

Exploration of anglo-saxon humour within the exeter book



The notion that the middle ages were accommodating to the rude, bawdy or obscene is one that is rarely used to characterise Anglo-Saxon literature. While the major canonical text of the later medieval period (Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*) is often considered a comedic masterpiece, such evaluations of Anglo-Saxon texts are rare. The "famed restriction of Christian doctrine" that Nicola McDonald describes, stifles much critical discussion. Despite attempts from a few scholars (particularly Jonathan Wilcox) to challenge this presumption, the view that the Anglo Saxons were, in the words of Herbert Grierson, "a loyal, dauntless folk, serious and naturally devout, but heavy and humourless", lingers throughout critical discourse.

Nonetheless, subtle hints that Anglo-Saxon literature was not devoid of humour are evident within the physical texts themselves - copies of the Rule of St Benedict are filled with medieval graffiti: faces of monks poking out from behind letters in a book that is otherwise sombre in tone. Perhaps the most obvious example of bawdiness in the pre-Conquest canon is exhibited in the Riddles of *The Exeter Book*, of which a significant minority evoke blatant sexual and scatological humour. Through appealing to Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* - I will argue that these 'obscene' elements were necessary as an outlet for a monastic culture in which such topics would otherwise be repressed. I will attempt to extend McDonalds claim to argue that the specific type of bawdiness and obscenity displayed in Old English literature, rather than be constrained by, necessarily takes place within a culture in which such topics would otherwise be taboo. The assumption that Christian doctrine entirely prevented the "rude, bawdy and

obscene” can be directly challenged through appeal to Ælfirc Bata’s Colloquium, a text designed to teach Latin skills. Colloquium supposedly details the everyday lives of monks and yet it is filled with sexually charged toilet humour. Take for example Colloquy 25, in which a student conflates knowledge and excrement, lamenting to his torturous master that “ you don’t know how to do anything better than to shit on and pollute all those who come to you with your stinking and irrational words”. I would argue that this quote alone challenges the “ famed restrictions” the Church supposedly had on Anglo Saxon literature; here humour actually stems from within the context of a Christian, monastic culture. The sexual riddles of The Exeter Book display a similar bawdiness, one that often engages in the subversion of societal norms. For example, Riddle 44 – in which the poet offers both the phallus and a key as potential answers – the body becomes the site of societal subversion:

Wrætlic hongað bi weres þeofrean under sceate foran is þyrelbið stip 7 heard stede hafað godne ·þonne se esne his agen hræglofer cneo hefeð wile þæt cupe holmid his hangellan heafde gretanþæt he efe lang ær oft gefylde(Splendidly it hangs by a man’s thigh, under the master’s cloak. In front is a hole. It is stiff and hard; it has a goodly place. When the young man his own garmentlifts over his knee, he wishes to visitwith the head of what hangs the familiar holehe had often filled with its equal length.)The high status of the “ frean sceate” (lord’s garment) is described alongside the lower body – “ weres þeo”, tempting the reader to imagine what lies beneath. A conflation of high and low imagery is extended as the poet transposes the top of the body “ hefeð” onto the lower body. This inversion

is not only a physical but societal one, the figure himself morphs from lord (frea) to servant (“ esne”); the movement of the listener’s imaginary gaze onto the lower half of the body accompanies the stripping of rank from the upper echelons of Anglo-Saxon society to the bottom. To critic DK Smith the poet engages in a technique similar to Bakhtin’s description of the carnivalesque, a label normally prescribed to later medieval literature involving the complete inversion of normal society. Riddle 44 is reminiscent of a comic practice that must challenge any exclusion of the Anglo Saxons from literary history of humour. While it should be noted that the answers to most of the riddles concern the natural world or Christianity, the question remains as to how a monastic community could transcribe the significant minority that appear to subvert the values of chastity and piety. One argument could be that in offering an alternative solution to a sexual one the poet draws the listener away from the sinful nature of the surface answer and leads them to a more innocent one: the poet unravels conventional norms and then restructures them. Perhaps we might consider, as a number of critics have, Freud’s theory of incongruity in relation to the riddles. To Freud an obscene joke is successful only when it is able to transform what is sexually provocative into a form that is societally acceptable: “ smut (...) is only tolerated when it has the character of a joke”. In a riddle such as this, the smut (an erect penis) is only implied, hidden within language that never explicitly confirms or denies a sexual solution. This duality is exemplified in the opening word “ wrætlic” – an adjective that does not accompany a noun. While this is not uncommon in Old English verse it is worth noting considering the ambiguity of interpretations that surround the word, with some translators offering “ strange” and others proposing “ curiosity”:

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linguistically “ wrætlic” is a riddle in itself. The double entendre of the riddle and a description that appears to both describes - and not describe (considering the duality of the answers) - a particular ‘ object’, to Smith allows the form to “ provide a socially acceptable way of gaining access to sexual imagery without having to call it up directly”. Ultimately then, to apply Freud, for a community engaged in celibacy these particular riddles - and their bawdiness - offer a necessary sexual outlet. When seen through the guise of an innocent solution, sexuality and obscenity become socially acceptable when held together by the humorous incongruity of these forces clashing. Thus the critic must accept that humour holds an integral place in the Anglo-Saxon literary canon, being the very product of a sexually repressed monastic culture.