, or perhaps he is walking, not dreaming, into a vision. This is appropriate to a narrative occupied with boundaries, crossroads, and the travel between countries that is also a movement between metaphysical planes, the narrative leading to a series of prophecies that, correctly interpreted, reveal to Thomas the coming fortunes of his own country.

The woman—her identity, body, and self—is herself a problem requiring interpretation, which Thomas (not yet a prophet, after all) addresses rather badly. Having learned that she is not the Virgin Mary, he promptly turns an about-face and asks if she'll sleep with him. She agrees after he promises to plight his troth and dwell with her forever, but once they've had sex seven times, he is surprised to discover that (as she warned him would happen), her beauty and riches have vanished. Thomas, devastated to be promised to such a now-loathly lady, becomes in one version concerned she is actually the devil, though the lady assures him she is not.[24] However, she does tell him to take his leave of the sun and the trees because, having promised himself to her, he will be spending the next year with her, "And Medill-erthe sall þou none see" (157-60). In a delightful moment of irony, Thomas now falls to his knees and prays for pity from the "Mylde qwene of heuene," and asks Jesus to take his soul, since he does not know where his bones are going to end up (161-8).

[24] This appears only in the Lansdowne MS, lines 141-56.

So far, Thomas has proven himself a poor interpreter of signs, misidentifying the lady as both the queen of heaven and the ruler of hell, baffled by the transformation of her body that she explicitly warned him would happen, unable to grasp her as either beautiful or ugly, as saint or fiend. And indeed, she is enigmatically otherworldly in the most literal sense, belonging neither to the mortal world, nor to heaven, nor to hell, but to some other, unnamed country. Following her into Eldon Hill, Thomas finds himself in an impossible place, apparently underground but still featuring a bird-filled garden growing pears, apples, dates, figs, and grapes, though he is told that if he eats anything from there, he will lose his soul to hell. The lady invites him to lay his head on her knee, and from there he sees a mountain that marks the way to heaven as well as the brushwood that marks the way to paradise, the "grene playne" (210) that leads to purgatory, and the hollow that shows the way to hell. Finally she points out her own castle, warning him that when they go there he should speak to no one, lest the "kynges of this Countree" find out she has been sleeping with him.

Trying to locate this place geographically, temporally, or even metaphysically seems futile, and the woman herself is a walking riddle, a set of signs stacked paradoxically so that interpretation is impossible before one learns what the interpretation is.[25] The unnamed lady and her unnamed country are loosely associated with heaven,

[25] In the ballad "Thomas Rymer," the lady almost immediately tells Thomas that she is the Queen of Elfland, a minor change that has the effect of immediately settling the enigma of her identity. Even if a contemporary reader of the romance would gather that she is some elf or fairy based on the tropes of the tale, Thomas himself still finds her identity slowly unfolding and never determined by any specific signifier, as he journeys and stays with her through her mysterious country. On the other hand, as Erin Madeleine Sebo argues, the change is a positive one for the character herself, as the lady is transformed from a nervous king's consort in the romance, who has to hide her affair with Thomas and seems to be at the mercy of both his and the king's desire for her company, to the ballad's confident queen. "Sex, Politics and Religion:

hell, the Virgin Mary, the devil, even the Garden of Eden. These are all identities (other than Eden) which the lady and the place are explicitly not, yet nonetheless the imagined and rejected identities persist at the periphery of what these enigmas signify instead. Whoever she is, the lady is in some way like the Virgin, though also in some way like the devil—and as Erin Madeleine Sebo suggests, a little like Eve, as she stands beneath the trees full of forbidden fruit and warns Thomas not to fall into hell.[26] The country is not heaven or hell or Middle-Earth, but exists as a co-hyponym in the same category. The cloud of religiously-freighted non-signifiers give shape, if not a name, to the place and person—the very enigma of their identities invites the simultaneous possibility that they can be perceived, if only temporarily, as any of these things.

In neither the eternity of heaven or hell, nor countable mortal time, Thomas spends three days in this country that are "thre ȝere & more" (286) back in the world, before the lady tells him he must return so that the devil does not take him as a tax. Upon his return to the same tree where she found him, Thomas asks the lady for a token and is told, appropriately, that he may be gifted with either harping or speech. He chooses the latter, "ffor tonge es chefe of mynstralsye" (316), and the lady adds the twist that he will not be able to lie—thus the origin of Thomas's legendary status as True Thomas. Thomas asks her to stay a little longer, begging for "some ferly," to which she responds with a partially enigmatic prophecy:

> Thomas, herkyne what j the saye:
> Whene a tree rote es dede,

The Transformation of the Figure of the Fairy Queen from *Thomas off Ersseldoune* to 'Thomas Rymer'." *English Studies* 94 (2013): 11-26.

[26] "Sex, Politics and Religion," 16-17. Sebo's point is that the parallel scene in the ballad version is a refiguration of the Garden of Eden, but it clearly applies to the romance as well.

The leues fadis þane & wytis a-waye;
& froyte it beris nane þane, whyte ne rede.
Of þe baylliolfe blod so sall it falle:
It sall be lyke a rotyne tree;
The comyns, & þe Barlays alle,
The Russells, & þe ffresells free,
All sall þay fade, and wyte a-waye;
Na ferly if þat froyte than dye.
And mekill bale sall after spraye,
Whare joy & blysse was wont [to bee;]

ffare wele, Thomas, j wende m[y waye]
I may no longer stand w[ith the.]'

(325-38)

The prophecy refers to the events of the fourteenth century, during the wars of Scottish independence, but of course within the narrative, Thomas is presumably hearing it earlier than that. Its audience is thus ironically doubled: for Thomas, this prophecy is a hazily ominous enigma; for readers of the romance in the fifteenth century, it is a riddling description of past events. (Interestingly, it is perhaps most clearly a riddle for modern readers who do not know their medieval Scottish history well enough to immediately recognize references to historical families, and thus must rely on historical research and/or the apparatus of an edition to correctly decipher the prophecy's historical meaning.) As Thomas hears this prophecy, it describes a number of prominent families who will fall and fade, framed by the expressive image of a tree dead or dying, its leaves faded and its fruit gone, and summed up by the grim promise of "mekill bale" spreading forth instead of "joy & blysse." Its terms are general—the tree is most clearly tied to the "baylliolfe blod" (Balliol blood), but could stand metonymically for Scottish nobility more broadly, since at least four more families (the Comyns, Barclays, Russells, and Friseals) will also, according to this, fade like the tree. From this perspective, it describes some coming catastrophe among these prominent Scottish families, but with more care

for the affect of the image, the mood of loss and ruination, than for the details of specific events.

The fifteenth-century Scottish audience, however, would immediately recognize this as a bitter indictment of the Balliol family, particularly Edward Balliol's English-supported invasion of Scotland in 1332 and repeated attempts, often temporarily successful, to seize the Scottish crown thereafter.[27] The family, the prophecy suggests, was dead at its core; their corruption and worthlessness went all the way down, and the ambitions of Edward Balliol were only a manifestation of a badness that pre-existed him, going back to his father's abortive stint as king of Scotland and before.[28] Thus, just as the rotten Balliol tree "fadis þane & wytis a-waye," so does that sickness spread to these other families, who notably had and lost members on both sides of the Balliol/Bruce conflict In the same language, they too "sall . . . fade, and wyte a-waye." From the

[27] A quick review of some relevant history: After the death of Robert the Bruce in 1329, with his son David only five years old, Scotland was governed by a series of regents. Edward Balliol, whose father John had been a king so unsatisfactory that he was bureaucratically removed from office (see note below), saw an opportunity in the king's minority and invaded in 1332, with the backing of Edward III. Balliol had himself crowned king but before the year's end was forced to flee back to England; with English help he regained his position in Scotland via the Battle of Halidon Hill, though he was deposed by supporters of David Bruce—David II—in 1336. The prophecies of Fitt 2 go on to describe and lament Edward Balliol's activities and the subsequent battles in greater detail: Balliol, depicted as a "tercelet" accompanied by other "tercelettis grete and graye" (dispossessed lords who joined Balliol's party) that "sall stroye the northe contree" (391-95).

[28] Alexander III was predeceased by his only son, so that upon his death in 1286, the crown passed to his young granddaughter Margaret, the Maid of Norway, who unfortunately also died while en route to claim the throne. This left a number of potential claimants to the throne, among whom John Balliol was eventually selected and crowned in 1292. In 1296, after four years of giving in to Edward I of England (who had extracted a promise of vassalage from all the potential claimants before Balliol was crowned), John was replaced in all but name by a "Council of Twelve," and forced to abdicate that same year when Edward personally invaded and conquered Scotland. Balliol has thus been historically blamed for the loss of Scottish sovereignty to the English, as the country remained under English control until Robert the Bruce seized the throne and gradually drove the conquerors out between 1306 and 1314.

perspective of the future, the prophecy is in fact revelatory of Thomas's present, of the damage already evident in the families it mentions; thus it speaks ironically to an audience who knows the outcome of these wars, but can simultaneously hear the prophecy through Thomas's ignorance.

The prophetic speech act changes if it is spoken by a mysterious lady to Thomas around 1300 rather than from the text to the reader in 1430 (or, for that matter, 2015). The conditions to make a prophecy felicitous should include, as a preparatory condition, that the speaker know the future. But the felicity conditions to make a prophecy *have been* felicitous are much easier to come by—the speaker only has to be able to claim prior knowledge of the future, and to be able to provide evidence (that is, the recorded prophecy itself) that it was known.[29] The central perlocutionary force of prophesying is not just that the hearer feel compelled to contribute an answer that will co-construct the whole meaning of the expression, as in riddling, but that she look in the world to identify possible referents for the prophetic statement. This might be done in a projected or imagined future, in the present as it unfolds, or in history, as the prophecy is retroactively evaluated. As Thomas hears the lady's prophecies, they describe many potential futures, many possible events that might be equally well described by the enigmatic language of the prophecy. As they are composed, and as we read them now, they cast this period of national turmoil in symbolic terms, the violence and catastrophe made inevitable by the

[29] The felicity conditions that Searle lays out for making an assertion include as an essential rule that "the maker of an assertion commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition" and as a "preparatory rule" that "the speaker must be in a position to provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition." Prophecies being a variant on assertions, they can be expected to require the same felicity conditions, with the added difficulty that the speaker be able to give "evidence or reasons" for his knowledge of the future. John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 62.

presage of a tree dead at the root. But the two readings co-exist in the referential uncertainty of the prophecy's enigmatic language.

This difference becomes even more marked in the next prophecy the lady gives, which appears differently across the five manuscripts of the romance. Thomas follows up the Lady's first prophecy with a more specific question about the Bruces and Balliols, asking "of this gentill blode / Wha sall thrife, and wa sall thee / Wha sall be kynge, wha sall be none, / And wha sall welde this northe countre?" (343-346). In the Thornton manuscript, which Murray takes to be the oldest based on its preservation of northern forms, the Lady responds:

> Thomas, of a Batelle j sall þe telle,
> Þat sall be done right sone at wille :
> Beryns sall mete bothe fers & felle,
> And freschely fight at Eldone hille.
> The Bretons blode sall vndir fete,
> Þe Bruyse blode sall wyne þe spraye ;
> Sex thowsande ynglysche, wele þou wete,
> Sall there be slayne, þat jlk daye.
>
> (349-56)

In this version alone, the Bruces (Scottish) defeat the Bretons (English). In the Cambridge manuscript's version, "the brucys blode shall vndur fall, / the bretons blode shall wyn þe spray ;/ C. thowsand men þer shal be slayn, / Off scottysshe men þat nyght and day" (353-6). Similarly in Sloane and Lansdowne the English are given as the victors over the Scottish—as was in fact the outcome of the historical Battle of Halidon Hill in 1333, in which supporters of Edward Balliol, led by Edward III of England, defeated those loyal to the Bruces. Murray speculates that this might provide an date of composition for the romance, which he puts on the eve of the battle of Halidon Hill: the contest between the Balliol and Bruce lines for the throne of Scotland was in full swing

and the prophecy would have been written "with a view to encourage the Scots in battle."[30] (Other prophecies from Fitt 2, describing events later than Halidon Hill, would in this analysis be later additions.) The Sloane, Lansdowne, and Cambridge manuscripts would thus reflect an adjustment made after the fact to accommodate the real outcome of the battle.

The Thornton manuscript in this case carries the traces of a prophetic speech act in which all of the felicity conditions were in place for the illocution to be effective, and which nevertheless loses its felicity over time. The version of the prophecy in which the Bruces trample the English could only be felicitous up to a certain moment, when the English had in fact trampled the Bruces, and so for the prophecy to persist either within the narrative or as a historical prophecy, it must be adjusted to retroactively retain its status. Whatever enigmatic qualities the prophecy has before the events it foretells take place, they evaporate in the face of identification with real events in history—when the truth value of the assertion becomes known—and the authority it carries is likewise dismantled. In retrospect, the prophecy draws together all of these historical moments to make them mean for each other: an imagined moment before the Scottish wars, the eve of the Halidon Hill battle that the Scottish would lose, the battle itself as it is prophesied, and the later moment, when the outcomes are known and the story can be shaped around (or not) the past events. The visceral specificity of the projected battlefield in the Thornton—blood underfoot, six thousand English corpses—is thus transformed into an

[30] Murray, "Introduction," xxvi. Besides the issue of the outcome, there is some dispute among the manuscripts as to the name of the location—Thornton and Sloane give Eldon Hill, but Lansdowne and Cotton, Halidon Hill, and Cambridge, Ledyn Hill (presumably a version of the latter). It seems probable that in the exemplar for Thornton and Sloane, the text's many other references to Eldon Hill were confused with the phonetically similar "Halidon Hill."

image that mourns a specific violence, the temporary loss of the crown to an English-backed usurper, in the later versions.

The remainder of Fitt 2 continues to prophecy/report major events during the Wars of Independence—from the battle of Falkirk (which she names directly) to the reign of Robert II, the first of the Stewarts (also named directly, though only in the Lansdowne). In Fitt 3, however, the romance begins to prophecy in earnest, in that the prophecies it now makes are no longer clearly tied to recent Scottish history, but to a temporally unmoored national future. Thomas, having apparently heard enough about the turmoil into which his country is headed, asks the lady to tell him how all this will end, and most importantly, "And what schalle worthe of this northe countre?" (492). She rehearses several more battles coming (she seems, for a mysterious lady from a metaphysically other country, to be extremely interested in the military future of Scotland), none of which can be clearly tied to any definite historical referent;[31] then, says the lady, "a basted shall comme owte of a fforreste," who will "wynne þe gre for þe beste, / & all þe land after bretens shalbe" (Sloane 607-12).[32] He will ride to England

[31] She refers first to a battle at "spynkarde cloughe" (Thornton 496) / "spynard hill" (Cambridge) / "Spenkard Slough" (Sloane), which has not been connected to any known location; however, in later the later *Whole Prophecie of Scotland*, Pinkie Cleugh is interpolated at this point instead, referring to the 1547 battle that was the culmination of the Rough Wooing (Albrecht, *Loathly Lady,* 105n496). She also describes a battle between Edinburgh and Pentland (509), which both Murray and Albrecht feel could possibly refer to Henry IV's siege of Edinburgh. In prophecies made up to this point, the lady is often more direct than enigmatic, giving the proper names of famous battles and places involved (Bannockburn, Falkirk, Robert Stewart, etc.), so that where these proper names are lacking it is difficult to feel totally convinced by speculation about what the prophecies might refer to. Following the Edinburgh and Spynkard battles, she describes three more battles—one "by-twixe Cetone and þe See" (536), one at Gladsmoor (560-61), and one at Sandeford, all of which, along with the bastard from the forest, appear elsewhere in Scottish prophesying.

[32] Leaves have been torn here from the Thornton manuscript; the Cambridge and Sloane manuscripts have the most complete version of this section.

where he will hold a parliament and put to rest false laws, and then participate in a battle at a place called Sandeford:

> of a battell I shall the spell,
> that shalbe done at sandyford :
> ney þe forde þer is a braye,
> and ney þe braye þer is a well ;
> a stone þer is, a lytell fraye,
> & so þer is, þe sothe to tell.
> thowe may trowe this, euery wurde—
> growand þer be okes iij ;
> that is called the sandyford,
> þer the last battell done shalbe.
> . . .
> þe basted shall gett him power strange,
> all þe fyue leishe lande—
> there shall not hon him bodword brynge,
> as I am for to vnderstand.
> þe basted shall die in þe holly lande;
>
> (Sloane 623-41)

Without the constraints of history, this prophecy can indulge in much more specific description, though the significance of these details is unclear. Sandeford itself cannot be tied to any known location, but is a predicted battle that appears in a number of prophecies associated with Thomas the Rhymer, to the extent that Henry Tudor apparently claimed it for Bosworth Field in 1485, styling himself thereby as the decisive victor of the final battle of Britain.[33]

The prophecy of the bastard out of the forest (likely related to legends and prophecies of Arthur) is essential to the trajectory towards this last battle.[34] The lady is

[33] Thomas Thornton, "The Battle of Sandeford: Henry Tudor's Understanding of the Meaning of Bosworth Field," *Historical Research,* 78.201: 436-42.

[34] This may also be in some use of dating the poem, if one finds convincing the argument for "bastard" as a bird in reference to Henry IV: "The prediction that the bastard will rule all the

imagined to be speaking to Thomas not long before the death of Alexander III and the fourteenth-century crises of Scottish sovereignty that resulted; the text is composed during and/or not long after the Scottish have spent the better part of a century trying to stave off English incursions and resolve their own civil wars. For anything that could be called a *final* battle to take place, a settling of both Scottish sovereignty and its vexed political relationship with England must be promised. A king who could unite the British while reforming the English government (the Scottish government is, naturally, not understood to be in need of any reform) has the potential, at least in this enigmatic, cryptic future, to truly end the conflict with a final decisive battle. Only Sloane and Cotton make any mention of who will be fighting in this battle—the Cliffords particularly, who "bolde shalbe, / in bruse land iij yeares & mare" (633-34)—and this seems much less the point than the actual location of Sandeford. Much more attention is given to the geography of the ford, bray, well, stone, and three oaks that mark the place.[35]

This focus on place over event is even more pronounced in the Cambridge manuscript's version, where the death of the bastard in the Holy Land comes before the battle of Sandeford, which thus seems only loosely connected to the career of the bastard

---

land may stem from prophecies of King Arthur's return, but it seems to have been given a contemporary meaning. The victorious bastard, according to Brandl, is a kind of bird and, like the heron who vanquishes a falcon, stands for Henry IV. The prophecy that the bastard "shall die in þe holly lande" (S 641) supports the identification, for such a prophecy was circulated concerning Henry IV. The "p*ar*lament of moche pryde" (*L* 615) held by the bastard would seem to be the Parliament of 1399. Thus Brandl believes that the poem was written after 1399, probably after Henry's demand for Scottish submission in August 1400, but before the English victory at Homildon in 1402, which is not mentioned. A possible reference (line 329) to the dying out of the house of Balliol in 1400 would support the date of 1400 or 1401." Albrecht, *Loathly Lady,* 12.

[35] Murray glosses "bray" as "a brae, or steep incline." "Notes," lxxxi.

from the forest, lacking the implication (although not excluding it either) that he is involved in that battle:

> Off þat laste battel I þe say,
> It [shall] be done at Sandeford :
> Nere sendyforth þer is a wroo,
> And nere þat wro is a well;
> A [ston] þer is þe wel euen fro;
> And nere þe wel, truly to tell,
> On þat grounde þer groeth okys thre,
> And is called sondyford;
> Thomas, trow þou ilke a word.
>
> (Cambridge 625-32)

The prophecy of the bastard who will unify Britain, in part via this final battle at Sandeford, thus comes to rest on the details of the place Sandeford is located tautologically in this description: near Sandeford is a "wro,"[36] a well, and three oaks, and that place is called Sandeford. The circularity of her identification makes Sandeford faintly mysterious, like Diagon Alley, the sort of place that you can only find if you already know where is. She (along with the author) thus reminds her audience of her authority: Sandeford may be the unplottable destined mysterious site of the last battle (of England and Scotland? of the British Isles? of the world?), but *she* knows how to find it. Despite the apocalyptic quality of the prophecy in terms of narrative and event, it focuses on an enigmatic image of relative tranquility. The choice to describe Sandeford through these specific details—a well, a stone, three oaks—signals that these are the details that matter, that they carry some significance for Sandeford as either a location or the site of

[36] "an isolated or remote place, an out-of-the-way spot;." "wrō (n.)," electronic *Middle English Dictionary,* 2001-2014, University of Michigan, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED53698.

the future events she forecasts, but of course she does not explain that significance. Much as one either knows where Sandeford is or does not, and will not be able to find it from these enigmatic directions, one either knows why Sandeford is determined by its well, stone, and trees, or one is simply not competent to interpret the enigmas of prophecy.

Patricia Clare Ingham has argued that the prophecies attributed to Merlin in British historical literature—the *Prophetia Merlini* included in (and excerpted from) the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, as well as the "Last Six Kings of Britain" prophecy included in the prose *Brut*—"link cultural recovery to the work of mourning." The recovery of some persistent core British identity is fantasized via a "melancholic British endurance through loss rather than despite loss"; apocalyptic images of the future are thus a way of negotiating the crises of the present and the past.[37] The prophecies here attributed to Thomas Rhymer seem to do something similar. The crises of fourteenth-century Scottish sovereignty are rehearsed, and future battles imagined, but this repetitive violence is framed on both ends by more scenes of enigmatic heroicism. At the beginning, Thomas emerges from a dream-like vision-like journey through otherworldly lands to provide Scotland with its patron prophet; in the end, another mysterious hero will come out of the wild to rebuke the English, unite the island, and end all wars.

The Enigma of Language

Enigmatic discourse in prophecy is, as I have discussed above, effective in bolstering the authority of the speaker, who demonstrates his or her ability to access

[37] See Ingham's chapter "Arthurian Futurism and British Destiny" in her book *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 51-76, here at 53.

esoteric truths that exceed the normal referential capacity of language. However, there is a potential circularity to this process: the authority of the language relies on the authority of that same prophet who constructs authority in part through enigmatic language. Thus prophecies tend to appeal to past figures of prophetic authority like Merlin, Bede, Solomon, and Thomas the Rhymer, in order to ground authority somewhere more reliable than prophecy itself, which in enigmatic form is potent but unreliable. After all, the circular logic works both ways— if the speaker has no authority at all, then the enigma will be heard not as prophecy but as nonsense, and if the enigma is nonsense, the prophet has no authority. Enigma depends for meaning on someone's belief that it *has* meaning, who is therefore willing to work to find an interpretation that makes sense of it. But if the hearer of an enigmatic assertion doubts that such meaning is even available, then it is at risk of becoming not merely enigmatic, but meaningless. This is suggestive of both the meaning normally adduced to enigmatic speech—enigma is *not* merely nonsense language, though it runs the risk of being heard that way—and the precariousness of meaning of that meaning.

The final text I wish to consider, John Skelton's late fifteenth-century *The Bowge of Court,* makes use of that doubt over meaning to construct something of an hermeneutic nightmare. Skelton's poem, an unsettling version of an allegorical dream-vision, works like the inverse of a prophecy. Here, the use of enigma over which no one can assert control leaves not only authority evacuated from language, but meaning itself in disarray. The allegorical landscape of the dream is a ship—the eponymous *Bowge of Court*—peopled almost entirely with personified vices. Ship and poem are named with reference

to the allowance of food given to the members of a court,[38] and courtier-vices here are energetically plotting, lying, and bullying for their fair share. Grappling for the favor of the lady Fortune whose governance steers the ship, they eventually decide that the dreamer/poet/narrator is in the way of their ambitions, and the dream ends as he is about to throw himself overboard to escape their murderous clutches. *The Bowge of Court* finds in the end that language is so unreliable that interpreting anything—dreams, allegories, speech acts, intentions, mottos, poetry—is hobbled by the implicit enigma of language itself.

Skelton begins the poem by nearly disavowing it. The poem opens with its narrator dwelling admiringly on the achievements of old poets, who "full craftely / Under as covert termes as coude be, / Can touche a troughte and cloke it subtylly."[39] In this view, the truth value of poetry is essential but inexact; the poets of renown express something true, but cloaked in "covert terms." The narrator wishes to try his hand at such poetry, in which truth is told through careful misrepresentation, but Ignorance arrives to discourage him.

> Whereby I rede theyr renome and theyr fame
> Maye never dye, but evermore endure—
> I was sore moved to aforce the same.
> But Ignorance full soon dyde me dyscure
> And shewed that in this arte I was not sure:
> For to illumyne, she sayde, i was to dulle,

[38] "Bowge" is generally taken as a version of "bouche," sustenance, from the Old French word for "mouth"; the MED defines phrase *bouche of court:* "an allowance of food and drink granted by a king or nobleman to a member of his household or of the retinue of a guest." "bŏuche (n.(1))," electronic *Middle English Dictionary,* 2001-2014, University of Michigan, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED5668.

[39] John Skelton, *The Bowge of Court,* in *Fifteenth-Century English Dream Visions: An Anthology,* ed. Julia Boffey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 232-265; here at lines 8-11. Subsequent references are given by line number within the text to this edition.

Avysying me my penne awaye to pulle

And not to wrythe, for he so wyll atteyne,
Exceedynge ferter than his connynge is—
His hede maye be hade, but feble is his brayne—
Yet have I knowen suche er this.
But of reproche surely he maye not mys
That clymmeth hyer than he may fotynge have;
What and he slyde downe, who shall hymn save?
(15-28)

Though he is intrigued by the artful subtlety of poetry, and has aspirations to achieve some enduring status as a poet himself, he is told that he is incapable of "illumination." He might, Ignorance suggests, be able to write lies, but cannot write lies that illuminate some more sophisticated truth, and attempting it will only give him farther to fall with no one to save him. Poetry is idealized here as truth expressed in a vehicle of falsehood, but Skelton's poet-narrator cannot guarantee that his poem will successfully combine the two. This is, he explains, here at the beginning of the poem he is writing, why he does not write poetry. He is, as his poetry claims, too feeble of brain to write poetry well, and should know better than to climb "hyer than he may fotynge have" by writing it badly. This seems more than just modesty topos; Skelton embarks on his poem by undermining his own authorial authority, setting us up to read what follows with no particular reason to believe that it "touches a truth," rather than being simply "crafty." Is this a tale that successfully blends truth and falsehood, or is it just entertaining lies?

But on the other hand, this hesitation is not represented as the narrator's own but as the rebuke of Ignorance, and the appearance of Ignorance outside the borders of the dream makes her argument against Skelton's writing questionable. How literally are we meant to take this figure, a "she" who comes to check his ambitions, though she never speaks directly or is described with any personal form? Is the poet hearing voices—and if

so, should we trust the opinion of those voices? Is he speaking metaphorically of his own self-doubt, or has one of his allegorical characters bled forward from his vision to address him before he's even fallen asleep? Ignorance here hardly behaves like the real instantiation of ignorance as an abstract quality, since she appears to be actually extremely knowledgeable, at least on the subject of the poet's own ignorance. We will later meet a Favell who flatters and a Disceyt who lies, alongside a Drede who fears, but if Ignorance here is, in fact, *ignorant*, than perhaps what we have learned in the prologue is actually that the narrator is competent, intelligent, and should write as much poetry as he likes, since only Ignorance would doubt his ability.

This problem of creating meaning across the border of interior psychology and external expression draws attention in *The Bowge of Court* to the general problems of language and knowing, of finding meaning in the unreliable language that emerges from the interiority of an always enigmatic other. The poem depicts a kind of pervasive hermeneutic bankruptcy, the insistent forestalling of meaning that occurs when everything might be a lie, but nothing is for certain—even the certainty that something definitely is a lie is unavailable. Not only the preponderance of lying in Skelton's text, but the regular unrecognizability of what is a lie and what is not, even from the reader's perspective, makes this dream vision into a nightmare.

Moreover, all of the discursive lying in the poem is reported by a fairly unreliable narrator, not only because of his stated ambivalence about his own work, but because in this case, the dreamer himself will adopt an allegorical persona, Drede. Labeling himself as a reification of an abstract quality alongside the personified vices of the poem, he is no longer an outside observer of what goes on in this allegorical landscape (or boatscape),

but an active participant with his own perspective and agenda. As James Simpson describes it, "instead of the narrator being given at least theoretical priority to the world he describes, he is instead posterior to that world, a product of it, and wholly absorbed by it." [40] The dreamer becomes a part of the allegorical landscape, his identity reconfigured by the logic of the dream; he is not simply a visitor whose function is to interpret and learn from the allegory playing out around him, but is dramatically implicated in the action of the dream. And because this dream features mostly vices and no virtues, Drede seems to embody the appropriate response to such vices. The whole poem is mediated to us in the voice of, literally, Fear—and unsurprisingly, Fear is going to look around and see a lot of things to be afraid of. Whatever truth Skelton means to convey in this text, it will be difficult to locate in the tangle of representation, remediation, perspective, and authorial disavowal of authority.

Several different modes of allegory seem to be at work here. On the one hand, the poem constitutes at least a fuzzy historical allegory in that it probably represents and satirizes the Henrican court where Skelton lived and worked until 1502 or 1503.[41]

---

[40] James Simpson, "Killing Authors: Skeltons' Dreadful *Bowge of Courte*," in *Form and Reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century,* ed. Shannon Gayk and Kathleen Tonry (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2011), 192.

[41] This assumes, as most scholars do, a date of composition sometime after Skelton joined the court of Henry VIII in 1488, possibly just before its printing by Wynkyn de Worde in 1499. However, based in part on the astrological references in the first stanza, Melvin J. Tucker argues for date of composition around 1480, while F. W. Brownlow pins it down to "eight o'clock in the evening of August 19, 1482." Scattergood suggests that in this case the poem's satire might be directed at the court of Edward IV, though it might also be simply a denunciation of political corruption more broadly, since Skelton was at Oxford, with no particular ties to the royal court, in the early 1480s. Tucker, "The Setting for Skelton's *Bowge of Court*: A Speculation," *English Language Notes* 7 (1970): 168-75; Brownlowe, "The Date of *The Bowge of Court* and Skelton's Authorship of 'A Lamentable of Kyng Edward the III', *English Language Notes* 22 (1984), 12-20; both of the foregoing are cited in John Scattergood, *John Skelton: The Career of an Early Tudor Poet* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 105-6.

Certainly, as Alaistair Fox has argued, *The Bowge of Court* follows the broad strokes of Skelton's own life, as he joined the royal court with the promise of literary patronage, took a position in the king's household as a tutor, and left when his tutelage was no longer needed.[42] *Bowge* is also quite evidently a personification allegory, although one troubled by these slippages between individual characters and personified abstractions that I have noted above—Ignorance's appearance before the allegory has begun, the dreamer's transformation into Drede—that make the reference being accomplished by these personifications uncertain. Ignorance may be taken as a projection of Skelton's own ignorance (although she seems more like a projection of Skelton's *awareness* of his ignorance), and Drede an instantiation of Skelton's own dread, making an implicit claim about the pernicious effects of court life on the innocent poet, who is reduced to a walking figure for dread. It is thus ambiguous whether figures in the dream are supposed to be allegorical abstractions of real qualities in the tradition of *Psychomachia,* or Henrican courtiers each consumed with a different political vice, or something else entirely.[43] Allegory is itself a kind of riddle, not in that in necessarily seeks to disguise its referent (though it might), but in that it works in part by first making its audience conscientious of the need for non-literal interpretation, calling attention to a set of

[42] Scattergood further suggests that once Henry had become the heir apparent after Prince Arthur's death in 1502, he required "a different kind of educational program and . . . another tutor," and so Skelton's employment came to an end. The fact that he was given the rectory in Diss, which was in the king's gift, does not suggest that he left under duress or in disgrace, despite the poem's abrupt and aggressive ending. *John Skelton,* 61.

[43] Stephen J. Russell, in his discussion of how Skelton's engagement with nominalist thought at Oxford influences *The Bowge of Court,* suggests that these are Platonic personifications only "on the surface" of the poem, which by the end has "chronicle[d] the absolute breakdown of Platonic personification allegory." "Skelton's *Bouge of Court:* A Nominalist Allegory," *Renaissance Papers* (1980), 1-9, here at 5, 8.

references in addition to the literal.[44] Skelton's muddling of the allegorical modes here unravels the allegorical riddle into an allegorical enigma: that is, everything continues to clearly represent deeply and accretively, but it is terribly slippery determining just what it represents.

The whole allegorical structure of the poem is thus made into an enigmatic sort of allegory, but there are as well discrete expressions within the poem that are worth examining as particularly enigmatic speech acts. Throughout *The Bowge of Court,* visual meaning is in tension with linguistic meaning, in that, for example, what a character says about himself is often belied by visual information that Drede gathers. In a few moments this comes to the fore particularly as Drede encounters pieces of written language—combining visual and linguistic modes of expression—that are enigmatic in their meaning, stating nothing clearly and demanding interpretive focus.

One of these comes in the prologue, before Drede begins to meet and converse with the ship's population of vices. Having given up on poetry and fallen asleep, the dreamer finds himself, in the dream, at a port where a ship has been anchored and is being boarded by merchants. He joins the crowd, though he knows no one there and will have no alliances to smooth his way going forward, and learns the name of the ship and that it is owned by a wealthy lady called Dame Saunce-Pere. The lady sits behind a curtain, on a throne inscribed, in gold lettering, with the motto "*Garder le fortune que est mauelz et bone*" (67). The meaning of this phrase is ambiguous: depending how one

[44] Maureen Quilligan describes this elegantly: "that 'level' [of allegorical meaning] is not above the literal one in a vertically organized fictional space, but is located in the self-consciousness of the reader, who gradually becomes aware, as he reads, of the way he creates the meaning of the text. Out of this awareness comes a consciousness not only of how he is reading, but of his human response to the narrative." *The Language of Allegory*, 28-29.

interprets the verb, it can mean either "Preserve fortune which is bad and good" or "beware fortune which is bad and good." As Julia Boffey explains, "the advice is deliberately ambiguous, in keeping with Fortune's dual nature."[45] The association of this with the lady of the ship, its placement on her throne, and of course its Frenchness are indicative of its centrality for meaning here: this is the motto at the power center of the ship, and thus in a way the motto on the poem as well—after all, they bear the same name. Beyond the trappings of significance that the phrase carries, the very ambiguity of it lends it weight, drawing attention to the problems of interpretation it raises, and thus the reader's (both Drede and the poem's reader) own process of interpretation.

Drede, however, gets very little time to contemplate this enigmatic directive. As he is standing alone reading it, he is approached, in succession, by two of the lady's gentlewomen, Daunger and Desyre. Daunger is accusatory and suspicious, wanting to know who Drede is and why he is there (it is at this point that Drede tells her, and the reader, his name). Desyre is more sympathetic, encouraging him to self-advancement, and giving him "a precyous jewell, no rycher in this londe: / *Bone aventure* have here now in your honde" (97-98). She promises him that as long as he has *Bone aventure*—good luck—no favor or friendship can forsake him, and warns him to be sure to stay on the good side of the ship's helmswoman, Fortune.

But as the action of the poem moves forward, Desyre's promises are increasingly revealed to be hollow. Drede hangs on to *Bone aventure* throughout the poem (as far as we know) and seems to stay in the Fortune's good graces (at least, those he speaks to seem bitterly confident that he has her favor). But he is regarded with suspicion by

[45] *Fifteenth Century,* 240n67.

everyone he meets—including, naturally a character named called Suspecte—and although everyone claims to want his friendship, they all immediately betray him, precisely because of the favor of Fortune that Desyre recommended he cultivate. The main section of the poem, following the prologue, depicts Drede's encounters with the series of seven personified vices: Favell, Hervey Hafter, Suspecte, Dysdayne, Ryotte, Dyssymuler, and Subtyltye or Discyte. Initially, they are all reluctant to have any society with Drede, who might not be especially good company, as the personification of fear, but eventually they come one by one to converse with him. And one by one, they reveal themselves to be untrustworthy, even as they insist on their sincere friendship and desire to defend Drede. They grow increasingly hostile until, at the poem's end, Drede perceives himself to be surrounded by figures coming to kill him. In a panic he grasps the edge of the ship, intending to throw himself overboard, and with that awakens to write his poem.

Each of the figures communicates a mixture of messages to Drede, both linguistically and visually, both directly and in overheard speech. To thoroughly explore only one example, Drede speaks first with Favell, who introduces him (and us) to some of the entrapments of conversation on this ship.[46] Favell compliments Drede on his "connynge, that is so excellent" (149) and his virtue, observes that "Fortune to you gyftes of grace hath lente" (152), and takes pains to assure Drede that "by the Lorde that bought dere all mankynde, / I can not flater, I must be playne to the" (163-4). This is of course so obviously untrue it's barely even dramatic irony: Favell, whose name means flattery, declares himself incapable of flattery, and this just after spending two stanzas effusively buttering Drede up.

[46] Boffey glosses "Favell" as "duplicity," but notes that "*Favell* is often used as a type-name for a flatterer," such as in Passus 2 and 3 of *Piers Plowman. Fifteenth Century,* 244 n134.

Here, then, is one moment where we can be sure of interpretation: Favell's claims about his inability to flatter are manifestly untrue, and this licenses the skepticism we should feel about everything else Favell says. Yet in among Favell's obvious flattery are assertions that are harder to parse:

> Ye be an apte man, as ony can be founde,
> To dwell with us and serve my ladyes grace.
> Ye be to her, yea, worth a thousande pounde.
> I herde her speke of you within shorte space,
> Whan there were diverse that sore dyde you manace:
> And, though I say it, I was myselfe your frende,
> For here be dyverse to you that be unkynde.
> (155-61)

We know that Favell is unreliable, but this reported speech is not quite like his more obvious lies. While we never see Drede's interaction with or relationship to the lady of the ship, this point comes up multiple times in the poem—that she favors him, that he stands well with Fortune as well, and of course that this, if true, will prove disadvantageous to the others on the ship. Favell's supposed defense of Drede to the lady and the other passengers seems less like flattery than puffery—like manipulative *self*-flattery, perhaps, complete with the apologetic interjection "if I do say so myself." Yet whether any of this took place, whether this conversation is wholly or only partially an invention of Favell, remains unknowable. It is clear what Favell wants Drede to think, but it is not at all clear what Drede should think instead.

As their conversation winds down, Drede takes note of Favell's accessories. He wears a cloak lined with "doubtful doubleness" (178) and carries a bag full of words. It is difficult to imagine what either of these would look like, because Drede isn't so much describing Favell as reading his appearance, recognizing in visual, rather than linguistic, cues his interlocutor's duplicity and his too-easy command of language. These

observations are compounded as Favell moves on, with Drede listening in, to a conversation with Suspecte, who is waiting with paranoid eagerness to learn what Drede has said about him. Favell confirms Suspecte's fears, claiming that Drede told him that he (Drede) "can not well accorde with the," then calls him a "soleyn freke" and suggests portentously, "let us holde him up, man, for a whyle" (187-88). Certainly this gives Drede—and the reader—more information, but not necessarily clarification: while Favell's flattery of Drede cannot be trusted, why should his conversation with Suspecte be any more reliable? Isn't, in fact, agreeing with Suspecte's suspicions about Drede precisely how one would go about flattering a person called Suspecte?

So we are left, with Drede, at an interpretive impasse, with no way of evaluating the truth of much of Favell's language, either spoken to him or to Suspecte. Yet Favell seems relatively harmless, especially compared to some of the encounters that follow. Suspecte comes straight from plotting with Favell to caution Drede against Favell, while demanding to know what Favell said of him; Hervey Hafter promises ominously that if he hears anyone speak against Drede, he will tell him about it. The threat of rumor, gossip, backbiting, and duplicity is evident. Far more alarming, however, is the conversation Drede then overhears between Hervy and Disdayne, who is discontented with what he regards as too swift a rise in fortunes for a newcomer like Drede. Hervey is all too quick to suggest "Lete us, tehrefore, shortely at a worde / Fynde some mene to caste him over the borde" (307-8).

Drede's good luck, his apparently positive place in the tables of Fortune, is beginning to emerge here as a problem for him. Drede has—literally—*Bone aventure,* so it is only to be expected that he will be in Fortune's graces (though tellingly, we never

hear whether he is or not from Drede himself). But the other characters' bitterness towards him is motivated by their perception that he is rising at their expense, that he will, as Disdayne complains, "stonde in our lyghte" (305). As characters conspire against him, threaten him, lie to him, and eventually approach him to murder him, it is difficult to say that Drede has *Bone aventure* in any way more than literally; that is, he has an object called *Bone aventure,* but his luck has taken a turn for the worse. The ill fortune of these characters' rising hostility is in fact a direct consequence of Drede's supposed good fortune. It is precisely his B*one aventure*, his (perceived) favor with the lady of the ship and with Fortune, that makes him a target.

We, and Drede, might at this point recall the motto directing its reader to *Garder le fortune que est mauelz et bone.* A superficial logic might assume that good fortune should be preserved while bad fortune is guarded against, but Drede's fortune and fate complicate this substantially. Though he is explicitly given *good* fortune, it brings him to a bad end. And this is something more than a Boethian cycle of good fortune inexorably tumbling into bad; because of the specific social context in which he's working, his good fortune directly and swiftly is transformed into bad fortune—the fallout of good fortune is bad. The enigmatic directive suggests, as the poem's exploration of fortune plays out after it, that all fortune is both good and bad, that the two are inextricable, and that therefore to preserve any fortune one must also guard against it. Good fortune is not reliably good fortune, and bad fortune is apparently unavoidable.

The Bowge of Court pushes enigma to its end, exploring the consequences of speech made deliberately unreliable, when reference and truth value are troubled by the shifting uncertainty of meaning and intention. With so many available interpretations, of

characters, statements, identities, and images, it becomes fatally indeterminate what the right interpretation for any of them is. Allegorical language that can't be clearly connected to an allegorical referent turns out to be in many ways just ordinary language, and so the allegory is gradually disorganized back into the inescapable enigma of language itself: if there are no Platonic realities to be reified as walking, talking, thieving personifications, then all that is left (and this is extra true for an allegory within a dream) is what is in one's head.

Yet for all this, Skelton's satire does not evoke some nihilistic insistence on the meaningless of language. On the contrary, he is demonstrating one way in which language and meaning can deconstruct against a very particular backdrop of noxious social vice. When speakers choose to exploit language—when they lie, manipulate, threaten, make and break alliances, promise infelicitously—rather than using it with the goals of directness and clarity, then they have created the conditions for this nightmarish dissolution of meaning. Even the central enigmatic statement of the poem would not be enigmatic absent a social context that makes it turn out that way—good fortune would not become bad absent the social ills of jealousy and competition that make people turn against the fortunate. The potential for this kind of deconstructive enigmatics exists already and inevitably in language, but it can be exaggerated or diminished by different contexts and different users.

Riddles are perhaps the inevitable outgrowth of language's inherent tendency toward enigma. We cannot completely control the way language flows into meaning, but we can use it—to assert power or to manipulate others, certainly, but also to expand the poetic possibilities of a text, to make complex ethical gestures, to express difficult truths

that defy easy reference. In enigmatics we see how deeply the availability of meaning in language depends on the faith of the interlocutors: their commitment to endowing their own language with sincerely intended meaning, their willingness to work for interpretation, and their belief that meaning is there if a hearer is willing to work to find it.

The reading of riddles is, as I suggested in chapter 1, emblematic of the reading of literature in general, but it is also like a tightly-coiled microcosm of conversation more broadly: a speaker speaks, a hearer listens, and between them they construct the event of a an utterance, a speech act, a text, a message encoded, received, and understood. A riddle that is answered and resolved, in which a neat formal answer resolves the problem of a focused formal conundrum, is a satisfying text, and allows us to imagine a perfect alignment of intention and interpretation, the speaker's communication fitting into the hearer's interpretation like dovetail joints. But a riddle that forestalls that closure is differently irresistible, in its excess of possible significance and all its points of entry into the world. We ask and answer riddles because we enjoy the tension between knowing and not knowing, between perplexity and revelation, between the comfort and power of a singular haunting *Truth* that authorizes the enigmatic text, and all the freedom and potential that flourish among multiple simultaneous *truths*. Riddles and enigmas show us, by our very responsiveness to their perlocutionary impetus, our own desire to gather up the signs of the world and make meaning from them.

Bibliography

Abbott, H. H. *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Adams, Michael. "Power, Politeness, and the Pragmatics of Nicknames." *Names* 57.2 (2009): 81-91.

Aguirre, Manuel. "The Riddle of Sovereignty." *Modern Language Review* 88 (1993): 273-82.

Albrecht, William Price. *The Loathly Lady in "Thomas of Erceldoune," with a Text of the Poem Printed in 1652.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954.

Anderson, Judith H. *Reading the Allegorical Intertext: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

Archibald, Elizabeth. *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations.* Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1991.

Aristotle, *Poetics.* Translated by S. H. Butcher. Internet Classics Archive, 1994-2009. http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.3.3.html.

Aristotle, *Rhetoric.* Translated by W. Rhys Roberts. Hypertext compiled by Lee Honeycutt. June 2004. http://www2.iastate.edu/~honeyl/Rhetoric/index.html.

Armin, Robert. *A Nest of Ninnies.* In *A Nest of Ninnies and Other English Jestbooks of the Seventeenth Century*, edited by P. M. Zall. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970.

Asay, Timothy. "Image and Allegory: The Simulacral Logic of Piers's Pardon." *Exemplum* 25.3 (2013): 173-91.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976.

Bander, Peter. *The Prophecies of St Malachy & Columbkille.* Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd., 2005.

Barley, Nigel. "Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle." *Semiotica* 10 (1974): 143-76.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z: An Essay.* Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *The Rustle of Language,* translated by Richard Howe, 49-55. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.

Ben-Amos, Dan. "Solutions to Riddles." *The Journal of American Folklore* 89 (1976): 249-54.

Bitterli, Dietrich. *Say What I Am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book & the Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Bland, Cynthia. "Langland's Use of the Term *Ex vi transicionis*." *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 2 (1988): 1245-35.

Bousfield, Derek. *Impoliteness in Interaction*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2008.

Bower, Walter. *Scotichronicon,* vol. 5. Edited and translated by Simon Taylor and D. E. R. Watt with Brian Scott. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1990.

Bradley, Henry. "Two Riddles of the Exeter Book." *The Modern Language Review* 6.4 (1911): 433-40.

Brown, Penelope, and Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Brown, Roger, and Albert Gilman, "Politeness Theory and Shakespeare's Four Major Tragedies." *Language in Society* 18.2 (1989): 159-212.

Brownlowe, F. W. "The Date of *The Bowge of Court* and Skelton's Authorship of 'A Lamentable of Kyng Edward the III'." *English Language Notes* 22 (1984): 12-20.

Carroll, Lewis. *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Martin Gardner. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.

Chandler, Daniel. *Semiotics: The Basics*. Routledge: New York, 2002.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales.* In *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson, 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Child, Frances, ed. *English and Scottish Popular Ballads.* London: Henry Stevens, Son and Stiles, 1882.

Cobley, Paul. "Objectivity and Immanence in Genre Theory. In *Genre Matters: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, edited by Garin Dowd, Lesley Stevenson, and Jeremy Strong. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2006.

Cochran, Shannon Ferri. "The Plough's the Thing: A New Solution to Old English Riddle 4 of the Exeter Book." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108.3 (2009): 301-9.

Cook, Eleanor. *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play.* Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Crane, Susan. "Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath's Tale." *PMLA* 27 (1987): 20-28.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin. *The Exeter Book Riddles*. London: Enitharmon Press, 2008.

Culpeper, Jonathon. *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offense.* Cambridge: Cambrdige University Press, 2011.

Cutting, Joan. *Pragmatics and Discourse.* 2nd edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Denslow, W. W. *Humpty Dumpty.* New York: G. W. Dillingham Co., 1903.

Dienhart, J. M. "A Linguistic Look at Riddles." *Journal of Pragmatics* 31 (1999): 95-125.

Dietrich, Franz. "Die Rätsel des Exeterbuchs: Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung." *ZfdA.* xi (1859)*:* 448-90.

DiNapoli, Robert. "In the Kingdom of the Blind, the One-Eyed Man Is a Seller of Garlic: Depth-Perception and the Poet's Perspective in the Exeter Book Riddles." *English Studies* 5 (2000): 423-55.

Dobbie, Elliott V. K., "The Poems of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle." In *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, 16-26. New York: Columbia UP, 1942.

Eeckhout, Bart. "Wallace Stevens' 'Earthy Anecdote'; or, How Poetry Must Resist Ecocriticism Almost Successfully." *Comparative American Studies* 7.2 (2009): 173-92.

Eggins, Suzanne. *Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics.* 2nd edition. London: A&C Black, 2004.

Eiser, Sigmund. *A Tale of Wonder: A Source Study of the Wife of Bath's Tale*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1969.

Felman, Shoshana. *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.

Fiengo, Robert. *Asking Questions: Using Meaningful Structures to Imply Ignorance.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Fish, Stanley. "How to do Things with Austin and Searle: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism." *Modern Language Notes* 91.5 (1976): 983-1025.

Fish, Stanley. "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One." In *Is There a Text in This Class?The Authority of Interpretive Communities,* 322-37. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Frege, Gottlob. "Über Sinn und Bedeutung." Reprinted in translation by A. M. and Marcelle Quinton, in *Readings in the Philosophy of Language,* edited by Peter Ludlow, 9-30. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

Frow, John. *Genre*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Fry, Donald K. "Exeter Riddle 31: Feather-Pen." In *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, edited by John Miles Foley, J. Chris Womack, and Whitney A. Womack, 234-49. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Fulk, R. D. *An Introductory Grammar of Old English with an Anthology of Readings*. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2014.

Galloway, Andrew. "The Rhetoric of Riddling in Late-Medieval England: The 'Oxford Riddles,' the *Secretum Secretorum*, and the Riddles in *Piers Plowman*." *Speculum* 70 (1995): 68-105.

Georges, Robert A., and Alan and Dundes. "Toward a Structural Definition of the Riddle." *Journal of American Folklore* 76.300 (1963): 111-18.

Goffman, Erving. "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction." In *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face to Face Behavior,* 5-46. Chicago: Aldine, [1967] 2005.

Goodrich, J. F., ed and trans. *Piers the Plowman.* 2nd edition. Baltimore: Penguin, 1966.

Gower, John. *Confessio Amantis,* Book 1. In *Confessio Amantis,* vol. 1, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, edited by Russell Peck. 2nd edition. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006.

Gruenler, Curtis. "How to Read Like a Fool: Riddle Contests and the Banquet of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*." *Speculum* 85 (2010): 592-630.

Gwara, Scott, and Barbara L. Bolt. "A 'Double Solution' for Exeter Book Riddle 51, 'Pen and Three Fingers'." *Notes and Queries* 54 (2007): 16-19.

H. F. Lippincott. "King Lear and the Fools of Robert Armin." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26 (1975): 243-53.

Hahn, Thomas, ed. *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle,* in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales.* Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995.

Hanson, Jim. "Formalism and Its Malcontents: Benjamin and De Man on the Function of Allegory." *New Literary History* 35.4 (2004): 663-83.

Hardwick, Charles S., ed. *Semiotic and Signifiers: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977.

Harle, Peter. "Structuralism." *Folklore Forum* 30 (1999): 9-17.

Harries, Lyndon. "The Riddle in Africa." *Journal of American Folklore* 84.334 (1971): 377-93.

Hasan, Ruqaiya. “Private Pleasure, Public Discourse: Reflections on Engaging with Literature.” In *Language and Verbal Art Revisited: Linguistic Approaches to the Study of Literature,* edited by Donna R. Miller and Monica Turci, 13-40. London: Equinox, 2007.

Heyworth, Melanie. “The Devils in the Detail: A New Solution to Exeter Book Riddle 4.” *Neophilologus* 91.1 (2007): 175-96.

Holthausen, Ferdinand. “Anglosaxonica Minora.” *Anglia Beibl* xxxvi (1925): 219-20.

Howe, Nicholas. “Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* and Isidorian Etymology.” *Anglo-Saxon England* 14 (1985): 37-59.

Huxley, Aldous. “Ravens and Writing Desks.” *Vanity Fair* 30.4 (September 1928): 46, 110.

Ingham, Patricia Clare. *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Kaivola-Bregenhøj, Annikki. *Riddles: Perspectives on the Use, Function and Change in a Folklore Genre*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2001.

Kelly, J. N. D., and Michael J. Walsh. *A Dictionary of Popes*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Kiernan, Kevin. “‘Cwene’: The Old Profession of Exeter Riddle 95,” *Modern Philology* 72 (1975): 384-49.

Kirby, Ian J. “The Exeter Book, Riddle 60.” *Notes and Queries* 48 (2001): 219.

Köngäs-Maranda, Elli. “The Logic of Riddles.” In *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, edited by Pierre Maranda and Elli Köngäs-Maranda (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 191-232.

Korhammer, Michael. “The Last of the Exeter Book Riddles.” In *Bookmarks from the Past: Studies in Early English Language and Literature in Honour of Helmut Gneuss*, edited by Lucia Kornexl and Ursula Lenker, 69-80. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003.

Koshik, Irene. "Questions that Convey Information in Student-Teacher Conferences." In *Why Do You Ask? The Function of Questions in Institutional Discourse*, edited by Alice F. Freed and Susan Ehrlich, 159-86. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Krapp, George P., and Elliott V. K. Dobbie, eds. *The Exeter Book.* Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records. New York: Columbia University Press, 1936.

Kress, Gunther. *Communication and Culture: An Introduction*. Kensington, Australia: New South Wales University Press, 1988.

Lakoff, Robin. "The Logic Politeness; or, Minding Your P's and Q's." In *Papers from the Ninth Regional Meeting*, Chicago Linguistic Society, edited by Claudia Corum, T. Cedric Smith-Stark, and Ann Weiser, 295-305. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, 1973.

Langland, William. *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text*. Edited by A. V. C. Schmidt. 2nd edition. London: Everyman, 1995.

Lapidge, Michael, and James L. Rosier, trans. *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works.* Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985.

Leach, Mary. "Why Dame Ragnell Had to Die: Feminine Usurpation of Masculine Authority in 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell'." In *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs,* edited by S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter, 213-34. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007.

Leary, T. J. *Symphosius, The Ænigmata: An Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

Leech, Geoffrey. *Principles of Pragmatics.* London: Longman, 1983.

Lendinara, Patrizia. "The World of Anglo-Saxon Learning." In *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature,* edited by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, 295-312. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Levinthal, David, and John Nickle. *Who Pushed Humpty Dumpty?* New York: Random House, 2012.

Liberman, Anatoly. *Word Origins – and How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Lindeboom, Benjamin Willem. *Venus' Own Clerke: Chaucer's Debt to the* Confessio Amantis. Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 2007.

Lupack, Alan. "Piers Plowman, B.VII.116." *Explicator* 34 (1975): item 31.

Mackie, W. S., ed. and trans. *The Exeter Book, Part II: Poems IX-XXXII*. Early English Text Society Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934.

Malone, Kemp. "The Wife of Bath's Tale." *The Modern Language Review* 57 (1962): 481-91.

Mann, Jill. *Feminizing Chaucer.* Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer Ltd., 2002.

Matsumoto, Yoshiko. "Re-examination of the Universality of Face: Politeness Phenomena in Japan." *Journal of Pragmatics* 12.4 (1998): 403-26.

McKinley, Katherine. "The Silenced Knight: Questions of Power and Reciprocity in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale'." *The Chaucer Review* 30 (1996): 359-78.

Mead, William E. "Color in Old English Poetry." *PMLA* 14.2 (1899): 169-206.

Meyer, Robert. "Chaucer's Tandem Romances: A Generic Approach to the 'Wife of Bath's Tale' as Palinode." *The Chaucer Review* 18 (1984): 221-38.

Miller, J. Hillis. *Speech Acts in Literature*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Minton, John. "*The Fause Knight Upon the Road*: A Reappraisal." *The Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1985): 435-55.

Munro, Andrew. "Reading Austin Rhetorically." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 46.1 (2013): 22-43.

Murphy, Patrick. *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011.

Murray, James A. H., ed. *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune.* Early English Text Society. London: N. Trübner & Co., 1875.

Musgrave, Elaine K. “Cithara as the Solution to Riddle 31 of the Exeter Book.” *Pacific Coast Philology* 37 (2002): 69-84.

Nelson, Marie. “The Rhetoric of the Exeter Book Riddles.” *Speculum* 49.3 (1974): 421-40.

Newmeyer, Frederick J. *Language Form and Language Function*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.

Nicholson, Mervyn. “Reading Stevens’ Riddles.” *College English* 50.1 (1988): 13-31.

Niebrzydowski, Sue. “Monstrous Appetite and Belly Laughs: A Reconsideration of the Humour in the Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell.” *Arthurian Literature* 27 (2010): 87-102.

Niles, John D. “Riddle 74 and the Play of the Text.” *Anglo-Saxon England* 27 (1998): 184-85.

Niles, John D. “Understanding *Beowulf*: Oral Poetry Acts.” *Journal of American Folklore* 106.420 (1993): 131-55.

O’Brien, M. J. *A Historical and Critical Account of the So-Called Prophecy of St. Malachy Regarding the Succession of Popes*. Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1880.

O’Keefe, Katherine O’Brien. *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Opie, Iona, and Peter Opie, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes.* New edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce,* vol. 3. Edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. “The Basis of Pragmaticism.” Reprinted in *Peirce on Signs,* edited by James Hoopes, 253-59. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Petsch, Robert. *Neue Beiträge zur Kenntnis des Volksrätsels*. Berlin: Palaestra 4, 1899.

Pitman, James Hall. *The Riddles of Aldhelm.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1925.

Pope, John S. “Palaeography and Poetry: Some Solved and Unsolved Problems of the Exeter Book.” In *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts, and Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker*, edited by M. B. Parkes and Andrew G. Watson, 25-65. London: Scolar Press, 1978.

Pulsiano, Philip, and Kirsten Wolf. “Those Damned Souls, Again.” *Germanic Notes* 22 (1991): 2-5.

Quilligan, Maureen. *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992.

Rellstab, Daniel Hugo. “Peirce for Linguistic Pragmatists.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*. 44.2 (2008): 312-45.

Ricoeur, Paul. “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling.” *Critical Inquiry* 5.1 (1978): 143-59.

Roberts, John M., and Michael L. Forman. “Riddles: Expressive Modes of Interrogation.” *Ethnology* 10 (1971): 509-33.

Roppolo, Joseph P. “The Converted Knight in Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’.” *College English* 12 (1951): 263-69.

Russell, Stephen J. “Skelton’s *Bouge of Court:* A Nominalist Allegory.” *Renaissance Papers* (1980): 1-9.

Scattergood, John. *John Skelton: The Career of an Early Tudor Poet.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014.

Schwytzer, Edward C. “‘Half a Laumpe Lyne in Latyne’ and Patience's Riddle in ‘Piers Plowman.’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 73.3 (1974): 313-27.

Scott, Charles T. “On Defining the Riddle: The Problem of a Structural Unit.” *Genre* 2 (1969): 129-42.

Searle, John, “A Classification of Illocutionary Acts.” *Language in Society* 5.1 (1976): 1-23.

Searle, John. “A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts.” In *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts,* 1-29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Searle, John. "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse." In *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, 58-75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Searle, John. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974.

Sebo, Erin Madeleine. "Sex, Politics and Religion: The Transformation of the Figure of the Fairy Queen from *Thomas off Ersseldoune* to 'Thomas Rymer'." *English Studies* 94 (2013): 11-26.

Senderovich, Savely. *The Riddle of the Riddle: A Study of the Folk Riddle's Figurative Nature.* London: Kegan Paul, 2005.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear.* Edited by R. A. Foakes. London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997.

Shapiro, Bruce. *Reinventing Drama: Acting, Iconicity, Performance*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Shook, Laurence K. "Riddles Relating to the Anglo-Saxon Scriptorium." In *Essays in Honour of Anton Charles Pegis,* edited by Reginald O'Donnell, 215-36. Toronto: PIMS, 1974.

Sigler, William A.. "Stevens Textplication 20: Earthy Anecdote." *Poet Tree* (blog). July 8, 2012. http://billsigler.blogspot.com/2012/07/stevens-textplication-20-earthy.html.

Simpson, James. "Killing Authors: Skelton's Dreadful *Bowge of Courte*." In *Form and Reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century,* edited by Shannon Gayk and Kathleen Tonry, 180-96. Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2011.

Simpson, James. *Piers Plowman: An Introduction.* 2nd, revised edition. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007.

Skeat, Walter, ed. *The Vision of William Concerning Piers Plowman in Three Parallel Texts.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1886.

Skelton, John. *The Bowge of Court.* In *Fifteenth-Century English Dream Visions: An Anthology,* edited by Julia Boffey, 232-65. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Smith, Ben H. *Traditional Imagery of Charity in Piers Plowman*. The Hague: Mouton, 1966.

Southworth, John. *Fools and Jesters at the English Court.* Stroud: Sutton Publishers Ltd., 1998.

Spencer-Oatey, Helen. "Rapport Management: A Framework for Analysis." In *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport Through Talk Across Cultures,* edited by Helen Spencer-Oatey, 11-46. London: Continuum, 2000.

Stanley, E. G. "Exeter Book *Riddle 11:* 'Alcohol and its Effects'." *Notes and Queries* 61 (2014): 182-85.

Stévanovitch, Colette. "Exeter Book Riddle 70A: Nose?" *Notes and Queries* 42 (1995): 8-10.

Stevens, Holly, ed. *Letters of Wallace Stevens.* London : Faber and Faber, 1967.

Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.* New York: Vintage Books–Random House, [1923] 1982.

Stroup, Thomas B. "Cordelia and the Fool." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12 (1961): 127-32.

Tanke, John. "The Bachelor-Warrior of Exeter Book Riddle 20." *Philological Quarterly* 79.4 (2000): 409-27.

Taylor, Archer. "The Riddle." *California Folklore Quarterly* 2.2 (1943): 129-47.

Taylor, Archer. *English Riddles from Oral Tradition.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951.

Taylor, Archer. *The Literary Riddle Before 1600.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948.

Thomas, Susanne Sara. "The Problem of Defining 'Sovereynetee' in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale. *The Chaucer Review* 141 (2006): 87-97.

Thornton, Thomas. “The Battle of Sandeford: Henry Tudor's Understanding of the Meaning of Bosworth Field.” *Historical Research* 78.201 (2005): 436-42.

Toelken, J. Barre. “‘Riddles Wisely Expounded’.” *Western Folklore* 25 (1966): 1-16.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit, Or, There and Back Again.* New York: Del Rey–Random House, [1937] 1986.

Trautmann, Moritz , ed. *Die altenglischen Rätsel (die Rätsel des Exeterbuchs).* Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1915.

Trautmann, Moritz. “Zu den altenglischen Rätsel.” *Anglia* xxxvi (1912): 133-38.

Tucker, Melvin J. “The Setting for Skelton’s *Bowge of Court*: A Speculation.” *English Language Notes* 7 (1970): 168-75.

Tupper, Friederich. “Solutions of the Exeter Book Riddles.” *Modern Language Notes* 21.4 (1906): 97-105.

von Erhardt-Siebold, Erika. “Old English Riddle 95.” *Modern Language Notes* 62 (1947): 558-59.

Walsh, Andrew. *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Walz, John. “Notes on the Anglo-Saxon Riddles.” *Studies in Notes in Philology and Literature* 5 (1896): 261.

Whitman, F. H. *Old English Riddles.* Ottawa: Canadian Federation for the Humanities, 1982.

Wilcox, Jonathon. “Mock-Riddles in Old English: Exeter Riddles 86 and 19.” *Studies in Philology* 93 (1996): 180-87.

Williamson, Craig. *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

Williamson, Craig. *The Old English Riddles of the* Exeter Book. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977.

Wion, Arnold. *Lignum vitae, ornamentum, & decus Ecclesiae, in quinque libros diuisum.* Liber Secundus. Venetiis: apud Georgium Angelerium, 307-11.

Wolfson, Susan. "Reading for Form." *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (2000): 1-16.

A. ARWEN TAYLOR

BALLANTINE HALL 442
1020 E. KIRKWOOD AVE
BLOOMINGTON, IN 47405
anataylo@umail.iu.edu
801.836.7694

EDUCATION

- Ph.D., Department of English, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2015
  minor: English Language
- M.A., English Literature, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2009
- B.A., English and Linguistics, *Magna Cum Laude*, Brigham Young University, 2005

Dissertation: "Enigma Variation: The Literary Pragmatics of the Riddle in Early English Literature"

Dissertation committee: Dr. Michael Adams (Chair); Dr. Judith A. Anderson; Dr. Robert D. Fulk; Dr. Shannon Gayk

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

- Teaching Fellow (IU Department of English), 2012-present
- Associate Instructor (IU Department of English), 2006-2012
- Editorial Assistant for the journal *International Studies Quarterly* (IU Department of Political Science), 2009-2013

FELLOWSHIPS, AWARDS, AND HONORS

- 2013-2014: Neikamp Cummings Dissertation Fellowship recipient
- 2010-2014: Presidential Honorary Membership in the American Dialect Society
- 2013: Clifford Flannigan Memorial Travel Grant, IU Medieval Studies Institute

PUBLICATIONS (FORTHCOMING AND UNDER REVIEW)

- "Quests and Answers: Speech Acts and Power in the Loathly Lady Tales" (under review)
- Review, *John Skelton: The Career of an Early Tudor Poet,* by John Scattergood. *The Medieval Review* (forthcoming)

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- "The Riddles in the Poem: Reading the Metaphors of Exeter Riddle 95," International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo, MI), May 2015
- "TW—Gulliver's Travels is Sizeist: Trigger Warnings Beyond the Internet," upcoming, National Conference for the Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association (New Orelans), April 2015
- "'By Writing Amended': The Ethics of Interpretation in Hoccleve's *Series*," International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamzoo, MI), May 2014
- "'Haters Gonna Hate, Mormons Gonna Morm': Boundary Maintenance and Lexis in Mormon English" (with Kjerste Christensen), American Dialect Society Annual Meeting (Minneapolis, MN), January 2014
- "An Ecology of Meaning: Reading Birds Beyond the Middle Ages," The Middle Ages in the Modern World (University of St. Andrews, Scotland), June 2013
- "Ambiguous Consent: Teaching Chaucer in an Age of 'Legitimate' Rape' (A Roundtable Discussion)," panel member, Lamentations: The 25th Annual Medieval Studies Symposium at Indiana University, April 2013
- "An Interpretive Journey: The Role of Medieval Themes in a Modern Dream Vision" (with Erin E. Sweany), The 27th International Conference on Medievalisms (Kent State University, Canton, OH), October 2012
- "Questions, Answers, and Distractions at the Banquet of Conscience," The 17th Biennial Congress of the New Chaucer Society (Portland, OR), July 2012
- "Of Gods, Hobbits, and Riddles," National Conference for the Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association (Boston), April 2012
- "The Loathly Lady and the Riddle of Sovereignty," Vagantes Medieval Graduate Studies Conference (University of Pittsburgh), March 2011
- "The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Knights Templar," The 20th Annual Mardi Gras Conference at Louisiana State University, March 2010
- "Wars and Lovers: The Structure of Arthurian Conflict in Film," National Conference for the Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association (Boston), April 2007
- "The Renaissance Fair: Performing the Pre-Modern," Indiana University English Department Graduate Conference, March 2007
- "The Passion of Piers: Piers Plowman as Embodied Liminality," Comitatus Annual Conference on Medieval Studies (Purdue University), February 2007

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

LITERATURE, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE:

- Introduction to Poetry (English L-205), Spring 2015
- The Rhetoric of Authority*:* Prescriptions and Proscriptions (CLLC-120), Spring 2013
- Introduction to Fiction: Altered States of Mind (English L-204), Fall 2012
- Survey of Literatures in English to 1600: Evolving Modes and Genres (English E-301), Summer 2012
- Children's Literature (with Professor Michael Adams) (English L-390), Spring 2012
- Introduction to the English Language (English G-205), Fall 2011

WRITING AND COMPOSITION:

- Argumentative Writing (English W-270), Fall 2014
- English Grammar Review (English G-202), Spring 2012
- Professional Writing (English W-270), Spring 2011
- Basic Composition, (English W-131B), Fall 2010
- Projects in Reading and Writing: History, Mystery, and Conspiracy—Secret Societies and the Stories We Tell About Them, (English W-170), Fall 2009, Spring 2010
- Elementary Composition (English W131), Fall 2006, Spring 2007, Spring 2009

SERVICE

- 2014-215: *Goði* (co-organizer), Indiana Old Norse Reading Group
- 2011-2013: English Department Graduate Student Advisory Committee
- Spring 2013: Organizer and committee member, graduate conference Consent: Terms of Agreement
- Spring 2012: Organizer and committee member, graduate conference Occupied: Taking Up Space and Time
- Spring 2012: Committee member, Vagantes National Graduate Student Conference, sponsored by the American Medieval Association, hosted by the IU Medieval Studies Institute
- Spring 2011: Abstract and logistics committee member, graduate conference Collections and Collaborations,
- 2010-2011: Member, Medieval Studies Institute Graduate Student Advisory Committee

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

- The Modern Language Association (2013-present)
- The New Chaucer Society (2011-present)

LANGUAGES: Latin (reading); Old English (reading); Swedish (good); Old Norse (basic); French (basic)

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS: medieval and Early Modern British literature; the history of the English language; religion and literature; linguistics in literary analysis; medievalism in modern culture

REFERENCES

Dr. Michael Adams, Associate Professor of English
adamsmp@indiana.edu

Dr. Shannon Gayk, Associate Professor of English
sgayk@indiana.edu

Dr. Judith H. Anderson, Chancellor's Professor Emeritus
anders@indiana.edu

Dr. Robert D. Fulk, Class of 1964 Chancellor's Professor of English; Adjunct Professor of Germanic Studies
fulk@indiana.edu

Dr. Kathy O. Smith, Associate Professor of English; Associate Chair, Department of English Composition Coordinator
kosmith@indiana.edu