

## Duality in *Piers Plowman* and the Anglo-Saxon Riddles (A Response to Arthur Versluis)

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The medieval penchant for weaving diverse sorts of symbolism and allusion into a single literary work finds its ultimate expression in *Piers Plowman*. To an already rich set of possibilities for this poem, Arthur Versluis adds a well-supported, detailed study of the number and letter symbolism inherent in its alliterative patterns, explicating in particular the three prophecies of the B text. As he points out, the intricate gematria therein is further complicated by the paradoxical nature of Christian numerology, in which a single number (and hence letter) may carry both positive and negative connotations. To wit: the number twelve, encompassing the material and the spiritual worlds, at once represents universality and the dichotomy between Man's perfect and fallen states; seven symbolizes the Virtues as well as the Deadly Sins, the Sacraments and the Ages of Man; six is both perfection (the Creation took six days) and imperfection, being the number of the Beast and (to thoroughly confuse the issue) one less than seven, the number of spiritual completeness. Thus, numbers and their corresponding letters "possess multivalent, often polarized implications" (107). In short, medieval Christian number symbolism, and its use in *Piers Plowman*, can be summed up in the number two. Standing for duality itself, two connotes Satan (deception) and Christ incarnate as God and Man.

The inherent contradictions in this system intimidate, and perhaps this explains why an author rarely makes use of them. Instead, either (s)he superimposes a number's *complimentary* meanings upon each other, as with the fives of Gawain's pentangle, or draws strictly upon its primary implications to create a monolithic symbol, such as Spenser's Una and Duessa. Why, then, does Langland exploit numerology's dualism? Perhaps, as Versluis suggests, to emphasize that "evil is

necessary in order that the apocalypse come about, and the final return to celestial order" (107), in which case some readers may be excused for feeling pushed to the brink of frustration (if not madness) by what seems to be Langland's literary hyperbole. On the other hand, we might do well to recall the older native tradition upon which the poet also draws.

*Piers*, of course, stands as a major example of the so-called Alliterative Revival. Yet Langland's debt to the Old English school is not limited to mechanics but extends to the techniques of Anglo-Saxon riddling, itself rooted in folk wisdom despite the obvious classical and early medieval Latin influences evident in certain extant specimens. Versluis seems to recognize this when he terms the prophecies of the B text "riddle-prophecies," and riddles they are, presented without explicit solutions. But more than this, they are specifically Anglo-Saxon riddles, for the key to a full understanding of them lies not only in the gematria which Versluis amply decodes but also in the duality implicit in each number-letter combination. That same duality lies at the heart of a majority of the Exeter riddles, reflecting, I would suggest, the ambivalent character of the Anglo-Saxon world view. A few examples should here suffice.

Some riddles emphasize the significant duality which is the essence of the natural world. Riddle 1, for example, depicts a storm as both a destroyer and a nurturer. The first of these functions is described through martial imagery: the subject becomes a proud, thundering host which ravages crops and burns towns, boding "violent death to men" (*wælcwealm wera*, 1.8).<sup>1</sup> Then, it appears as rain falling upon the woods and bringing new life. But there is more, however, for the subject "bears on [its] back that which once covered earth-dwellers, flesh and spirit, entirely in ocean" (*hæbbe me on hrycge þæt ær hadas wreah foldbuendra, flæsc ond gæstas, somod on sunde*, 12-14a). In this manner, the poet uses storm clouds to recall a time when water covered the earth—in the Great Flood and prior to that, during the Creation before land was separated from the sea (Genesis 1.v-1.ix)—indicating at once God's creation and destruction of the world. Thus, the storm and the deity it reflects exist as combinations of inseparable opposites. Other nature riddles exhibit the same sense of essential paradox. In some the dichotomy is equally

dramatic, as in specimen 29, which describes the cycle of day and night in terms of the sun and moon, complete with many of their traditional (and contradictory) associations. Elsewhere, it is less noteworthy: Riddle 42 ("Cock and Hen") reduces it to the simple distinction between the genders. Nonetheless, basic dualism permeates riddling depictions of the natural world.

Similar to the storm in its capacity for violence and nurture are the subjects in riddles defining various tools and activities of humanity. Riddle 80, usually solved as "A Horn," presents a speaker which may sound a battle charge or entertain with music; it may be handled by a fierce warrior or a gentle noblewoman; it connotes death as the warrior's companion (*fyrdrinces gefara*) and life in its association with growth. (This latter is particularly interesting, for the phrase *hæbbe me on bosme þæt on bearwe geweoð* almost suggests a cornucopia image.) Likewise, the subject of Riddle 25, whether "an Onion" as traditionalists would have it or, as Edith Williams convincingly argues<sup>2</sup>, the male sex organ, paradoxically attacks its "slayer" and brings both happiness and tears to women. Even objects which are acted upon possess variant possibilities. That designated by riddle 30 (a piece of wood, the Rood, a harp, or whatever) is at once a grove's blossom and a "burned ember" (*bearu blowende, byrnende gled*, l. 4). It may be "troubled" by fire (*legbysig*) or refined by the same (*fyre gemylted*; see religious translations by Alfred and the Cambridge Psalter for this usage).<sup>3</sup> And so it continues with shield and sword, book and leather, key and shirt.

For the consciousness permeating the Exeter Book riddles, existence and everything in it appear as essentially dual, contradictory, dark and light. For me, Riddle 74 sums up the idea. One of the more puzzling examples, it has been solved variously as "Cuttlefish," "Water," and "Swan," although most modern scholars, following Krapp and Dobbie, accept Tupper's suggestion, "Siren." Yet a more satisfactory solution presents itself in the poem's contradictions:

Ic wæs fæmne geong, feaxhar cwene,  
 ond ænlic rinc on ane tid;  
 fleah mid fuglum ond on flode swom,  
 deaf under yþe dead mid fiscum,  
 ond on foldan stop, hæfde ferð cwicu.

[I was a young woman, a grey-haired wife,  
 and a noble warrior in one hour;  
 flew with birds and in the sea swam,  
 dove under the waves, dead among fishes,  
 and on earth walked, had a living soul.]

Lines 1 and 2 seem to indicate images reflected in a mirror or, given the following clues, in water. (Water itself is precluded by lines 3a and 5, and likely by 3b-4b.) They might also be understood as shadows. A shadow will fly, swim, or walk with that which casts it; it exists even on the sea bottom; it is at once dead, since it has no independent existence, and alive, since it is part of and cannot be separated from the "living soul" which it mimics. Or perhaps "Reflection," in its broader sense, is the answer, for it encompasses mirror image and shadow. It may be the outline of a thing or its essence, a facsimile or its obverse. A reflection exemplifies dualism.

That dualism lies at the center of so many riddles is not surprising, for such is the Anglo-Saxon view of human experience and of the cosmos. The narrator of "Wulf and Eadwacer" strains to express conflicting emotions in her anguished cry, "I found some joy in that, I found that loathsome too" (l. 12), while the speaker in "The Ruin" reflects on the glory and on the inefficacy of human accomplishment. The Rood is at once blood-stained and covered with gems, defeated and triumphant. The passage on moderation in "The Wanderer" warns us to be neither too happy nor too sad. All of these, it seems, reflect *wyrd*. As Deor presents the case, "wise God changes often" and will bring some men joy, others "a share of sadness." The poem's refrain reflects the best man can hope: "that passed away, this also may." In other words, *wyrd* may bring good or bad, and ours is not to question how or why but merely to accept.

Riddles are about the mysteries of the universe, large and small. In a world governed by *wyrd*, that means contradictions and opposites running parallel. Yet it also means the possibility of good—solace, glory, happiness—in the midst of evil, and when turned to a Christian purpose a basis for hope. Why, then, should *not* Langland, if he is going to write riddles, exploit this? Archetypal woman may be Medea or Mary, God the Savior or the Judge, Man the redeemed or the doomed. Or perhaps

Langland's was more of a struggle to reconcile what often comes through in the early English temperament as a valiant and vivacious but hopeless and cynical struggle to continue. In drawing upon the native Anglo-Saxon tradition, he appears to have adopted not merely the alliterative technique and a penchant for riddling, but the Janus-like perceptions of his ancestors. In this, he might find relief also from both Anglo-Saxon fatalism and the dichotomies of Christian dogma, offering in *Piers* a basis for redemptive faith.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All riddle quotations are from Krapp and Dobbie's edition of the *Exeter Book, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 3 (New York: Columbia UP, 1936).

<sup>2</sup>In her article, "What's So New about the Sexual Revolution? Some Comments on Anglo-Saxon Attitudes toward Sexuality in Women Based on Four Exeter Book Riddles," *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, eds. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>These citations are from riddle 30B, the second of the two versions in the *Exeter Book*.