RIDDLING EROTIC IDENTITY IN EARLY ENGLISH LYRICS

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In this essay I will consider how the subjects of early English lyrics that engage erotic or sexual material employ a technique that I call “riddling”, in order to present taboo subject material in the first person without exposing the circulators of these texts to public censure for that eroticism. I suggest that the subjects of early erotic lyrics tend to be presented as unknown identities which must be solved, just as a riddle is solved. I construct the model of “riddling” on an interpretation of Anglo-Saxon erotic riddles from the Exeter Book that construct unstable erotic identities which both expose and protect the lyric subject as sexual. I then apply this model to the early English lyric texts.

In transferring this model, I do not mean to suggest a direct lineage between the Exeter riddles and those lyric forms that came hundreds of years (and a few national cultures) later. Nevertheless, the Exeter riddles and English lyrics of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries share some formal and thematic traits, most notably the first-person speaking subject. The “I” (or implied “I”) tempts the reader to see a “real” subject in the text, and this creates an illusion of intimacy in the text. This co-option of the readers into the identity game, I suggest, has the effect of destabilizing readers’ own identities, to the extent that we are led to question what we know, or what we understand about ourselves and our own reading processes.

I suggest that while the later erotic lyrics are not riddles per se, they employ a “riddling” gesture, posing the question “Who am I?”, and presenting multiple clues that evoke both the true speaking subject – the author, composer or reciter of the lyric – and an eroticized false speaking subject. The sexual identity is thus simultaneously revealed and obscured. The listener/reader is encouraged to make erroneous assumptions about the speaking subject – assumptions that are also highly sexualized. Yet, as in the Freudian trick of the riddles, the sexual
answer is only mock erroneous – the lyric appears to catch the reader out as possessing a “dirty mind”, and yet slyly acknowledges that we all have such minds. Therefore, in the final analysis, the erotic, not the innocent, answer is the most pertinent one – if not the “right” one.

Anglo-Saxon erotic riddles
A good example of an erotic riddle from the Exeter Book is Number 23, here translated by Michael Delahoyde:

I am a wondrous creature, a joy to women, useful to neighbours; not any citizens do I injure, except my slayer. Very high is my foundation. I stand in a bed, hair underneath somewhere. Sometimes ventures a fully beautiful churl’s daughter, licentious maid, that she grabs onto me, rushes me to the redness, ravages my head, fixes me in confinement. She soon feels my meeting, she who forced me in, the curly-haired woman. Wet is her eye.¹

The answer is “an onion”; or, of course, a penis. Here is another example, in a prose translation by Edith Whitehurst Williams:

My head is beaten by a hammer, wounded by a pointed instrument, rubbed by a file. Often I open wide to that which pricks against me. Then, girded with rings, I must thrust hard against the hard, pierced from the rear, press forth that joy which my lord cherishes at midnight. Sometimes, by means of my countenance, I move to and fro, backwards, the entrance of the treasure when my lord wishes to receive what is left of that which he commanded from life (i.e. to death), which he thrust with deadly power according to his desire.²

The answer is a keyhole; or, a vagina. Anglo-Saxon riddles, like those above, are often written in the first person. Sometimes the first-person