THE ELEMENTS OF ANGLO-SAXON WISDOM POETRY IN THE *EXETER BOOK* RIDDLES

RAFAŁ BORYSŁAWSKI

University of Silesia, Katowice

ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the parallels between the Old English wisdom poetry and a group of riddles contained in the Exeter Book. Although the riddle form in general as well as the Anglo-Saxon riddles in particular can be identified with broadly understood didactic functions, several of the Exeter riddles appear to be especially interested in the nature of wisdom and in the intellectual game of wits ensuing from it. Moreover, the associations with Anglo-Saxon wisdom literature are not exclusively present on the thematic level of the riddles, but they are also evident on other levels of signification, operating in relation to the entire collection. The Old English riddles, therefore, are not only examples of wisdom literature themselves, but they may also be seen as the evidence for the lack of rigid discrimination between riddles and other, seemingly non-riddlic, poems. What is more, the riddlic element seems to be one of the formative factors among the Old English wisdom literature.

> Frige mec frodum wordum. Ne læt þinne ferð onhælne,
> degol þæt þu deopost cunne. Nelle ic þe min dyrne gesecgan
> gif þu me þinne hygecræft hylest ond þine heortan geþohtas.
> Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan.
>
> [Question me with wise words. Do not let your mind be hidden
> or keep the secret that you know most profoundly. I will not tell you my secrets
> if you hide the wise craft of your mind and your heart's thoughts.
> Wise men should exchange wise sayings (riddles).][1]
>
> "Maxims I (A)", *The Exeter Book*, 10th/11th c.

---

[1] This and all subsequent translations into Modern English are mine.

Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan, says the anonymous author of the *Exeter Book* "Maxims". 'Wise men should exchange...' *gieddum*, understood most often as 'wise sayings', although throughout the Old English corpus this word has also been found to denote the concepts whose scope ranges from wisdom and poetry, song and proverb to riddle. Thus this short line directs us to the curious interdependency of all these items in Old English literary heritage, to the fact that the categories superimposed by nineteenth and twentieth century critics are frequently blurred when applied to a particular text. The intention of this paper is to provide some insight into the parallels between the Old English wisdom poetry and the Old English riddle, as well as into a group of gnomic riddles contained in the Exeter Book. I shall attempt to prove that although the riddle form in general as well as the Anglo-Saxon riddles in particular can be identified with broadly understood didactic functions, several of the Exeter riddles appear to be especially interested in the nature of wisdom and in the intellectual game of wits ensuing from this interest. Moreover, I intend to demonstrate that the associations with Anglo-Saxon wisdom literature displayed by the riddles are not exclusively present on their thematic level. They are also evident on other levels of signification, operating in relation to the entire *Exeter Book* collection, not the least of them being the etymologies of the terms denoting riddles in Old English. Therefore the unifying thesis of this paper proposes to look at the Old English riddles as not only examples of wisdom literature themselves, but also as the evidence for the lack of rigid discrimination between riddles and other, seemingly non-riddlic, poems in Anglo-Saxon literature.

Indeed, although the association of wisdom with the riddle form does not strike us now as particularly obvious, it is beyond doubt that the structures which we nowadays predominantly connect with the sphere of childish play originated from a highly utilitarian proto-literature. To a large extent, they were concerned with transmitting and concealing the sacred, the wisdom inaccessible to those unable to decode it. Regardless of the culture in which they were created, riddles, by their very character, are concerned with a subtle game of hiding and unveiling their content. Thus they are secrets open only to those who are able to discover and then apply their codes, in order to disclose their mysteries. And since esoteric knowledge operates on the level of a code which is not immediately evident to the public, the associations between riddles and secret knowledge are not unsound. This perspective recalls Umberto Eco's comment on the nature of early knowledge from his *Interpretation and overinterpretation*: "Secret knowledge is deep knowledge (because only what is lying under the surface can remain unknown for long). Thus truth becomes identified with what is not said or what is said obscurely and must be understood beyond or beneath the surface of a text. The gods speak (today we would say: the Being is speaking) through hieroglyphic and enigmatic messages" (Eco 1992: 30). The language

and literature of Anglo-Saxon England attest to the correspondence between the enigma and wisdom both in the wealth of Old English riddles and in the etymology of the Old English terms employed to denote them.

Even a cursory etymological examination of the origins of the riddle concept in Germanic, Romance and Slavonic languages assures us of two chief roles that riddles must have performed in early cultures, namely that of wisdom and that of magic conjoined with the sacred. Curiously, while the Germanic languages focus more on the common-sensical, pragmatic sides of riddles, the Romance and Slavonic languages clearly identify the concept with more esoteric spheres of religion and soothsaying. Let us look at several detailed examples: the modern English word "riddle" originates from Old English *rædelle*, *rædelse*, which stem from *ræd* 'counsel', 'opinion', 'conjecture' and also 'riddle'. It is related to Old Saxon *rædislo*, Frisian *riedsel*, and Old High German *râdisle*, and it has its counterparts in contemporary German *Rätsel* (cf. *Rat* 'counsel' and *erraten* 'to guess') and Dutch *raadsel*. Interestingly Dutch *raden* means both 'to counsel' and 'to solve [a riddle]'. Scandinavian languages, on the other hand, retained close etymological ties with the Old Norse word *gáta*, a cognate of Old English *giedd/gyd*, so common throughout the *Exeter Book*, and denoting a range of ideas, such as 'song', 'lay', 'poem', 'speech', 'tale', 'sermon', 'proverb' and 'riddle'. Interestingly, Slavonic languages seem to share the same verbal root: compare Old Church Slavonic *gadanye* 'divination', 'guessing', 'riddle'; Polish *(za)gadać* 'to speak' or, in Old Polish, 'to speak in riddles', *gadka* 'speech', 'saying', 'riddle'; Czech *hadati* 'to guess', 'to prophesy'; Russian *gadat'*, *gadivat'* 'to guess', *gadatyel'* 'diviner'. Romance languages in turn, derive their words for "riddle" from Latin *divinus* 'divine', 'prophetic', *divinatio* 'divination' and *divinare* 'to worship', 'to divine', 'to guess'. Thus, the common morpheme in Germanic languages is **rad* connected with counselling and guidance, clearly akin to Latin *ratio* and Polish *rada*, while in Romance and Slavonic languages it is the morpheme **divin* and **gad/had* respectively, both associable with divination and prophesying, and, on the linguistic level, with the Old English *giedd*, a possible cognate to the Sanskrit *veda* 'sacred knowledge'. What is intriguing is that the Old English riddles never refer to themselves using the Old English word *rædelle* but by employing the term reserved for poetic and gnomic compositions, that is the already mentioned *giedd*. The space of the present paper does not allow room for a more in-depth analysis of *giedd*'s occurrence throughout the *Exeter Book*, however a tentative conclusion seems to be deducible from such an undertaking: almost every *giedd* translated as 'poem' could, rather convincingly, be also rendered as 'wise speech', 'parable' and then as 'riddle' and vice versa, without generating much confusion in the meaning, and, what is more, enriching the interpretive potential of the texts it appears in.

To exemplify this proposition let us inspect briefly the enhanced potential of the opening line of possibly the most popular poem from the Exeter collection, "The Seafarer": *Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan* 'Let me tell of myself a true song / lay / poem / speech / tale / sermon / proverb / riddle' (Muir 1994, 1: 232) – each of these modern English words could be applied to the entire poem, to a large extent functioning as a didactic allegory. Evidently, in a number of cases the range of *giedd*'s meaning is narrowed down due to contextual restraints, however just the very potential of *giedd*'s multiple reading grants rather thought-provoking prospects in the understanding of the especially rich textual layers of poetic riddles and riddlic poems. An even clearer example of an enriched interpretive potential is present in the accommodation of both the 'parable' and 'riddle' meanings in *giedd*, which is to be found in Cynewulf's reference in "Christ II (The Ascension)" to one of the most potent figures in wisdom tradition, King Solomon:

> Bi þon Salomon song sunu Dauiþes
> giedda gearosnottor gæstgerynum ...
>
> ll. 273-4 (Muir 1994, 1: 76)

> [As regards Solomon, the son of David,
> he, wise in songs / poems / riddles [*giedda gearosnottor*] sang in
> spiritual enigmas [*gæstgerynum*] ...]

The question whether parables could occasionally function as riddles and the other way round, although initially seeming to be transgressing generic boundaries, may be beneficial in the consideration of those of the riddles which evidently resort to the rhetoric akin to wisdom poetry. In a word then, the etymological study of the notion only strengthens the thesis postulating close associations between riddles and wisdom texts. It stems from the fact that riddles originally performed socially momentous and solemn tasks, in this respect being related to the magical element of language embodied in charms.

The late Professor Margaret Schlauch never did discuss the Old English riddles in a separate publication (cf. Niećko 1971), and from the little that she said about them in her memorable *English medieval literature and its social foundations* (1956) one could draw an initial impression that she succumbed to the old treatment of the riddles as marginal texts in Old English heritage. However, the perfunctory remarks about them show her understanding of their unique roles and significance: "The Riddles are no mere playful exercise for intellectual clerics. They show once again how deeply the writers were preoccupied with the wonders of creation, how eager to learn what the past had to tell about them. Here Anglo-Saxon England fell heir to a conception of nature transmitted from Athens to Alexandria ..., a nature poetically envisaged in hierarchical ranks of being ..." (Schlauch 1956: 70). Even these few words stress the aspect which

can hardly be put to question now, that not only riddles and not only gnomic texts were concerned with learning and edification. This was the mission bestowed on *all* writing, or, to be even more exact, bestowed by the divine Logos on all the elements of nature. In the popular words of Alain de Lille, a 12th century theologian, *omnis mundi creatura quasi liber et pictura nobis est et speculum* 'every creature in the world is, for us, like a book and a picture and a mirror as well' (quoted in Coulter 1997). The details constituting a medieval literary work were supposed to be "read", understood and solved by their audiences, and that included not only the textual layer of a work but literally speaking its every possible aspect. That action very much corresponded to riddle solving as the understanding emerged from an appropriate interpretation of the attributes displayed by the enigmatic elements of a given work. Such an approach was the prerequisite to finding the hidden, and thus more sublime, meaning. Much later the medieval preoccupation with symbols operating in a way akin to riddles reached its climax with the powerful allegories of, for instance, *Le Roman de la Rose* or *Piers Plowman*, and with their copiousness of intertwined symbols. The importance of the detail and the importance of its appropriate reading can be found in every aspect of medieval thought – in iconography, literature, architecture, philosophy. What is more, it is partly this medieval obsession with symbolic meaning which frequently makes it impossible to formulate clear generic boundaries – a medieval cathedral, for instance, is much more than a temple; at the same time it is a representation of a complex theological text and a didactic instrument. Thus, when we examine the scope of the subjects present in Anglo-Saxon riddles, ranging from the most sublime religious concepts or objects and ending with the most tangible or even outwardly offensive actions and objects, it is evident that their main feature is the contemplation of the divine creation. In other words, nothing is either too magnificent nor too shameful for their authors – *every* aspect of the divine plan of things had been conceived by God and thus becomes worthy of inspection. Likewise, as the *Exeter Book* riddles often assert, nothing is too simple and everything may appear to us as a puzzle. The closer we look at Anglo-Saxon riddles, the closer they begin to resemble the study of nature and the divinity reflected in it, in this way being a form of a philosophy of science. And yet, it is equally crucial to see that their role in the dissemination of wisdom is at the same time combined with their role as its guardian, for the insight offered by the riddles is only accessible to those who have either been familiarised with the methods of unveiling it, or succeeded in deducing them by discovering their hidden pattern.

It must be emphasised at this point that all the above is as characteristic of the Old English riddles, as it is of those of the Old English texts, that have been categorised under the heading of wisdom literature. Wisdom or gnomic literature of Anglo-Saxon England probably poses the greatest challenge as regards

its definition to literary historians. Besides the poems which are most ostentatiously gnomic, its elements may in fact be found in every other category – elegiac, heroic and religious – a phenomenon similar and related to the permeation of the riddle-like challenges referred to above. Artificial though such definitions are, they may be viable and effective in their comparative analysis, as long as we remember both about their impediments, and about the fact that they may have mattered little for the Anglo-Saxon mind, even if we assume that in one or the other form they actually operated then. Thus, the texts that fall under the elegiac heading are at the same time deeply religious, but also frequently heroic and vice versa. Broadly speaking, however, wisdom texts may be characterised by being mainly didactic in form and directed at the presentation of both general truths and philosophical, esoteric insights into the nature of things and concepts. A number of such poems recorded in various Old English manuscripts exists, and they are particularly closely related in that their primary aim was not to present narrative motifs, as the heroic and religious verse did, nor were they the tool of self-expression, as were the elegiac poems. Instead, their concern was with the most profound enigmas of human existence, defined by T. A. Shippey in his *Poems of wisdom and learning in Old English* as things "*deop*, *deorc*, *dygel*, *dyrne*, deep and dark and secret and hidden" (Shippey 1976: 4).

Both the open didacticism of such wisdom texts as "Precepts", "Maxims", "The Order of the World", "Soul and Body", "The Gifts of Men", "The Fortunes of Men" and the esotericism of the two "Dialogues of Salomon and Saturn" correspond directly with the didacticism and esotericism interwoven within the Exeter riddle collection. The correspondence is built on two broad planes, that of function and that of idiom and form. From the functional perspective the riddles are clearly didactic, for they teach not only the multiplicity of the world, not only the deceptive quality of established categories and human senses, but also the fact that the outward semblance directs man to what Gregory the Great called "inner meaning, for the wonderful works of the visible world possess the marks of the creator; and though we are still not able to see Him, we incline towards Him if in those things which He has made we admire Him" (Moralium XXVI, *Patrologia Latina*, 36, 205, quoted in Whitman 1982: 62). Also in terms of idiom and form the Old English riddles are didactic; they summon to the contest of wits not only by the stark *saga hwæt ic hatte* 'say what I am called', but by addressing the intellect: the riddlee(s) is referred to as *þoncol man* 'thoughtful man' (Riddle 2, l. 12); *wisfæst menn* 'learned men' (Riddle 28, l. 13); *wis worda gleaw* 'wise in words man' (Riddle 32, l. 14); *searoþonc gleaw* 'man of skilful thought' (Riddle 35, l. 13); *wisfæst wer* 'learned man' (Riddle 41, l. 9); *wisfæstra hwylc* 'learned one' (Riddle 67). These very ways of address and locutions speaking of wisdom are also to be found among the gnomic texts. They are, for instance, evocative of the *Exeter Book* "Maxims I (A)" fragment quoted

as the motto above, summoning to the exchange of knowledge through wise questions and answers. Exeter "Maxims", "Precepts" and "The Second Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn", recorded in the Cambridge Corpus Christi College, abound in references to sagacity derived from experience, which, of course, is stressed as the underlying source of wisdom in heroic and elegiac pieces too. Additionally, the form of wisdom poems itself bears indubitable analogies to riddles. We frequently encounter there concise, apparently unrelated, sometimes laconic expressions necessitating meditation, or, in the case of "The Runic Poem", a series of statements explaining the significance of the signs of futhorc. The latter are, at least theoretically, convertible to riddles whose answers would be furnished by the runic signs. Lastly, the Old English gnomic poetry offers us riddles themselves beside the references to *giedd*, the phenomenon which might have contributed to the popularity of riddles as such. It is the contest of wits, familiar from the Biblical, Carolingian and Eddaic traditions, and represented in Old English literature by the First and Second "Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn". Particularly the second of these two employs a number of very obscure gnomic questions / riddles posed by Saturn, a Chaldean prince, and answered by the king of Israel. One of the problems Saturn sets before Solomon in "The Second Dialogue..." calls for a gnomic understanding of transitoriness by means of a riddle, of which, for want of space, let us quote the initial fragment:

> Saturnus cwæð:
> "Ac hwæt is ðæt wundor ðe geond ðas worold færeð,
> styrnenga gæð, staðolas beateð,
> aweceð wopdropan, winneð oft hider? ..."
> ll. 103-105 (Rodrigues 1995: 171)

> [Saturn spoke:
> "But what is that wonder that through this world travels,
> inexorably goes, beats at foundations,
> awakens tears of lamentation, often attacks here? ..."]

Consequently, as much as a number of the Exeter riddles involves the gnomic discourse, this and other similar passages appearing in the poetic dialogue involve the riddlic mould and mode to penetrate that which is esoteric.

Let us then once again assert the chief assumption concerning the Weltanschauung pertinent to both riddles and wisdom poems. The nature and the common logic behind the so far outlined correlations between them can be summarised and concluded by what seem to be their common roots, namely the fascination with the miscellany of existence and the inquisitiveness into the nature of this existence. Symbolically, I see this common logic as illustrated by the striking similarity of the conclusion to the preceptive "Fortunes of Men", when after a long list of human vocations the poet remarks upon the variety of the divine plan:

Swa wrætlice weoroda nergend
geond middangeard monna cræftas
sceop ond scyrede ond gesceapo ferede
æghwylcum on eorþan eormencynnes.

ll. 93-96 (Muir 1994, 1: 250)

[Thus wondrously the Saviour of multitudes,
Throughout the middle-earth, has men's crafts
Shaped and ordained, and guided with destiny
Every one of human kind on earth.]

and in the identical opening lines of Riddle 31 and 32, praising the diversity of the divine scheme in the world of nature:

Is þes middangeard missenlicum
Wisum gewlitegad, wrættum gefrætwad.

ll. 1-2 (Muir 1994, 1: 310, 311)

[This middle-earth in various
Manner is beautifully adorned with embellished ornaments.]

In the final part of this, perforce, sketchy survey of the wisdom elements in the riddles and the riddlic elements in the gnomic texts, let us now consider, however briefly, the Old English riddles most conspicuously related to the questions familiar from the gnomic poetry. Riddle 43 is a text which perhaps most clearly corresponds to Anglo-Saxon wisdom poetry, not only in its overt didactic, if not homiletic form, but also owing to the theme it examines. It is a concise illustration of the motif that appears in one of the poems preceding it in the *Exeter Book*, "The Soul and Body", itself considered to be one of the chief Old English wisdom texts. The soul is concealed in the riddle as a *giest in geardum* 'guest at home' served by the man. On the semantic level the central part of the riddle is constructed as a moral lesson, whereas on the formal level that very teaching becomes the chief clue to the riddle:

... Gif him arlice
esne þenað, se þe agan sceal
on þam siðfate, hy gesunde æt ham
findað witode him wiste ond blisse,
cnosles unrim, care, gif se esne
his hlaforde hyreð yfle,
frean on fore. ...

ll. 4-10 (Muir 1994, 1: 322)

[... If a servant
attends to him honourably, he who must go
on journey, at home they will find
sustenance and bliss decreed for them,
innumerable family, sorrow they will find

if the servant obeys his lord poorly,
his master on the journey. ...]

The preceptive capacity of these few lines outlines the appropriate conduct of an honourable Christian and stresses the peregrinatory character of the earthly existence. The mystery of Christian path of life is thus encapsulated in the short riddle. Indeed, one could not find a better exemplification for the famous Aristotelian principle of good riddles furnishing satisfactory metaphors and demonstrating the complicated matters in the lucid way (Aristotle 1967: 357).

Other Exeter riddles displaying the elements common of the wisdom group share some of the idiosyncrasies of various types of Anglo-Saxon poetic expression, the elegiac and religious themes in particular. A good example of the latter are Riddle 40 "Creation", based on Aldhelm's enigma "De Creatura", the Cross riddles (Riddle 30A, Riddle 55) and Riddle 26 "The Bible", all of which present certain teachings about the nature of creative and redemptive divinity. The use of the paradox and the composition based on preceptive statements, so familiar from the Exeter "Maxims", also appear in Riddle 40, as well as in the riddle immediately preceding it. Riddle 39, one of the most cryptic of all the Exeter riddles and one which still has not been successfully resolved, is indeed very close to its successor in the manner of representation. Like the Creation of Riddle 40, the *wiht* 'creature' of Riddle 39 is surrounded by an aura of omnipresence and power much greater than any man can know. And yet, paradoxically, it is *earmost ealra wihta* 'the poorest of all beings', (l. 13), and *ac hio siþas sceal / geond þas wundorworuld wide dreogan* 'it must suffer the travelling through this wide world' (ll. 16-17). It is, therefore, elegiac in its mode, yet its true import seems to be placed on the contradictions of which it is composed: it seeks people and then goes away, it has no limb, no life, no soul even, and yet it lives. The final statements seem to present a sort of difficult, esoteric teaching, the wisdom apparently close at hand, and yet available only to those who are ready to learn it, to solve this riddle:

Næfre hio heofonum hran, ne to helle mot,
ac hio sceal wideferh wuldorcyninges
larum lifgan. Long is to secganne
hu hyre ealdorgesceaft æfter gongeð,
woh wyrda gesceapu; ...

Riddle 39, ll. 20-24 (Muir 1994, 1: 315-316)

[Never did it touch heaven, nor did it encounter hell,
but it shall forever live according to the World's King
teachings. Difficult it is to say
how the life's condition will later develop,
twisted is the destiny. ...]

Notwithstanding, the various solutions offered so far – 'moon', 'day', 'time', 'creature death', 'revenant or dream' (cf. Fry 1981) – still do not explain all the clues of Riddle 39.

Throughout some ninety-four Exeter riddles there are several items which touch upon the very character of wisdom and knowledge. In doing this they are, in fact, meta-riddlic – they ask questions concerning their own nature and they are, as it were, their own solutions. From the riddles possessing such features, two are most prominent and these two shall serve as a conclusion to our deliberations here.

The first of them is one of the best known and most ingenious of the Exeter riddles, Riddle 47, commonly, although, as it has been proved by Fred C. Robinson (1975: 356), wrongly solved as "Book-moth". The riddle is concise enough to quote it in full:

> Moððe word fræt. Me þæt þuhte
> wrætlicu wyrd, þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,
> þæt se wyrm forswealg wera gied sumes,
> þeof in þystro, þrymfæstne cwide
> ond þæs strangan staþol. Stælgiest ne wæs
> wihte þy gleawra, þe he þam wordum swealg.
>
> (Muir 1994, 1: 323)

> [A moth devoured words: I thought of that as
> A curious event / fate, when I heard of that wonder,
> That a worm should swallow the song / riddle / composition of a man,
> A thief in the darkness devouring a glorious discourse (cud)
> And its strong place. The stealing guest was not
> A whit wiser having swallowed the words.]

The ostensible answer to the riddle is made clear in its very first word: *Moððe word fræt* 'a moth devoured words'. This eventuality is, however, rather unlikely, and it probably is not just the bookworm that we should consider, but the riddle's much more interesting deeper meaning and potential interpretive implications. After a close reading of the text, Robinson proves that the riddle's references to consumption can be equally well applied to the questions of acquiring knowledge, as in the dual meaning of the modern English word "to ruminate" (Robinson 1975: 358). The riddle could and should therefore be solved as referring to the process of understanding wisdom, or rather the failure within that process. The *moððe* from line 1 appears to be more of an unsuccessful scholar or an illiterate person confronted with an unintelligible text, than a simple portrayal of the irritating insect (Robinson 1975: 359). Simultaneously, the model of senseless reading as devouring and the model of comprehension as "digestion" work in reference to the actual riddle. Since the word *giedd* could also be understood as 'riddle', it is the very riddle which is being devoured here. Because it remains obscure for the *stælgiest* 'stealing guest', it represents the intellectual benefit which could not be drawn from devouring/reading and thus it is devoid of intellectual nourishment. Half-jokingly then Riddle 47 speaks of the necessity of an interaction between the text and the reader so that wisdom could transpire from it.

The second of the riddles considering the beneficial potential of knowledge which, nonetheless, is obtainable only through considerable effort, is the text recorded on the final folio of the *Exeter Book*. Riddle 94 forms indeed a conclusion to the collection, as, whatever its original solution was designed to be, it seems to refer to the question of wisdom in terms open to various conjectures. Therefore, although it is a matter beyond doubt that the Exeter manuscript did not finish with that riddle, it has frequently been seen as a metaphorical finale of the collection. Adam Davis, for instance, in his essay on the forms and functions of Old English riddles observes that:

> The compiler has made it clear here, if nowhere else, that this collection is concerned with the nature of knowledge and the knowable, and the recursive forms are not multiple riddles, but the riddle. Multiformity is not a by-product of the inquiry, but the essence of it, the inculcation of an intellectual and spiritual habit, not a body of texts but a pattern of behaviour.
>
> (Davis 1992: 147)

Let us cite the entire riddle here:

> Ic eom indryhten ond eorlum cuð,
> ond reste oft; ricum ond heanum,
> folcum gefræge fere wide,
> ond me fremdes ær freondum stondeð
> hiþendra hyht, gif ic habban sceal
> blæd in burgum oþþe beorhtne god.
> Nu snottre men swiþast lufiaþ
> midwist mine; ic monigum sceal
> wisdom cyþan; no þær word sprecað
> ænig ofer eorðan. Þeah nu ælda bearn
> londbuendra lastas mine
> swiþe secað, ic swaþe hwilum
> mine bemiþe monna gehwylcum.
>
> (Muir 1994, 1: 382)

> [I am highborn and known to the nobles,
> And I often remain with the powerful and the poor,
> Famous among people, I travel wide;
> Formerly foreign to friends, I incite
> Plunderer's hope, whether I shall have

Glory in cities or bright gold.
Now wise men love very much
My presence; to many shall I
Announce my wisdom; nor will there be spoken any word
Over earth. Although now the sons of men,
The earth-dwellers, fiercely seek my tracks, I sometimes
Conceal my path from all men.]

Its object is described as the thing known both to *ricum ond heanum* 'the powerful and the poor', and travelling the wide world inciting *hiþendra hyht* 'the hope of plunderers', the feeling certainly known to, for instance, the raiders stealing the richly adorned volumes of the day. It finishes with a gnomic statement, and although the mystery enshrouding it may not be as confounding as was that of Riddle 39, we are still far from reaching a definitive answer: among the proposed suggestions as to what the solution might be we can find 'a wandering singer' and 'prostitute', 'riddle' itself but also 'moon', 'soul', 'spirit', and 'book' (cf. Fry 1981). However, the semantic area most apposite to the clues is probably that of knowledge conveyed with the help of a written word. This could obviously include 'book' as the solution, but what seems to me more appropriate here is something in general associated with the sphere of Anglo-Saxon wisdom and didactic writing. The thesis advanced by Gregory K. Jember (1977), despite its shortcomings, seems particularly applicable at this point. Jember postulated for the study of Anglo-Saxon riddles to step out of the rational-empirical approach and to seek for additional, more metaphysical solutions associated with word magic, aside from those constructed on the perception of the riddles as representations of functional objects (Jember 1977: 35-37). The solution transgressing the limitations of the answer presented as one object can, in my opinion, be encompassed by the word *giedd* in its entire semantic capacity outlined earlier, namely that of a textual composition aimed at facilitating intellectual insight, and not necessarily excluding the spheres of play and entertainment.

Thus we have seen that it is the idea of *giedd* which envelops the often demanding and hidden wisdom, so much sought after by the *ælda bearn* 'sons of men'. It is the *giedd* which conjoins the riddles with the gnomic poetry by implying active intellectual participation of their audience, forced to search for solutions, just as other didactic texts imply the search for self-improvement and self-understanding. And lastly, it is the *giedd* which, I believe, spans the heritage of Old English poetry producing one universal perspective on it – not that of superimposed categories and artificial divisions, but that of unity revolving around the yearning for wisdom.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

Muir, Bernard J. (ed.)
1994 *The Exeter anthology of Old English poetry* [*The Exeter Book*]. Volume I. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Rodrigues, Loius J. (ed. and trans.)
1995 *Anglo-Saxon didactic verse*. Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Aristotle
1967 *The art of rhetoric*. (Translated by John Henry Freese.) London: William Heinemann Ltd.

Brahmer, Mieczysław – Stanisław Helsztyński – Julian Krzyżanowski (eds.)
1971 *Studies in language and literature in honour of Margaret Schlauch*. New York: Russel and Russel.

Coulter, Dale
1997 "Pseudo-Dionysius in the twelfth century Latin West", in: *The ORB Online Encyclopedia*, http://orb.rhodes.edu/encyclop/culture/Philos/coulter.html

Davis, Adam
1992 "*Agon* and *Gnomon*: Forms and functions of the Anglo-Saxon riddles", in: John Miles Foley (ed.), 110-149.

Eco, Umberto
1992 *Interpretation and overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foley, John Miles (ed.)
1992 *De gustibus: Essays for Alan Renoir*. New York and London: Garland.

Fry, Donald K.
1981 "Exeter Book riddle solutions", *Old English Newsletter* 15, 22-33.

Jember, Gregory K.
1977 "A generative method for the study of Anglo-Saxon riddles", *Studies in Medieval Culture* 11, 33-39.

Nicholson, Lewis E. – Dolores Warwick Frese (eds.)
1975 *Anglo-Saxon poetry: Essays in appreciation: for John C. McGalliard*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Niećko, Jacek
1971 "List of publications by Margaret Schaluch", in: Mieczysław Brahmer – Stanisław Helsztyński – Julian Krzyżanowski (eds.), 9-20.

Robinson, Fred C.
1975 "Artful ambiguities in the Old English 'Book-Moth' riddle", in: Lewis E. Nicholson – Dolores Warwick Frese (eds.), 355-362.

Schlauch, Margaret
1956 *English medieval literature and its social foundations*. Warszawa: PWN.

Whitman, F. H.
1982 *Old English riddles*. Ottawa: Canadian Federation for the Humanities.