

From *Swifan* to *Swyved*: Contemplating the Evolution
of Medieval *Double-Entendre* Literature

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Throughout history verbal jousts tested a participant's creativity, knowledge, and mastery of language, thus catalyzing the evolution of so-called wisdom literature (Tupper xviii-xix). This literary evolution yielded several genres of merit in medieval Europe including the Anglo-Saxon *Exeter Book* Riddles and the French and Chaucerian *fabliaux*. Both the riddles and the *fabliaux* demonstrate similar thematic and linguistic elements as evidence of an evolution of the *double-entendre* Anglo-Saxon riddles to the bawdy *fabliaux* and throughout this evolution runs a sense of familiarity about medieval society. This literature stands "as evidence for the history of medieval sensibility" (Muscatine 2).

While the Anglo-Saxon riddle tellers made direct borrowings from the Latin riddles of Symphosius and Aldhelm, there certainly are themes present in their riddles taken from the popular culture of the time. Although the recorders of the Anglo-Saxon riddles were most likely clerics, the riddles yet "reflect the views of people who may have been aware of fate and of God[...]but were in the end more concerned with crops than concepts[...]and, more than any other literature that survives from the period, this riddle collection is the song of the unsung labourer" (Crossley-Holland 15). Indeed, the riddles address the everyday, ordinariness of life (Tupper xxviii).

The linguistic composition of the *Exeter Book* Riddles supports this, and in fact, the genre became a refuge for contemporary colloquial speech which was seen as coarse and lower class within the ideologies of Christianity and Germanic heroism (Tanke 27). The same folkloric

themes and colloquialisms are later found in the *fabliaux*, such that “has always been with us, living a scurrilous underground life in the bawdy joke and the tavern tale” (Harrison 5).

Although early critics have classified the *double-entendre* Anglo-Saxon riddles as low, artless, and crude, especially when the use of idioms and proverbs gives way to so-called rough language and double meaning, they agree as do modern critics that one constant exists in both these *double-entendre* riddles and the *fabliaux*: for the humor to be effective “the laugh must come at the right place, and all elements of the narrative must be subordinated to this end” (Hellman 187):

Fabliau humor is often complex and its climax artistically prepared. Humor is achieved by conscious ploys on the author’s part[...]by the openly parodic and burlesque. The ironic vision that *fabliaors* give the audience is a device to arouse laughter[...]and] they demonstrate the sophistication of the comic devices and rehabilitate the genre to place it on an artistic level equal to other medieval works. (Eichmann 10)

As reverent as the Anglo-Saxon clerics were, they were not prudish (Crossley-Holland 113). They recorded and preserved the riddles which dealt with sexual themes as readily as those dealing with God and the divine. Critics have pondered why such seemingly base works as the *double-entendre* riddles would be included in the *Exeter Book*, a book of serious poetry presented by a bishop to his cathedral (Stewart 39). Is it their political significance or social import? Or simply their entertainment value? Perhaps both. It seems likely that the need to entertain, to compete in the verbal jousts, pushed riddle tellers to embolden and expand their humorous themes. They hid, for example, within a joke the burden of a sexual taboo, and as the taboo was attacked by the joke itself within the riddle, the resultant laughter would release the burden (Tanke 29).

Some critics still believe that the *double-entendre* riddles are unrefined, existing only to exploit double meaning and coarse suggestion and overshadowing the proper solution with “smut

and horse-laughter” (Tupper xxv). However, current criticism has begun to turn the tide, realizing that “even Dante places illicit sex farther from the center of Hell than do some current evaluations of medieval sensibility” (Muscatine 3). As modern critics have shed their prudish clothes, they have discovered that the widespread appeal of the *double-entendre* riddles has one foot planted in the elicitation of laughter when the riddle solver either exposes his naivete in the non-sexual solution or his prurience in the sexual one (Tanke 28). The other foot is firmly placed within the complexity of the riddles’ themes and structure.

Most of the *fabliaux* address similar salacious themes with equal sophistication of skill, and in them “art and obscenity serve each other well” (Cooke and Honeycutt 2). By examining further similarities between the *double-entendre* riddles and the *fabliaux* – characters reflective of society’s diversity, sexual aggressiveness, the use of taboo words, and the transgression of cultural taboos concerning sex and class – the question arises: is there a connection strong enough to support the idea that one genre gave rise to the other? With the Norman conquest, French came to England, but English survived as well for

the Anglo-Saxons transmitted their language to their conquerors. This is very probably because English had itself become a language of literature and government. There is an indirect, yet also a real, connection between the two facts that England is the world’s oldest continuously functioning state, and that English is now its most widely spoken language. (Wormald 19)

Therefore, it seems likely that the *double-entendre* riddles blossomed into the *fabliaux* as a result of various performers and writers competing with one another to entertain the masses with their verbal jousting.

When the *fabliau* genre began to bloom, *jongleurs* – minstrels who wandered the French countryside reciting poetry, performing acrobatics, dancing, juggling, and other such feats

– had been spreading bawdy literature through the same oral tradition as the *double-entendre* riddles, a tradition which some critics believe is validated in the answer to Riddle 95 of the

Exeter Book: “Wandering Singer” (Tupper lxxxv):

I'm a noble object known to warriors,
and often quietly rest; renowned amongst
high and humble, I range far and wide
and plunderer' pickings are mine if I,
once remote from friends, can but win
success and shining reward in halls.
Now discerning men appreciate
my presence; I'll reveal wisdom
to many people, all over the earth
they fall silent. Although the sons of men,
livers on land, watch eagerly now
for some sign of me, I sometimes
conceal my tracks from all humankind. (Crossley-Holland 103)

The *jongleurs*' popularity hit its height during the thirteenth century, and their appeal spread to all levels of society; in fact, “it was the *jongleurs*, with their versatility and their unattachment, who were instrumental in spreading the *fabliaux*” (Eichmann 11).

The communal reserves from which stories were taken never ran dry, and in fact, such humorous and ribald themes continue to be used even into the present (Eichmann 11). Those spreading *double-entendre* literature were skilled in improving even the best stories by keeping “intact the general themes and punch lines while revising superficial details to suit the local audience” (Harrison 5). Chaucer, who was fluent in French, was familiar with the *fabliaux*, their sources, and their analogues, in which his own ribald tales have their roots. Much like the *jongleurs* and other tale tellers, Chaucer kept his sources open before him, and rather than merely rewriting these tales, he improved them through “slight subtractions, additions, expansion or omission of passages, or modifications of the action; by a reworking of characterization; by more vivid settings and atmosphere; and by the enrichment of theme and significance” (Pratt xxxi-

xxxii). In this way the French and Chaucerian *fabliaux* share common thematic and structural bonds with the *double-entendre* riddles.

Of the 95 *Exeter Book* riddles, nine are considered by critics to have *double-entendre* meanings, in which the ambiguity is sustained throughout (Stewart 39). These riddles are characterized by sharp observation and wit (Crossley-Holland 15). As well, much skill is required to sustain the balance between the sexual and non-sexual answers via a description that refers to both solutions at once (Stewart 40). Riddle 25, whose sexual/non-sexual answers are penis/onion, serves to illustrate the teller's skill in structuring his riddle so that it operates in both the sexual and non-sexual contexts concurrently as it moves swiftly towards its conclusion (Stewart 42):

I'm a strange creature, for I satisfy women,
 a service to the neighbors! No one suffers
 at my hands except for my slayer.
 I grow very tall, erect in a bed,
 I'm hairy underneath. From time to time
 a beautiful girl, the brave daughter
 of some churl dares to hold me,
 grips my russet skin, robs me of my head
 and puts me in the pantry. At once that girl
 with plaited hair who has confronted me
 remembers our meeting. Her eye moistens. (Crossley-Holland 46)

By contrast, in a 19th century version of this riddle there is blatant obscenity which sinks to banality, and “the subtlety of such momentary digressions [in Riddle 25] as the intriguing reference to harming none but its murderer or to the curly hair of the woman is quite beyond this later version” (Stewart 42). Riddle 25 carefully and successfully weaves the two solutions together, leading the audience to an unexpected comic, rather than crude, conclusion (Stewart 42).

Of the 150 or so *fabliaux* which survive, over 75 percent are boldly obscene (Eichmann 6). Many, however, possess the same wit and skill of the *double-entendre* riddles. The depth and complexity of construction, however, are greater in the *fabliaux*. Two main figures are always present – the trickster and the dupe – which set up the comic denouement. In general, the more blatant obscenities describe the trickster, while the euphemistic expressions characterize the dupe, “at least up to that point in the story (if it is ever reached) where the dupe discovers that he has been deceived” (Percy 177):

Trickster figures have a valid and immediate grasp of a concrete reality which their use of obscenities and figurative expressions permits them to report in a highly determinate and particularized way. Dupes employ euphemisms to render less immediate a reality their hypocrisy will not allow them to admit, or they exhibit such confusion about the whole process of signification as to be blind to the actual referents in figurative expressions that make some arbitrary use of verbal signifiers. (Percy 181)

The use of obscenities, figurative expressions, and euphemisms causes deliberate incongruity within the tale, which serves to enhance its comic effect (Percy 171).

In Guerin’s *fabliaux*, “The Priest Who Peeked,” a parish priest convinces a peasant that he is not having sex with the peasant’s wife even as he is doing so. When the tale begins the priest, peeking through a hole in the door, boldly accuses the peasant couple of having sex when clearly they are only eating dinner: “‘Eating? What a lie! I’m looking / Straight through this hole at you. You’re fucking” (Eichmann 45, lines 35-36). The peasant tells the priest to hush and says it is not so, that they are only eating. The priest then tells the peasant to switch places with him to see it for himself. The priest ravages the peasant’s wife once the peasant is locked outside, and when the peasant questions him, the priest says, “Don’t you see: I have your platter. / I’m eating supper at your table” (70-71). The peasant replies, “Lord, this is like a dream or fable. / If I weren’t hearing it from you, / I never would believe it true / That you aren’t fucking

with my wife” (72-75). Faced with the reality of his situation, the peasant fails to understand it (Pearcy 180). And where at first the words of the trickster/priest are more obviously obscene, his words soften while those of the peasant/dupe become more rough when in the end the trickster tricks the dupe. The swiftness of the denouement compels the audience to the tale’s conclusion with no time for any response but laughter (Eichmann 5).

A similar plot unfolds in Chaucer’s “The Merchant’s Tale,” when Januarie’s sight is returned to him just as his wife, May, is having sex with Damyan. In this version of the tale, however, the trickster May is assisted by the gods who provide her with the words for her deception: “Up peril of my soule, I shall nat lyen / As me was taught, to heele with youre eyen, / Was no thyng bet, to make yow to see, / Than struggle with a man upon a tree” (Chaucer 370, lines 2371-74). Just as with the words of the priest and the peasant, here when the trick is sprung, May’s words soften and Januarie’s become more blunt: “I wende have seyn / How that this Damyan hadded by thee leyn, / And that thy smok hadde leyn upon his brest” (2393-95). Yet even as he witnesses May’s adultery, Januarie fails to believe it due to a spell put upon him by Proserpina, the god Pluto’s wife.

Aside from thematic and structural similarities, associations may be established at the linguistic level as well. Many words and phrases recur throughout the Anglo-Saxon *double-entendre* riddles forming a unique vocabulary which is later utilized (sometimes in alternate forms created by linguistic shifts) by the tellers of the *fabliaux*. Consider the following:

Word and Location

**Translation and Use in
Double-Entendre Literature**

Old English: **(Ge-)fyllan** **Fill** – the action of the penis
Riddles 25, 44, 61, 91

Middle French: **Fille**
“Gombert and the Two Clerks”

Old English: **Heafod** **Head** – euphemism for the penis
Riddles 25, 44, 61, 91

Middle English: **Heed**
“The Reeve’s Tale”

Old English: **Heard** **Hard** – referring to the penis
Riddles 44, 62, 91 or the thrust of the penis

Middle English: **Harde**
“The Miller’s Tale”

Old English: **Hol** **Hole** – a probable ancestor of the
Riddles 44, 62 modern slang word for the vagina

Middle English: **Hole**
“The Miller’s Tale”

Middle French: **Con**
“The Chevalier Who Made Cunts Talk”

Old English: **Hrægel** **Garment** – referring to the lifting
Riddles 44, 45, 54, 62 of garments prior to intercourse

Middle English: **Smok**
“The Merchant’s Tale”

Old English: **Swifan** **Move, thrust, fuck** – the action of
Riddle 12 intercourse

Middle English: **Swyved**
 “The Miller’s Tale”
 “The Reeve’s Tale”

Throng
 “The Merchant’s Tale”

Middle French: **Foutre**
 “The Priest Who Peeked”

Old English: **Tillic (Esne)** **Good, capable (servant)**– euphemism
 Riddles 54, 63 for sexual prowess

Middle English: **Hende (Nicholas)**
 “The Miller’s Tale”

Old English: **Willan** **Want** – referring to sexual desire
 Riddles 44, 54, 63, 91

Middle English: **Wil(le)**
 “The Miller’s Tale”

Old English: **Womb** **Belly** – referring to the area above
 Riddles 37, 62 the vagina

Middle English: **Wombe**
 “The Merchant’s Tale”
 “The Reeve’s Tale”

Middle French: **Ventre**
 “The Priest and the Lady”

This vocabulary of double meanings has continued throughout the history of *double-entendre* literature, popping up everywhere from Shakespeare to modern *double-entendre* jokes and literature with the same double meanings as before (Stewart 51).

While the intent of such ambiguous language and direct sexual images is to elicit laughter at the expense of cultural mores and social classifications, it also shelters and preserves a true portrait of a people. In their literature, the Anglo-Saxons praise the commonality of their lives and celebrated their earthy, unabashed sense of humor: “The participants in the action described by these riddles are characterized in such a way as to contrast with the bawdy directness with which the action itself is described” (Stewart 47). No theme is off limits for “all phases of Old English existence are revealed in these poems” (Tupper lxxxvi). Herein lies their ultimate value:

[Seth] Lerer’s conclusion is essentially the same as Tupper’s: as a genre of ‘catalogue poetry,’ the *Exeter Book* riddle corpus ‘brings the scope of individual experience together into a complete and readable whole’ [...]the *Exeter Book* riddles possess extraordinary powers of revelation: they provide us with a window onto the Anglo-Saxon world. (Tanke 21-22)

The riddles reveal the vernacular musings of a people gone from this earth, yet not so far removed from us, as these “readings attempt to recover what is marginal and suppressed in Old English literature and life, but also to naturalize this marginal and suppressed content” (Tanke 38-39). Such naturalization continues even today in the literary studies of Historical Criticism, Feminism, and Cultural Studies.

The French, and later the English, continue this tradition in their literature. The *fabliaux* provide significant glimpses of daily living, “a deeply human taste for material goods and sensory pleasure, for food, drink, and uncomplicated sexuality” (Muscatine 153). The commonplace themes, sharp wit, swift climaxes, and colloquial expressions all appear to be the natural extensions of the tale tellers and in turn of their audiences. To transgress is human; to tell

of it, universally humorous: “That spirit truly pervades these tales[...]and it molds their diversity and complexity into what might be considered a ribald epic, a medieval Human Comedy”

(Cooke and Honeycutt 5).

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