Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor and the Old English Riddles

Edward L. Risden

Riddles serve a number of functions, as Marie Nelson has observed; they provide, for instance, a "structure for the competitive exercise of verbal skills" (445). Part of the pleasure involved in riddles derives from solving them before one's companions do, but danger lurks for those too quick to leap to a seeming or risque solution. We derive humor and a sense of community from the shared process of working to solve and then solving a riddle, but we may embarrass ourselves or even cast aspersions upon our own character by solving them incorrectly. As D. K. Smith has noted with respect to the Old English "sexual" riddles, "the humor of the form lies largely in forcing the solver into naming the sexual solution, so that the riddler can turn around and, by offering an innocent solution, highlight the listener's own apparent depravity" (82)—apparently to the delight of onlookers. Riddles have "a way of simultaneously hiding and revealing what we both desire and fear" (Smith 98).

Smith adds, citing Freud, that "the success of a joke turns on its invocation and then resolution of a sense of incongruity, on 'the ability to find similarity between dissimilar things'" (Smith 82; Freud 7). In further developing a reading consistent with the "incongruity theory" of humor, Smith also cites Jacques Derrida's more general notion of the troublesome/productive ambiguity of signs in *Of Grammatology*: the "impossibility that a sign, the unity of a signifier and a signified, [can] be produced within the plenitude of a present and an absolute presence" (Smith 91; Derrida 69). That is, the fun lies in the ambiguity which an accepted reading or "solution"—even a benign one—does not entirely remove. Several parallel, popular critical terms express a similar concept: Derrida's *différance*, that meaning derives from difference rather than likeness and layers of association rather than equation; Lévi-Strauss's *bricolage*, building or stacking layers of suggestion be-

cause we lack the exact tool to specify meaning; Bakhtin's *carniva-lesque*, shifting or inverting the typical layers/rules of a social pattern as part of a public event. Each of these terms metaphorizes a stratifying or overlaying of meanings as part of productive ambiguity. Each implies an intellectual test (do we participate with the "in" group in the joke or arcana?) as well as a belief that understanding derives from "play," enjoyment and use of inexactness to create meaning(s).

From the commonality of those terms we may begin to consider a theory of humor with which to read the riddles. Evolving a theory by which to approach how riddles create humor—not only sexual humor, but humor more generally—presents considerable difficulty, but Victor Raskin's script-based semantic theory of humor offers a method for reading jokes generally and the riddles particularly that can help us construct an understanding of how riddle-humor works (though it cannot detail a social context in which the riddles would have seemed appropriate). Raskin's theory clarifies and applies the postmodern theorists' notions of layering and play by establishing a semantic construct for verbal humor that, through ambiguity and variability, can particularly illuminate riddles.

A riddle as a kind of developing mystery narrative pieces together clues, and as we hear or read the expanding set of clues, as Smith notes, "the solution appears embarrassingly obvious, and that obviousness is part of the trick" (89), because "if jokes have a great deal to do with the way something is said, riddles have a great deal to do with the way something isn't said" (88). According to Raskin's approach, we can see a riddle as deliberately misleading by its polysemous clues; as we follow the clues, we construct various scripts in our minds, discarding or considering possible solutions as the matrix of clues expands. We layer one possible solution upon another until a single result clarifies in the mind; at that point earlier layers—possible solutions—may drop from consideration entirely, though with riddles we must be careful, since by missing or discarding the "correct" solution in favor of a bogus or even embarrassing solution, we may become not the solver of but the butt of the joke. Years ago when I first encountered Emily Dickinson's "I Love to See It Lap the Miles," I approached it as one does a riddle. I remember considering "horse" and "wind" before resolving on "Iron

Horse," a train. Since then, when I have taught the poem, I enjoy listening to students go through the process of reasoning and testing referents, and they typically test "horse" and "wind" as I did and often resolve on train as well—though some continue to prefer their own choices. I ask only that their answer, whatever one they choose, fit the clues the poet provides.

A riddle may in fact have more than one solution; as with the sexual riddles that turn on *double-entendres*, the sexual referent often fits the facts—we reject or at least repress it merely out of politeness or because of context (as Smith points out, clerics following the Benedictine Rule would have felt obligated to eschew the risqué reading). We usually find a second reading that perhaps fits the clues *better*, but though we may then assert that reading as primary, we at least tacitly accept the secondary sexual solution. That's where much of the humor comes in: part of the pleasure derives from the sudden glee of the resolution of possible solutions into one best solution— we derive a sense of accomplishment by making the incongruities compatible; part of the pleasure of the sexual riddles also comes, though, from our recognizing the secondary, sexual solution—the power of the secondary solution and its bending of if not breach of taboo perhaps accounts for the special popularity of the sexual riddles.

Raskin's theory explains that humor arises when two "scripts," or parallel narratives, which at first seem to overlie comfortably, instead don't fit together, and we manage to make them fit by discovering a startling and pleasing resolution to the incongruity. Further, we may apply that model to both sexual and nonsexual riddles equally, since the theory responds to the structure of the joke/riddle rather than to its particular content. For example, let's test the theory using three of the *Exeter Book* riddles with different kinds of solutions and offering slightly different kinds of pleasure in their resolution: one with clearly sexual content, Riddle 44; one nonsexual, even sacred in its solution, Riddle 48; one with an absurd solution, Riddle 86.

The famous Riddle 44, a useful starting point because of its familiarity, goes as follows:

Wrætlic hongað   bi weres þeo,
frean under sceate.   Foran is þyrel.

Bið stiþ ond heard,   stede hafað godne;
þonne se esne   his agen hrægl
ofer cneo hefeð,   wile þæt cuþe hole
mid his hangellan   heafde gretan
þæt he efenlang ær   oft gefylde.

(Wonderfully [a thing] hangs by a man's thigh,
under a lord's cloak. [It is] pierced in front.
It is stiff and hard; it has a good place.
When the man heaves his own garment
over his knee, [he] wishes to greet that familiar hole
with the head of his hanging thing,
which he with even-length has often filled before.)

The traditional solution, "key," fits all the facts, but the secondary, bawdy—even forbidden—answer fits them as well. One might even argue the secondary reading to be the primary reading, to fit the narration of clues better than the inoffensive primary solution: as Smith notes, "[b]y positioning this open object in relation to the lord's body, the poem ensures that we will read its description in bodily terms" (90). But while part of the humor comes from the pleasure of the sudden recognition of the solution to the riddle, some also comes from the tension of recognizing and repressing the secondary solution. The secondary, forbidden referent, "penis," must remain unspoken, particularly if we presume a monastic audience; anyone who utters it breaks the rule of propriety and becomes the butt of the joke. In such a context, riddles serve not only as a source of gnomic wisdom as objective statements of aspects of the nature of the world, but also as a test for the monks' attraction to bawdry: are they serious of mind enough to reject the obvious, inappropriate answer and persevere to the correct, acceptable solution, which takes considerable discipline, or do they submit to the "poser's desire that they expose their knowledge of sexuality" (Smith 86)? The reader/auditor must have the fortitude to reject the joke on the bawdy level and concentrate on a "better" answer, proving his mettle.

Script-based semantic theory helps here because it encourages us to combine clues and layer possible answers, rejecting (though with laughter, if we keep it tacit) ineffective or inappropriate possibilities

until we arrive at the acceptable and fitting answer. Failed solutions may still exhibit the solver's wit, as does rapidly progressing to the correct solution. A good riddle, like any good poem or puzzle, will provide scripts with individual humorous facets that both contribute to the solution and offer humorous pleasure for their own sakes. In line seven of the "key" riddle, for instance, the solver drawn into the sexual reading will enjoy a pun on *evenlang*, which suggests *æfen-lang*; that is, the familiar hole which the lord has often filled for a whole evening long, a kind of locker-room style performance joke.

Sacred riddles respond just as well to the script-based semantic reading, as we may see with Riddle 48:

Ic gefrægn for hæleþum   hring endean
torhtne butan tungan,   tila þeah he hlude
stefne ne cirmde,   strongum wordum.
Sinc for secgum   swigende cwæð:
"Gehæle mec,   helpend gæsta."
Ryne ongietan   readan goldes
guman galdorcwide,   gleawe beþencan
hyra hælo to gode,   swa se hring gecwæð.

(I have heard of a ring that speaks before heroes,
bright without a tongue, good though it did not shout
nor cry loudly in strong words.
A treasure before men silently said:
"Save me, helper of spirits."
Let men understand from the red gold
[this] mystery-speech, wisely commit
their salvation to God, as the ring has said.)

On reading the first clues one may immediately try something like "mouth" for this riddle, which just as quickly appears too simple. Or, accustomed to sexual riddles, one might see the ring as a vaginal image, but that reading quickly dissolves and does not reappear after the fifth line, which because of its spiritual power would invoke guilt for any steps toward a bawdy referent and immediately take the interpretation toward a different script. *Hæleþum* may just mean "men," but more often it suggests heroes or men interested in heroic

deeds. One may also read that suggestion in a sexual way, but the word typically appears in heroic context, as in *Beowulf* to refer to the warriors in the Danish court or in the *Battle of Maldon* to refer to Byrhtnoð's courageous followers--for Christian Anglo-Saxons the "Christian soldier" who engaged in the fight for salvation lived heroically. As early as line two the bright, silent tongue suggests prayer, which line three may confirm with "strong words": words that bring about eternal life have the greatest power of all. *Torhtne* may pun on "torque," a ring, necklace, or armband used among the Germanic folk as a token of honor, reinforcing a serious, even heroic reading, and *secgum* may pun on *secgan*, which reinforces the ring's power of speech. So by line five anything left of a frivolous reading of the riddle becomes a sub-script that reinforces awareness of our sinful nature.

When the ring speaks, requesting help and salvation, a solver may confirm that the solution responds in some way to our desire to cleanse ourselves of sin; when we learn that it is made of red-gold, we guess something both valuable and honorable or ceremonial, and the invocation of a "mystery" associated with salvation helps us piece together the proper solution: a chrismal or paten, the round plate that holds the Eucharist. The humor here applies the "superiority theory," which argues that humor makes us feel better than others or than our previous selves. Here we must apply superiority theory in the sense that by solving the riddle we have cast aside interest in sinful readings (or in pagan things) for salvific ones, and the sacred script eclipses any other: we have become superior to our former, more sinful selves. The pleasure in the solution confirms the solver's knowledge of and participation in Christian mysteries and community.

For a third example let's try the seemingly simple, thoroughly traditional, but exceedingly and absurdly annoying Riddle 86:

> Wiht cwom gongan   þær weras sæton
> monige on mæðle,   mode snottre;
> hæfde on eage   ond earan twa,
> ond II fet,   XII hund heafda,
> hrycg ond wombe   ond honda twa,
> earmas ond eaxle,   anne sweoran
> ond sidan twa.   Saga hwæt ic hatte.

(A creature came traveling where men sat,
many in council, prudent in mind. [The creature]
had one eye and two ears
and two feet, twelve hundred heads,
a back and a belly and two hands,
arms, and shoulders, one neck
and two sides. Say what I am called.)

A couple of years ago I gave this riddle to one of my classes to solve, and one student, learning the solution, refused to forgive me for the rest of the semester. S. A. J. Bradley calls it "[p]erhaps the most renowned AS riddle, with its absurdly arbitrary-seeming solution—which nonetheless derives from Symphosius" (404). The solution must involve a person of some type, so we begin the script with that assumption—but what kind of person?

The creature (*wiht*) goes among wise men sitting in council as if to participate (*mæþ* implies honor and respect, and also "measure," people who know how to measure), so the word *wiht* must imply a man or woman. Two ears, two feet, two hands, two sides, arms, shoulders, a back, a belly, and a neck seem to confirm our first notion until we come upon two difficulties: only one eye, but twelve hundred heads. What kind of person, or if we were wrong in our first assumption, what kind of creature, has one eye and twelve hundred heads? We can overlay some interesting scripts at this point in our reasoning.

The council, described as "snottre," may be wise folk or prudent folk, those who need to be wise or to be prudent to survive. If the creature joining them is a man, why does he have one eye? Does the riddle represent a remnant pagan reference to Oðin/Woden, the one-eyed king of the Germanic gods? That seems unlikely in a Christian (and Christianizing) context. Could the man be a headhunter? We know from iconography and human remains that Germanic and Celtic tribes participated in some kind of "cult of the head," keeping heads as tokens of honor (look for example at the Norse story of Mimir or the Welsh of Bendigeidfran) and perhaps collecting the heads of enemies. Could the headhunter have lost an eye in battle and survived, appearing now in a council of war to offer up tokens of his success to legitimize his advice? That script makes for an inter-

esting story, but also seems less than likely for a monastic audience. From what kind of background and living conditions would the monks have come, and could that background provide any clues?

Nearly anyone would have known of town markets where "prudent" sellers of their wares would have gathered to sit and talk and drink and sell, and most fortunately we know from the Latin source that the answer to this riddle is nothing more exotic than an a one-eyed garlic vendor, carrying hundreds of heads of garlic for sale at market. Though a real groaner to us today, this riddle presents to its audience a special kind of pleasure and a special kind of humor. It tempts us to Romantic or mythic solutions, but the answer lies right under our noses. As we peel off layers of readings, alternative scripts, we find that sometimes the simple and obvious answer is *the answer*: another important lesson for monks perhaps caught up too easily in debates over theological niceties when their teachers would have them more readily fall back upon the directness of faith.

In the cases of these three quite different riddles, script-based semantic theory offers a structural way to understand both an effective reading method for jokes/riddles and how they create humor. A sense of the context of the *Exeter Book* also helps us appreciate the value a comparison of overlaid scripts could have had for the riddles' Anglo-Saxon audience. The humor theorist versed in the Anglo-Saxon world might well ask:

> Speak me rightly, I appeal to ladies, monks, or gents.
> Peel my many layers to get my scents.
> Laugh till you cry, then know the reason why.
> Answer me truly: what am I?

St. Norbert College

Notes

[1] In an essay on Exeter Riddles 17 and 53, Jonathan Wilcox makes a similar point, though in different terms. He observes that "[i]nherent in the form of the riddle is a tension between multiple possible solutions and one finally-satisfying 'correct' solution"; he notes too the "variety of decoy possibilities" and suggests that an additional layer of pleasure and meaning lies in the "significant resonance" between the decoy-solutions and the ultimately appropriate one. Wilcox exemplifies that point in his discussion of Riddle 53, when he asks, "When is the cross of Christ not a battering-ram [the traditional solution] to salvation? When it is simply the gallows of a wicked man [his revised solution]" (403). Humor arises from the interplay or disparity of possible resolutions as well as from our pleasure in locating the unexpected resolution.

[2] Alternatively, of course, we may consider the possibility that the "mens' club" of the monastery enjoyed and preferred the bawdy readings rather than the tamer, more polite solutions, the fun coming in their breaking free of the restraints of "proper" religious discourse. What we know of the contemporary religious literature, though, may lead us to believe that superiors would have discouraged such readings as worldly and frivolous, at least officially.

[3] In "Mock Riddles in Old English: Exeter Riddles 86 and 19," Wilcox calls attention to the "carnivalesque" nature of this riddle and suggests that its particular quality of "teasing" (the fact that it has fewer clues than its source in Symphosius) may indicate it served as a "neck riddle" (to save the speaker's neck in a game of cleverness by means of a trick that makes it unsolvable) or merely as a mock riddle, the twist occurring in the pronoun shift in the last line: "Say what I am called." In such a case the *I* refers not to the absurd creature described in the riddle, but to the riddler.

Works Cited

Bradley, S. A. J., trans. and ed. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Everyman Classics. London and Melbourne: Dent, 1982.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri C. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.

The Exeter Book. Ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie. The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III. New York: Columbia UP; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936.

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1960.

Nelson, Marie. "Four Social Functions of the *Exeter Book* Riddles." Neophilologus 75 (1991): 445-50.

Raskin, Victor. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Synthese Language Library, Texts and Studies in Linguistics and Philosophy 24. Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: D. Reidel, 1985.

Smith, D. K. "Humor in Hiding: Laughter Between the Sheets in the Exeter Book Riddles." *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*. Ed. Jonathan Wilcox. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000. 79-98.

Wilcox, Jonathan. "Mock-Riddles in Old English: Exeter Riddles 86 and 19." *Studies in Philology* 93.2 (Spring 1996): 180-87.

---. "New Solutions to Old English Riddles: Riddles 17 and 53." *Philological Quarterly* 69.4 (1990): 393-408.