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**Say What I Mean:
Metaphor and the Exeter Book Riddles**

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The Exeter Book riddles are a heterogeneous collection, and at first glance it seems they have little in common beyond the riddle format and the final teasing challenge, "Say what I mean," or "Say what I am." The riddles range in length from a few lines to over a hundred, in tone from the religious to the mundane to the obscene; their subjects can be as specific as a butter churn or as broad as creation itself. One crucial similarity, however, does unify the riddles: all (well, almost all) are built around underlying, unstated metaphors. These metaphors-- such as *a sword is a warrior, a ship is a dragon, water is a mother*-- shape the riddles, governing their content and structure. (A small minority of the Exeter Book riddles are non-metaphoric. I will return to them later, but the thesis will concentrate on the metaphoric riddles). Recognition of the bond between riddles and metaphor dates back at least to Aristotle. "Good riddles do, in general, provide us with satisfactory metaphors," he writes in the *Rhetoric*, "for metaphors imply riddles, and therefore a good riddle can furnish a good metaphor" (1405b).

One Anglo-Saxonist describes the Exeter Book itself as "an eclectic anthologist's choice of Old English verse" (Williamson *Feast* 5). Presented to the Exeter Cathedral library before 1072, and written in a hand that dates it to the late tenth century (Hacikyan 6), the manuscript contains a miscellany of Old English poetry-- lyrics, dramatic monologues, saints' lives, religious poems, and a few fragmentary epics. Included in the collection are ninety or so riddles; the exact number depends on editorial treatment of

fragments. The riddles are written in alliterative verse, and consist of an enigmatic description of one object in terms of another, intended to confuse and mislead the solver so that she mistakes what is being described for what it is being described as.

There is much we don't know about the Exeter Book riddles. The time of their composition can only be guessed at. Craig Williamson, an editor and translator of the riddles, dates them to between the seventh and ninth centuries (*Feast* 5); Agop Hacikyan, in his study of the riddles, states that they were composed between the eighth and tenth centuries (25). Their authorship will probably never be determined. Hacikyan decides on multiple authors, based on linguistic and stylistic variations among the riddles (25), and this seems most likely. Beyond this, the most that can be concluded with certainty is that

whoever wrote the Old English riddles, he or they...were learned men, with access to medieval writings on philosophy and natural history, and they were conscious, careful crafters of verse. They were also, as should be obvious, lovers of nature and of men and careful observers of the world around them (Williamson *Riddles* 12).

We know even less about the social context of Anglo-Saxon riddling, or the tradition out of which the Exeter Book riddles grew. Some are clearly indebted to Latin riddles, others seem purely Germanic in tone and content. Williamson guesses that "the riddles are...a wedding of oral practice and Latin literary tradition" (*Feast* 7).

To understand exactly how riddles “imply metaphor,” we need to define both forms and examine how metaphor functions within a metaphoric riddle. Definitions of riddles (and even of the subset, metaphoric riddles) vary a great deal; the most useful for my purpose may be that of Charles Scott: “A grammatical unit of discourse...internally composed of two obligatory utterance level units, between which there obtains a partially obscured semantic fit” (74). Or, as David Evans puts it, “If one translates this statement into normal English prose, he learns the not very astounding fact that a riddle consists of a tricky question and its answer” (168-9). A metaphor consists of two terms or concepts; one, the tenor, is being described, and the other, the vehicle, is used to comment upon some aspect(s) of the tenor. In a metaphoric riddle, the question is a description cast in terms of the vehicle, the answer is the tenor of the underlying metaphor, and the “partially obscured semantic fit” between question and answer is the metaphor itself.

A metaphor also consists of what Williamson calls the ground (a set of shared characteristics between tenor and vehicle, of which there must be at least one to allow the metaphor to function) and the gap (characteristics of either tenor or vehicle that have no corresponding feature in the other component of the metaphor) (*Feast* 26-7). Metaphoric riddles play on the tension between ground and gap to create confusion, contradiction, and paradox, and at the same time point to a solution. Riddle 20, for example, whose solution is “sword,” contains two underlying metaphors: *a sword is a warrior* and *a sword is a phallus*. (It’s common for the riddles to use two or more metaphors with a single tenor, as well as exploiting the

contradictions inherent in a single metaphor, to heighten the confusion). Examining how these metaphors function within the riddle will show the pattern of metaphor usage in the Exeter Book riddles.

At least two thirds of the riddle deals with the metaphor *a sword is a warrior*, which can be stated more accurately as *a sword is a thane*. A thane is an Anglo-Saxon rank, or social class, or simply a job; it describes a warrior who lives in the personal service of a lord, rendering him protection and military service and receiving in return food, clothing, shelter, and gifts from the plunder taken in battle. As it appears in the heroic poetry, the relationship between lord and thane is a highly emotional one, fraught with some of the most important values in Anglo-Saxon culture: loyalty, courage, honor, generosity. The central similarity, around which the metaphor is built, is that both swords and thanes render military service to a man. The speaker of the riddle has a lord who guides him to war and for whom he fights. But the riddle works outward from this similarity, equating other functions and qualities of the sword with those of a thane. The metal of the sword blade becomes the thane's mail-coat, its gold decorations and jewels become the warrior's plunder or the gifts given to a retainer by his lord. The emotions of the lord-thane relationship are ascribed to the sword and its owner as well; the sword feels loyalty towards its master, the owner is generous with gifts and praise.

If this were all there were to the riddle, the answer would be impossible to guess-- it could be either a sword or a thane, and there would be no way to tell. But the riddle explores the gap as

well as the ground, as when the sword says of its owner, "he praises me highly and keeps me in prison." (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own). This statement is utterly incompatible with the relationship between the loyal thane and his gracious lord that has been described up till now, and the confusion goes on: the honest thane is also a murderer, hated and cursed; his lord denies him a wife and the chance to have children (for a sword cannot "reproduce" until it is melted down to make something else-- in other words, until it ceases to serve its lord). It is this exposure of the gap that points the solver to the answer *sword* rather than *warrior*.

In the last few lines, the metaphor *a sword is a thane* is upset yet again by the addition of a contradictory metaphor: *a sword is a phallus*. There is no exploitation of the gap here (a common phenomenon in the riddles with sexual motifs); the last six lines could apply equally well to a sword or a penis, and are open to three possible readings. Spoken by the sword, they tell of a woman's grief and fury when her lover or husband is killed in battle; spoken by the penis, they create a scene either of rape (or at least violent sexual play), or of a woman's disappointment when her lover is unable to perform, and must "d disdain such battle." The ambiguity is neatly captured in Old English by the multiple meanings of the noun "willan" in the phrase "*wonie hyre willan*," "I diminish her will/ pleasure/ desire." In modern English it must rely on a more extended translation.

Not every riddle follows this exact pattern, but the play on ground and gap, and the use of conflicting metaphors are typical of

the ways the metaphoric riddles function. Sexual riddles (like Bread Dough [45], Churn [54], Onion [65]) are an exception; they usually have no reference whatsoever to the gap, and so actually have two answers, an innocent and an obscene one. Social taboos take over the function of the gap, pointing the solver to the tenor (or the innocent solution) rather than the vehicle. In the more typical riddles, the ground between tenor and vehicle is used to create confusion, the gap to point to the solution. "Ground words reinforce the metaphoric equation; gap words recall the separated worlds of tenor and vehicle. The ground extends a metaphor, the gap produces paradox....The gap and ground produce the clash and confirmation of metaphor, the collision and collusion of worlds" (Williamson *Feast* 27).

The task of solving a metaphoric riddle could be seen as a process of discovering its underlying metaphor, and untangling the confusion of its terms. The solution of each riddle is the tenor of its metaphor; the riddler's goal is to make the solver choose the vehicle rather than the tenor. But though riddles use metaphor and "imply metaphor," do they take the solver through the same cognitive process as metaphor? To decide this we need to look more closely at the mental processes involved in creating and interpreting metaphor.

Metaphor theory is a vast and complicated field, involving theorists from Aristotle to John Locke to George Eliot, embracing anthropology and psychology, philosophy and literary theory and linguistics. I have chosen to concentrate on two theories of metaphor, that of Keith Basso and that of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. All three theorists believe that metaphor has a specific meaning (which is not to say that this meaning is the same for every

interpreter), and is not simply a decorative device or a categorical falsehood, the equation of one thing with another. The two theories they propose deal with the cognitive process involved in creating and interpreting metaphor, and particularly the ways in which metaphor affects our system of conceptual categories. The division of the world into categories is the basis for our perception and behavior. Categories allow us to decide that an object we have never seen before is a chair, and tell us to treat a cat differently than a dog, or a coffee cup differently than a lover. With their insistence that one thing is something else, metaphors (and riddles) would seem to conflict with and subvert our ordinary category structure.

In his study of a certain type of Western Apache metaphor known as "Wise Words," Keith Basso offers a theory for the interpretation of metaphor that involves the creation of a new semantic category. A metaphor is, he writes, a factually or categorically untrue statement-- X is Y-- equating two unequal categories. Although the categories are not identical, they must have at least one property in common, which then becomes the defining property of a new, unlabeled semantic category which subsumes both tenor and vehicle. (Basso 247). The meaning of the metaphor is conveyed in the properties of the new category. For the metaphor *a sword is a thane*, a new semantic category with the defining property *renders military service* is created; the meaning of the metaphor would be "a sword renders military service to a man as does a thane."

Basso's theory works fairly well to explain why the sword of Riddle 20 is said to fight for its lord. The other elements of the

metaphor-- that the sword is said to wear a mail-coat and to receive gifts from its lord-- could perhaps also be viewed as characteristics that swords and thanes have in common, and which then become properties of the new semantic category created by the metaphor. But what are we to do with the fact that the sword is assigned the emotions of the lord-thane relationship? Here we are outside the realm of similarities between swords and thanes; a sword feels no emotion and cannot be said to be either loyal or disloyal. In fact, an element of the gap between swords and thanes explored by the riddle is that a sword, unlike a man, feels no loyalty and will kill or conspire to kill a friend as easily as an enemy.

This is the point where I found Basso's theory of metaphor inadequate and turned to that of Lakoff and Johnson. In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson insist that metaphor is not simply a matter of shared properties between categories, but of shifting an entire structure of thought from one conceptual domain to another, and restructuring it in terms of the first. "Metaphors allow us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another. This suggests that understanding takes place in terms of entire *domains of experience* and not in terms of *isolated concepts*" (Lakoff and Johnson 117, italics mine). The metaphor *a sword is a thane* does not only involve the single concept of military service, but an entire range of ideas, relationships, and social customs, which includes the emotions, the balanced obligations of loyalty and generosity, and the social importance of the lord-thane relationship. Lakoff and Johnson also show that a metaphor, while usually based on a preexisting similarity between tenor and vehicle, proceeds to *create* other

similarities as it restructures the domain of the tenor in terms of that of the vehicle (147-155). Some of these are based on properties of the tenor-- like the sword's mail-coat and gifts from its lord-- and others are imposed on the tenor purely by virtue of their importance in the domain of the vehicle. The sword is endowed by the riddler with animate qualities that it does not possess-- a voice, a will, and the capacity for emotion-- because these are vital properties of the vehicle.

I don't want to abandon Basso's theory altogether, however; I think it has an application to the creation and interpretation of metaphor, and especially metaphoric riddles, that should not be ignored. A new conceptual category *is* created by metaphor (though its structure is less simple than Basso's model proposes) and a crucial point about this category is its novelty, the fact that it did not exist in the category system (nor therefore in the language) before the metaphor was made. This new category is the key to the essential creativity of metaphor, both in its composition and its interpretation.

It is the rare gift of the maker of metaphor...that he glimpses new categories of meaning before anyone else and, realizing that the linguistic resources at his disposal are inadequate to express them directly, turns to metaphor as a way to escape from his dilemma....The maker of metaphor speaks in semantic contradictions and extends to his audience an invitation to resolve them. If the invitation is accepted, and if attempts at resolution are successful, the result is the acquisition of a concept that is in a very real sense unspeakable (Basso 258).

The new category is not simply a list of shared properties between vehicle and tenor, but the properties of the tenor rearranged, and comprehended in a new way, in terms of the structure of the vehicle domain. This restructuring allows us to see and conceptualize something familiar with new eyes, or understand something we have not experienced before in terms of something already known.

The cognitive force of metaphor comes, not from providing new information about the world, rather from a (re)conceptualization of information that is already available to us....Metaphor is a primary way in which we accommodate and assimilate information and experience to our conceptual organization of the world. In particular, it is the primary way we accommodate *new* experience. Hence it is at the source of our capacity to learn and at the centre of our creative thought (Kittay 39).

The metaphor *a sword is a thane* is unfolded in the riddle exactly as Basso and Lakoff and Johnson describe in their models for metaphor creation and interpretation. Both riddles and metaphor, then, function the same way in creating, or forcing the reader or hearer to create, a new semantic category. As a conceptual structure from one domain of thought is transposed onto another, an overlap occurs between categories previously thought entirely separate. This overlap or crossing of category boundaries gives the interpreter of metaphor or the solver of a riddle her sense of surprise and wonder when the meaning finally becomes clear.

In speaking of interpreters and solvers, however, I have invoked the crucial difference between metaphors and riddles. A

metaphor in its classic form, X is Y, forces the receiver to create the new category for herself by presenting her with a patently false statement which requires a readjustment of her conceptual category system if it is to be read as meaningful. "Generally it is only when a sentence is taken to be false that we accept it as a metaphor...Absurdity or contradiction in a metaphoric sentence guarantees we won't believe it and invites us, under proper circumstances, to take the sentence metaphorically" (Davidson 40). A riddle, on the other hand, draws the solver into such a category, already created by the riddler, with no immediate and obvious warning of its literal falsity. Until the riddle is solved, it demands that a reader create in her mind a new category for the object or creature the riddle describes, for its properties do not match up with any category she knows: a loyal thane who is kept in prison, an animal with twelve feet and eight eyes, a creature that lives with no blood or bones, mind or soul. But there is no blatant "absurdity or contradiction" to warn the solver that the new category does not actually exist, until the play between ground and gap creates so many paradoxes that the riddle cannot possibly be taken as literally true, and the answer presents itself.

Riddles have solutions, decided on in advance by the riddler; metaphors have interpretations, created by the reader or hearer. In metaphor, arriving at the new category is the interpreter's goal; it, and the information it provides about the tenor, is the finished product of the metaphor. But the new category already exists in a riddle-- the solver's goal is the solution, and with the solution comes the restoration of the categories that were

combined so bewilderingly to make the new category. Discovering a riddle's answer brings a feeling of relief as well as pleasure, as the categories disarranged by the riddle slip neatly back into place. No longer does the solver need to strain her imagination to picture dragon-like beings with feet on their backs, loyal thanes who are imprisoned and forced into celibacy, or mothers who keep their children in underground burrows. The category system of the past can remain inviolate. Riddles are not only a "nightmare of resemblances and crossed categories" (Williamson *Feast* 25-6), but also "a lyric key to the house of dreams, transforming uncanny creatures into recognizable friends" (Williamson *Feast* 34). Elli Kõngäs Maranda writes:

I am convinced that whatever other function riddles and riddling may have in various cultures, there is a basic, perhaps universal function, which is cognitive....Riddles play with boundaries, but ultimately to affirm them...Shared characteristics between categories are a threat to the distinctiveness of the categories; riddles examine those things that are shared and pinpoint those that divide ("Riddles" 131).

The sense of relief as categories are restored does something to explain the vital importance of an answer to a riddle; as Scott's definition states, a riddle must consist of "two obligatory utterance level units," or *both* "a tricky question and its answer." A riddle without an answer is incomplete, at least partly because of the answer's role in restoring the categories violated by the riddle itself. This role also helps to explain the insistence on *one* solution that is

an essential part of riddling. The requirement of a single “correct” answer has been objected to, both in reference to riddles in general and to the Exeter Book riddles in particular. Several researchers have pointed out that often more than one answer seems to fit the criteria set out in a riddle. “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 metaphoric description” (Ben-Amos 249). Nigel Barley repeats this point in specific reference to the Exeter Book riddles:

Even if the riddle-giver demands a unique solution, we do not have to believe that there is one and only one formally correct solution for each riddle, any more than there is for an ambiguous sentence...Often in the case of the Old English riddles we do not have sufficient information to wholly disambiguate a riddle image...As they stand, therefore, they may well have several ‘correct’ solutions (which is not to say that we cannot prefer one solution to another) (151-2).

Against the undeniable truth that there is often more than one possible answer to a riddle, stands the fact that a riddle with only one answer, or with one best answer, is inherently most satisfying. While a range of answers may be theoretically possible, in actual performance only one answer is allowable, and the riddler usually has the prerogative to decide what that answer should be. Other answers may be “good” or “close” but only one is “right.” “What may be a logical answer or an answer that is acceptable for the same

interrogative proposition on another occasion can be spurned by the formally authoritative riddler seeking the one answer he has in mind," write Phyllis Gorfain Glazier and Jack Glazier in their study of riddles among the Mbeere, an African tribe (199). Ian Hamnett claims this as a general truth about riddles: "riddles are often 'objectively' susceptible of more than one reasonable and appropriate solution, but in fact only one solution 'counts' as correct" (384).

Though Barley's observation about the variety of answers possible holds true for some of the Exeter Book riddles, in general they are remarkable, particularly in comparison with riddles from other traditions, for the wealth of information and detail they provide, which often restricts the field of possible answers to one. Side by side with an Mbeere riddle such as "Resemblances" [*twins*] (Glazier and Glazier 212), or a riddle from Northern Borneo like "You keep it with you but it cannot be seen" [*a woman's hair knot*] (T. Williams 141), the Exeter Book riddles provide an embarrassment of riches in terms of hints and details, and their answers are, if not always easy, at least possible to guess. Regardless of what answers may be theoretically possible or appropriate, then, a single answer (whether provided for by the riddle itself or the by absolute authority of the riddler) is necessary to riddling, probably because of the answer's role in restoring the categories confused by the riddle itself. Having more than one acceptable answer, or no answer, means that these categories remain in flux, unresolved, a disturbing phenomenon.

The restoration of violated categories at the end of a riddle also goes some way in explaining the amount of time and effort put

into solving riddles. (Both riddles and metaphors demand an active, creative response from the receiver, but riddles demand an intense, deliberate effort beyond that of metaphor). Some researchers have claimed that solving riddles is simply a matter of remembering solutions previously heard, not creative effort to come up with a new solution. "The main intellectual effort in a riddling situation consists of a quick scanning of the coded messages to 'discover' the answer rather than an intellectual effort to 'invent' a novel answer," Elli Kõngäs Maranda writes of Finnish riddles ("Logic" 196). "People seldom spend much time thinking about a riddle, and...when they do think about it, they are more likely to be trying to recall a *known but forgotten answer* than to be genuinely attempting to tackle a new problem," Hamnett claims (384). Although this may be the case in the riddling traditions of other cultures, it does not apply to the Exeter Book riddles; since the scribe was not considerate enough to provide answers with them, the solutions would never be known if solvers weren't willing to expend a great amount of time and effort on them. Categorization is at the heart of our entire conceptual system, determining what we perceive and how we perceive it, organizing and limiting our responses to our environment. Having our conceptual system shaken is a disturbing experience, though not without its own seductive pleasure-- but the riddle genre holds out the promise that there *is* an answer, and thus a restoration of our original categories, if we will try hard enough to find it.

It would seem, then, that although riddles may *use* metaphor, the cognitive function they perform is exactly the opposite of metaphor. Metaphor proceeds from the known into the unknown,

riddles from the unknown to the known. Metaphor questions and reforms the existing category system; riddles play with that system but return it inviolate. But in fact, metaphor “protects” the category system just as riddles do. By its obvious falseness, metaphor allows the reader or hearer to play with, even reform, the category system while excusing such play as “merely figurative” or “not really true.” “Juliet is the sun,” Romeo says (2.2.5), and while listeners can understand and appreciate the metaphor, none of them would have any doubts that Juliet is a young woman and the sun is a large celestial object, and that these two things are not the same. Questioning and rearranging our conceptual system is both fascinating and frightening, and usually requires an excuse that the reordering is not serious or permanent, that it is play (as in riddles) or not literally true (as in metaphor).

Riddles and their answers have another level of meaning, which brings them closer in cognitive function to metaphor. On one level, answering a riddle means discovering the tenor of its underlying metaphor; this is the answer which restores the violated categories. A sword is simply a sword, not a loyal thane kept in prison, a virtuous servant and a murderer at the same time. On another level, the answer to a riddle can be seen as the underlying metaphor itself. The vehicle is as essential to the riddle as the tenor is; an answer that ignores the vehicle is not sufficient to express everything the riddle has said. When a riddle demands, “Say what I mean,” what it means is not only the tenor, but the vehicle as well, not only the simple answer but the metaphor that shapes and structures the tenor and gives it new life. A sword *is* a thane, or in

other words, the elaborate similarities between swords and thanes pointed out by the riddle are true. The first answer restores the old categories, the other opens the conceptual system to the eternal play and change that is the essence of metaphor-- and of riddles.

Michael Lieber argues that riddles do not violate the category system but instead demonstrate its flexibility, its ability to accommodate new information and new categories. Questioning the category system, he says, would be tantamount to denying its reality and inviting insanity:

Given that the cognitive order of any culture defines for its people what constitutes reality, the assertion that the order is provisional is a denial that the order is real. No culture can include such an assumption and continue to maintain itself as a viable system...No sane person can assume that his categories of reality are unreal and yet act consistently in terms of them (258).

I cannot agree; while neither riddles nor metaphors deny the "real" category system or do serious damage to it, they do question it by drawing to our attention its status as a cultural artifact, not a perfect reflection of reality.

By creating a new category, metaphors and riddles point out the incompleteness of the existing category system. They also reveal overlap between categories previously thought entirely separate, opening our eyes to similarities between swords and men, or young women and stars. Perhaps most importantly, riddles and metaphors question the basis on which we build a category system, our prioritizing of certain properties as more or less important. By

creating categories which include men and swords, water and mothers, ships and dragons, riddles are ignoring distinctions upon which our entire category system is based: human and non-human, animate and inanimate, cultural and natural, real and imaginary. By building categories based on other properties, the riddles call our attention to the fact that our category system is not simply natural or inherently right, but the product of human decision and evaluation. As Nigel Barley writes, the riddle "is a complicated play on reality and appearance, linking the unlike, denying conventional similarities, and generally dissolving barriers between classes to make us realise that the grid we impose on the world is far from a perfect fit and not the only one available." (144).

Moreover, metaphors and riddles do not simply question the old category system; they provide us with a new one, showing us a set of connections and relations never before imagined. This is especially true of the Exeter Book riddles, which offer a rich elaboration of not just one connection but an entire set of connections. Not only is the sword a thane, but its owner is its lord, the metal blade its mail-coat, its decorations its gifts, its scabbard a prison. Sometimes the Anglo-Saxon riddler is so caught up in the comparisons and connections that the goal of confusing or misleading the solver becomes secondary. Some of the longer riddles (Water [83] is a good example) go on long after the answer has become obvious. The Sword [20] admits to being a weapon, nearly giving the answer away; Bow [23] has the answer spelled backwards in the first line, which doesn't prevent the riddler from going on to draw an involved metaphor of the bow as a poisonous animal, spitting deadly

venom at its enemies. In these riddles (and in the Exeter Book riddles as a whole) the point is as much to enjoy the play with categories as it is to guess the answer, which is partly why the riddles remain enjoyable reading even after the solution is known.

Aristotle writes, "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor....It is...a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars" (*Poetics* 1459a). Although there may be a difference in the cognitive process of solving a riddle and interpreting a metaphor, and the new conceptual category created by each may function in different ways, at the heart of both riddles and metaphor is the crossing and restructuring of categories, the perception of similarity in dissimilars. Play with the category system on this level is not, as Lieber claims, an invitation to insanity, but instead a very sane recognition of a very true fact: that our categories are not natural or perfect, but cultural artifacts, incomplete and biased. "A collection of riddles makes us aware that all the world's a riddle and all our classifications merely unconfirmed solutions" (Barley 144).

Now I will return to an issue I mentioned before: the question of the non-metaphoric riddles. There are approximately ten of these (deciding what constitutes a metaphor and what doesn't is, of course, subjective, and many riddles combine metaphoric and non-metaphoric elements). Everything said about the subject in these riddles is literally true, and there is no attempt made to present the subject as something else. And yet the same crossing of category boundaries occurs in these riddles as in the metaphoric riddles, showing it to be a central concern of the Exeter Book riddles.

Riddles of literal description-- such as Barnacle Goose [10], Magpie [24], Lot's Family [46], and Oyster [76] -- exploit inherent ambiguities in their subjects to achieve an overlap of categories, bringing together properties from normally separate categories. The Oyster and the Barnacle Goose (which was believed to have hatched out of barnacles) are both animate and inanimate; the Magpie can sound like-- and so, the riddle implies, *be*-- several different animals; because of Lot's incest with his daughters, his family tree becomes a spiderweb of criss-crossed relationships. Lot's daughter's are also his wives, his sons are also his grandsons, each boy is the other's nephew and uncle.

Two riddles-- Bible [26] and Harp or Beer [28]-- play with the category structure through a description of *process*. (There are elements of process in Mead [27] also, as well as in other riddles). Each describes the creation of a cultural artifact from a raw material, and takes the subject through a bewildering set of changes, crossing categories in the process. The Bible goes from living to dead, wet to dry, raw material to cultural object, passive to active as, in its finished form, it speaks its message and redeems humanity. The other non-metaphoric riddles (Leather [12] and Wood [30]) are those of transformation, where the subject, a raw material, is used to create several different artifacts. Wood describes itself as a blossoming tree, firewood, a ship, and a cross (or possibly a wooden chalice). The distinction between these riddles and the riddles of process is the negation of time as a factor-- the Wood is *at once* "a blossoming grove, a burning coal"-- and the fact that the end product is not one single thing, but many. The focus of both transformational

and process riddles is the crossing of categories through physical change rather than metaphor. In addition to these, the last non-metaphoric riddle, Beech/Book [90], crosses categories on a purely linguistic level, with a pun-- the Old English *boc* means both "beech tree" and "book," and the riddler takes advantage of this to describe a beech tree (in its various manifestations-- this is a transformational riddle as well as a pun) and a book as if they were one thing.

The crossing of categories and blurring of distinctions that occurs in the Exeter Book riddles is not random. Although each riddle is individual and unique, taken as a whole they create a pattern. The metaphors of the Exeter Book riddles tend to extend human and animate characteristics to the animal or inanimate world, rather than describe the human or animal world in terms of the inanimate. As Daphne Nelson has noted, "The whole thrust of metaphoric description in the riddles seems to be to give more life rather than less" (31). Of the eighty-one metaphors I have counted in the riddles, seventy-three have living vehicles, and thirty-eight of these vehicles are human. Only three compare the tenor to an inanimate object. Sixty-six of the subjects, however, are inanimate objects, twenty-one animals or plants, and only two human. To read the Exeter Book riddles is to enter a world where human nature doesn't stop at the boundary of the human skin, but expands outward into the things people have made-- swords, books, keys, butter-churns and bread dough-- and the natural world that surrounds them-- icebergs, foxes, rivers, rain, snow, the sea. Natural objects are often described as if shaped by human craft and

skill-- the Iceberg [68] is “wonderfully adorned,” Water [83] is “covered with treasure,” “a glistening jewel.”

Put another way, and using another statistic, forty-five (more than half) of the riddles are projective-- the subject of the riddle speaks in the first person, taunting the solver to discover its identity (Williamson *Feast* 23). These riddles endow the non-human world with the most characteristic of human properties: speech, and by implication will, intelligence, sentience. “The most common riddle game is to give something nonhuman a human disguise,” Williamson writes. “This metaphoric movement carries us out into the Other where we find an image of the self” (*Feast* 23). In their play with categories, riddles blur what is perhaps the most basic category divisions of all: between what is self and not-self.

In charging the universe with human shapes, we escape the bone-house [a common Anglo-Saxon metaphor for the body] to rage with the storm, mother with the fox, clutch light with the moon, court death with the shield, and rise up with the onion or the Gospel skin....In riddles we shape and celebrate the universe, see and become one with the creatures (Williamson *Feast* 44).

The crossing of categories and the extension of humanity to the non-human world is not restricted to the Exeter Book riddles; it forms a common theme in much of Old English poetry. The poetry abounds in kennings, short metaphoric descriptions, riddles in miniature: whale’s road (sea), sea-horse (ship), bone-house (the human body). More than simply alliterative devices, kennings like “sea-horse” give us a glimpse of the world around us coming to

unexpected life, while kennings like “whale’s road” show us the object they describe from another, non-human point of view. In a long religious poem, “The Dream of the Rood,” the cross on which Christ was crucified speaks in the first person, very much like a riddle subject:

It was long ago, I remember:
I was cut down, torn from my roots,
my foes dragged me from the forest’s edge
to a stony hill, and ordered me
to raise outlaws high for all to see--
a shameful show (ll.28-35).

In the dreamer’s vision, the cross glows with jewels one moment and drips with blood the next, at once a glorious object of worship and an instrument of execution. In the epic poem *Beowulf*, Grendel, the hero’s foe, occupies a disturbing categorical space between human and monster, devil and man. He is described as a warrior, a hall-thane, the descendant of Cain, and at the same time as a fiend, an ogre, a demon from Hell. “He is the embodiment of all categorical contradictions-- a riddle without an answer” (Barley 157). While the riddles show us the connection between the human and the non-human with a sense of wonder and delight, Grendel hints at the darker side of the equation-- the distance between human and monster may not be as great as we would like to think.

The fascination of riddles with overlap between categories is not surprising, since riddles themselves create an overlap between two of the most fundamental (and problematic) categories in any literature, oral or written. “Riddles are a highly social form of

literature. They presuppose at least two parties, the poser and the solver, and constitute a dialogue between the two" (Barley 143-4). With the absolute necessity of both roles, riddler and solver, the distinction between the text and the reader, or the teller and the audience, becomes blurred. To solve a riddle (and for that matter, to interpret a metaphor) is in a sense to develop it, shape it, create it.

There is no way of knowing what social role riddles played in early medieval England. In many cultures riddles have ritualistic associations, and are assigned a place in religious and courtship ceremonies (other areas of human life where the distinction between self and not-self becomes blurred). Whether or not they played such a role in Anglo-Saxon culture, the inclusion of the Exeter Book riddles in an anthology of serious secular and religious poetry seems to indicate that riddles were not considered trivial; if they were played (and there is no denying the humor present in many, perhaps all of them) they were nonetheless played on a very serious level.

Williamson writes,

The Old English riddles have meaning to peddle and part of the meaning lies in the game....And in the end they never confess except to flatter, "Say what I mean." What they mean is the riddle-solver's meaning. What they mean is that reality exists and is at the same time a mosaic of man's perception. What they mean is that man's measure of the world is in words, that perceptual categories are built on verbal foundations, and that by withholding the key to the categorical house (the entitling solution) the riddlers may force the riddler-solver to

restructure his own perceptual blocks in order to gain entry to a metaphorical truth. In short, the solver must imagine himself a door and open in (Williamson, *Riddles* 25).

Perception and reality, boundaries and limits, overlap and similarity, what is human and what, if anything, is not-- these were the concerns of the Anglo-Saxon riddlers. They are also the concerns of metaphor-makers in any culture, including our own.

Thoughts on Translation

Of the several goals I had in mind when I chose to make translation part of my thesis, the most important was simply to get to know my texts more intimately, and to experience the richness of Old English poetic language directly. I also wanted to avoid relying exclusively on other translators, being left at the mercy of their biases and interpretations. (Which is not to say, of course, that I have no biases of my own, but simply that if I must be at the mercy of anyone's biases, I would prefer them to be my own and not someone else's). Working on my translations, I have become acutely aware of something I noted in my thesis: that to solve a riddle is to create it. This is even more true of translation. A riddle inevitably reflects and is shaped by the translator's solution, and her perception and interpretation of its underlying metaphor(s). If solving a riddle is to create it, translating a riddle is in many ways to solve it.

I have included a section of commentary after each riddle, discussing and evaluating the various solutions offered by riddle solvers, and considering what type of category crossing, metaphoric and otherwise, occurs in the riddle. It seemed more sensible to discuss one or two riddles thoroughly in the body of the thesis, and to consider the rest individually, to avoid overcomplicating the thesis.

Any translator of Old English poetry is inevitably confronted with the issue of alliterative verse. Grammatically and syntactically, Old English (with its free word order within sentences and its lists of synonyms) was better suited to alliterative verse than Modern English. In addition, modern readers are accustomed to rhyme and meter rather than alliteration as the basis for poetic structure. My translations have ended up as a compromise, retaining the alliterative structure in a much looser form than the Old English, often spreading alliteration out over several lines. At times I have rearranged and reordered the text to conform better to an alliterative pattern-- a liberty I don't think the Anglo-Saxon riddlers would have begrudged me, since their own structure and placement of lines often seems designed mainly to meet the demands of the alliterative form.

My translations are based on A.J.Wyatt's 1912 edition of the riddles, with some glances at W.S.Mackie's 1934 edition for the Early English Text Society and Craig Williamson's 1977 edition. In considering solutions, I have looked at these editions, as well as Krapp and Dobbie's 1936 edition for the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records and George Jember's 1975 translations.

Riddle 15

White throat, brown head-- hairs bristle
on my back and cheeks. Quick in the chase,
I carry weapons, eager for war; two ears tower
over my eyes, and I walk with my claws
over green grass. I am sure to grieve
if a death-grim warrior discovers
my secret hall, where I keep my children
safe in our shelter, until a guest
comes to our doors. Death is their fate
unless I flee my homeland; if he follows
he must crawl on his belly, but I cannot
await his fierce chase-- a fool's counsel!
Running on my hands, I make a road
through the mountain, and lead my children
on a secret way through a hole in the hill
to save their lives, my noble young.
Once they are safe, I'll never fear
the slaughter-hound-- if he tracks me,
follows my trail, a bloody meeting
will not fail him. On the hilltop,
there I'll face him, armed and eager,
fight the foe that I long fled.

Commentary

The exact identity of the animal in this riddle is the subject of much debate. Wyatt supports *badger* on the basis of the coloring (the word I have translated as "brown," *fealo*, can simply mean *dark* or even *black*) and the creature's burrowing abilities. Williamson argues for *fox* because of the line "two ears tower over my eyes." Krapp and Dobbie and Mackie suggest *hedgehog* or *porcupine* because of an ambivalent reference to spears or javelins (*hildepilum*) which I have chosen not to translate literally, simply treating it as a general reference to arms or weapons. *Fox* or possibly *badger* seems to me to be most likely, on the basis of the physical description in the first few lines. Williamson points out that "a cornered badger will usually keep to its burrow" while "a fox needs space to utilize its assets of speed and agility in order to make the kill" (*Riddles* 173-174).

The riddle's emphasis is on the two complementary and contradictory sides of mothering, the warm protection and shelter of the burrow and the savage defense against an attacker, the ironically described "guest." Not only is the human relationship of mother and child ascribed to an animal, but the inherent paradox within this relationship is explored: that mothers can be both nurturing and frighteningly aggressive.

Riddle 20

I am made for battle, dear to my master,
 wrapped in a mail-coat of many colors,
 wearing a slaughter-gem bound with wire--
 a strange creature! My generous lord
 governs and guides my ways to war
 and in broad daylight I carry bright gold,
 handwork of smiths, high through the halls.
 I lift life's burden with a battle-weapon.
 My lord honors me when men drink in the hall,
 presses gold and silver upon me,
 praises me highly and keeps me in prison.
 When I burst free, though weary of travel,
 I am valiant in war. I murdered a man
 by the hand of his friend; I was hated and cursed
 everywhere among weapons. And if I should die
 at my enemies' hands, none of my sons
 will ever avenge me; for my family
 will never grow greater with children of mine
 unless I leave my giver of rings.
 This is my fate: if I fight for my lord
 I cannot have a bride to bring me
 child-wealth. I am bound in chains
 and my king keeps me from such joys.
 Yet even celibate, I enjoy
 the treasures of men; I can madden a woman,
 weaken her will, make her desire fade.
 She wrings her hands, reviles me
 with bitter cries, speaks slander of me,
 but I must disdain such battle.

Commentary

The solution *sword* is generally accepted. I have discussed this riddle in the body of the thesis. The riddle may be incomplete (Williamson *Riddles* 198-199); it certainly seems to end abruptly.

Riddle 30

An enemy murdered me, stripped my world-strength away,
drowned me, dipped me under water
again and again; then set me in the sun
where I shed every hair. The knife's edge
cut me, scraped me clean, and the bird's joy
scattered quick drops over my brown hide.
It drank tree-dye before it walked over me,
leaving dark tracks. Then a warrior
built me a wooden house, covered with hide,
adorned me with gold, fair smith's work,
wrapped me in wire. Such glorious wealth--
treasure, red dye-- declares the praise
of the nation's protector; none but a fool
could find fault with this! If men's children
make use of me, they will become
blithe and bold-hearted, wiser of mind,
safe and sound and sure of victory;
their friends will be many, more faithful and true,
dearer and closer kin, loving and kind, who will
give them favors, grant them great wealth
and honor, hold them fast in love.
Ask what they call me; my holy name
is helpful to men, ever useful among them.

Commentary

The only controversy about this riddle is whether the book described is the *Bible* or not; the extravagant rewards promised to those who "make use of" the speaker seem to hint that it is. I have discussed this riddle in the body of the thesis.

Riddle 30

I am busy with flame, dance with the wind,
 wrapped in glory and gathered by storm,
 travel-eager, troubled by fire,
 a blossoming grove, a burning coal.
 Proud men pass me from hand to hand,
 women kiss me; they bow before me
 when I raise myself; they reverence me
 and I send blessing and bliss upwelling among them.

Commentary

Wood seems the likeliest answer, or perhaps more specifically the Old English word *beam* with its various meanings of *tree*, *log*, and *cross* (first proposed by F.A. Blackburn), although this leaves out the apparent reference to a ship, *fus forþweges*, “eager to set forth,” and the hints of a wine cup at the end.

A transformational riddle, Riddle 30 takes wood through its various states and stages, both natural and cultural: a blooming tree, shaken by the wind; boughs broken by a storm and collected for firewood; a ship, eager to set forth on a journey; a cross, worshipped by men and women in the hall. Williamson suggests that the riddle’s last four lines may be deliberately ambiguous, referring to a wooden wine-cup instead of or as well as a cross, a mocking reference to a worship of alcohol as pleasant and potent as the worship of Christ (*Feast* 182).

Riddle 36

I watched a creature on the waves,
 amazing and wonderfully adorned.
 Four feet sprang from her womb,
 and eight touched her back,
 she had two wings, six heads, twelve eyes.
 Tell me her name-- more than a bird,
 the shape of a man, a hound, a horse,
 a woman's face. Are you wise enough
 to know the truth of her ways?

Commentary

In a fit of despair Wyatt wishes this riddle were "at the bottom of the Bay of Portugal: there is no poetry in it, and the ingenuity is misplaced" (93). He offers no solution; Mackie as well as Krapp and Dobbie rather desperately propose *a ship with a horse, man, boy, bird, and woman on board*, but this solution results in ten eyes, twelve legs and five heads. I find Williamson's argument for *ship* convincing: the feet under the womb or belly are oars; those on the back belong to four sailors; the wings are the sails; the eyes are shared among the sailors and two figureheads. The ship looks like a bird because of the sails, a horse because of its general shape and the common kenning "sea-horse," a man because of the sailors, and a woman and a dog probably because of the figureheads. "The English ship depicted in the Bayeux tapestry has a dog-like head fore and a human head aft," Williamson notes (*Riddles* 251).

This is one of the cryptographic riddles, with a solution or a hint contained in a code within the body of the riddle. In this case it takes the form of a line of letters, which can be decoded into the Latin for “man,” “woman,” and “horse,” alongside their Old English counterparts *monn*, *wiif*, and *hors*. Each vowel has been replaced by the consonant immediately following it, although the scribe who wrote the riddle down apparently made some mistakes in his copying (Krapp and Dobbie 341). Williamson (*Riddles* 249) and Krapp and Dobbie (341) all think the line is a scribal interpolation, perhaps a bit of marginalia copied into the text by mistake, and I have not included it in my translation. The switching between Latin and Old English marks another occurrence of category crossing, and is the usual pattern in the cryptographic riddles, although the more common practice is to encode a solution in Anglo-Saxon runic characters, contrasting with the Latin alphabet of the rest of the riddle.

Riddle 39

Writings declare that this creature has lived
among mankind unnumbered years,
clear to be seen; it carries power
much greater than men know.
It greets each living person, leaves again,
wanders homeless on the exile's road,
and never rests two nights in one place;
yet it is none the poorer for that.
No foot, no hand, never ran on earth,
no eye, no mouth, never spoke with men,
no mind, but written books proclaim
it is the poorest creature ever brought forth.
No soul, no life, yet it journeys widely
all throughout this world of wonders.
No blood, no bone, yet it became
a comfort to the children of middle-earth.
It will never reach heaven or fall to hell,
but it lives forever, ruled by the lore
of the lord of glory. It would take too long
to follow with words its twisted fate.
Amazing to say: every word spoken
about this creature is clearly true.
No limbs, yet it lives! Guess this riddle,
with true words tell what this creature is called.

Commentary

No one has yet been able to respond to the riddler's challenge with a perfectly satisfactory solution, despite the fact that the subject-- whatever it is-- is clearly visible among us and visits every living thing. Wyatt, Krapp and Dobbie, and Mackie all suggest *day*, which would explain why the creature never spends two nights in one place but not its peculiar power or poverty. George Jember offers *death*, which could be said to be the poorest creature ever brought forth since it was conquered by Christ. Williamson objects to this on the ground that it is too abstract for a riddle subject: "Death and darkness do not stalk as characters in and out of Old English poetry. There are no other Old English riddles for "good," "evil," "sin," "death," or any other abstraction of human experience" (*Riddles* 259). Williamson himself argues convincingly for *speech*, powerful yet poor because of its insubstantiality compared to written words. This answer has the benefit of explaining one of the most obscure lines in the riddle-- "every word spoken/ about this creature is clearly true"-- since each spoken word is true in the sense that it indicates its own meaning, and every answer offered for the riddle would be true in the sense that it would be speech. On the other hand, this solution doesn't explain why the creature of the riddle travels so widely, never spending two nights in one place. Other possibilities are *cloud*, *moon*, *time*, *age*, or *dream*.

Of the suggested solutions, *death*, *speech*, or *dream* seem to me to be the likeliest, although none is perfect. The motif of a dream as a creature that exists but does not exist appears in the Latin

dialogues of Alcuin, an Anglo-Saxon scholar at the court of Charlemagne:

Albinus: A certain unknown man conversed with me with tongue and voice, one who never existed before and who will never be hereafter, and it is one whom I heard not nor know.

Pippin: Did a dream disturb thee, master?

Albinus: Even so, my son (Laistner, 157).

This riddle crosses the boundaries between living and non-living, existence and oblivion, by demanding that the solver imagine something that lives without any of the usual requirements for animate life: blood and bone, limbs, mouth, eyes, feet, hands, soul. And yet it is the “poorest of creatures ever brought forth,” the riddler says in a deliberate echo of Genesis. By telling us that this creature exists among us, *sweotol ond gesyne* (evident and manifest), the riddler hints at a ghostly presence in our daily lives that defies all our most basic category distinctions.

Riddle 45

I heard of something, I can't tell what--
It grew in a corner, swelling, standing,
lifting its cover. A lord's proud daughter
grabbed the boneless thing between her hands,
laid her gown over it as it grew.

Commentary

Despite the obvious (even overwhelming) sexual innuendo, this riddle has a perfect innocent solution-- *bread dough*. Williamson points out that there is an "elaborate and punningly obscene etymological joke" involved in the riddle's references to a woman of high social rank, since the Anglo-Saxon word for "lord" (*hlaford*) literally means "bread-guardian" and the word for "lady" (*hlæfdige*) "bread-kneader." "The lady in question is presumably making more than cakes," he comments (*Feast* 191).

Riddle 54

A young man came over to the corner
where he knew she waited; from far away
he walked to her side, lifted his shirt,
thrust something stiff beneath her girdle;
both of them shook as he worked his will.
He served well, hurried, sometimes he
made himself useful-- but the work always
wore him out long before she became
weary herself. A great wealth
grew under her girdle, something sweet
that men treasure and trade their gold to own.

Commentary

Churn is agreed on by almost all riddle solvers. Like the other obscene riddles in the Exeter Book, this one has no reference to the gap between tenor and vehicle, so that there are strictly speaking, two answers, an obscene and an innocent one. (The crucial part the metaphoric gap plays in riddles is highlighted by solver's reactions to its absence in the obscene riddles. More than once I have heard people object to the Churn riddle by protesting, "That's not a riddle! It's just a description of sex.")

The crossing of categories is obvious, when the same description can call to mind simultaneously human sexual intercourse and the act of churning butter, and when both acts result in something valuable and lovable.

Riddle 68

I saw a creature wandering on her way,
beautiful, wonderfully adorned.
A miracle on the wave's road: water became bone.

Commentary

Ice or *iceberg* is the accepted solution. This short riddle contains in miniature some of the themes that are worked out more elaborately in the longer riddles: the extension of animate life and will to the inanimate, and the suggestion of human art and craft applied to the natural world. The distinctions between life and death, animate and inanimate, are blurred as the inanimate iceberg acquire purpose and destination, and dead bones become active and alive as well.

Riddle 83

Her birth is a wonder-- wild, fierce,
 strong and strange; she rages and roars
 as she follows her course along the ground.
 A living mother of many great creatures,
 lovely in motion, striving forever;
 her strangling grip lies deep.
 No words can grasp her ways, her face,
 the widespread power her children wield.
 But the Father of all watches over
 what he brought forth and skillfully shaped--
 beginning and end-- and also the Son,
 and the highest, the Holy Spirit.

* * *

Her power grows, made manifest--
 upheld by a miracle, dear to men,
 covered with treasure, laden with food,
 her face is a glory of good to mankind,
 a glistening jewel resting on clouds.
 Clean and eager, bountiful, beautiful,
 sweet to the rich, soothes the poor,
 noble and best, boldest and greatest,
 greediest ground-walker ever seen
 beneath the air with human eyes.
 Her glory weaves the world-children's might.

* * *

She is harder than earth, more giving than gifts,
 wiser than men, worth more than jewels,
 washes out crime, and all the earth
 is made beautiful because of her
 and the children she breeds.

* * *

She raises her canopy, richly adorned
 over the people; she never fears death.
 Uncover her name, declare with words
 the vast and various might of her kin.

* * *

Commentary

This elemental mother is *water*, in all her forms (there are transformational elements as well as metaphoric in this riddle): rain, snow, hail, ice, rivers, lakes, oceans. This riddle captures a different aspect of maternity than Fox [15]: the awesome, life-giving power of fertility, with hints of a pre-Christian mother-goddess (possibly why the riddler thought it necessary to state so explicitly that the powerful mother he describes is under the authority of the Christian God). The riddler becomes less interested in exploring the tension between ground and gap, and more in exploring the contradictions inherent in his subject itself-- that water is destructive as well as life-giving, fierce as well as nurturing, "noble and best" as well as "the greediest ground-walker ever seen." Every living thing is dependent on her, yet she is obedient to a higher power.

The original text of this riddle is badly damaged and incomplete. (I have indicated large gaps with asterisks). I have taken a translator's liberty with the text and incorporated isolated words and phrases from the damaged portions into the body of the riddle. I supplied the reference to the Holy Spirit myself, in order to complete the catalog of the Trinity.

Riddle 89

My head is forged with a hammer, wounded,
ground with a file; my mouth gapes wide
and I swallow something that sticks against me--
it is pierced through, protected with
a hard mail-coat, ring-armor.
Then I offer to give my lord the thing he loves
when midnight comes, his heart's delight.
My face pulls back the lid that lies
over his treasure, whenever he wishes
to take what was left from the ones who were
driven from life with dark death-craft
at his command, at his desire.

Commentary

The traditional solution to this riddle is *key*, but I have to agree with Edith Williams that *keyhole* is more likely in view of the verb *beginan*, to gape open or swallow. Although the terms *heafod* ("head") and *nebbe* ("face"-- also "beak" or "nose") do seem at first glance to be more likely to apply to a key than a keyhole, there is really no reason why a keyhole that has a mouth cannot have a face as well-- it is a simple extension of the metaphor. Part of the difficulty with this riddle is the two lines which I have translated "it is pierced through, protected with / a hard mail-coat, ring-armor," taking them to refer to the key. The syntax here is very difficult, and it is hard to disentangle what is pierced through, what *hringum gyrded*, "girded with rings," what is acting and what acted upon.

The sexual dimension of the metaphor is similar to Sword [20], again with the double meanings of rape as well as sex, and the same motifs of battle and plunder. Williams points out that the term *laf* ("what is left") has a triple meaning, as does the final section of Sword [20]: the treasure taken as plunder from enemies and kept under lock and key, the woman captured as a slave after her people have lost a battle, and the final moment of male pleasure as the woman dies a symbolic "death," either fainting or collapsing at the moment of climax (53-4).

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