EN2003

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‘The riddling style of Old English poetry, which is not confined to the Riddles, indicates a sense that life is enigmatic and demonstrates a preoccupation with finding the meaning of things’. Discuss with reference to no more than two poems in the module reader.

1560 Words

‘Riddle 18’, the ‘Creation’ riddle, illustrates the paradoxes of knowledge. Much scholarship has been done on creation and knowledge in Old English riddles. Ruth Wehlau argues that the Old English poets saw poetic composition as a recreation of God’s Creation, which itself was seen as a riddle for humanity to glean wisdom from (Wehlau 10-1, 38-9). Fabienne Michelet relates the two processes: ‘to combine words and to construct worlds are analogous activities’ (Michelet 44). Craig Williamson suggests creative meaning depends upon the reader: ‘meaning depends on our manipulation in images of the Other’ (Williamson 25). More recently, however, Patricia Dailey outlines how the ‘wonder’ aspect of riddles illustrates unknowability; she argues they convey ‘the inability to know an object fully’, suggesting riddles work by emphasising the impact of language upon perception but also paradoxically suggesting that though the poet may ‘interpret’ the object, they cannot fully ‘capture’ it (Dailey 460-70).

It is here I would like to situate my argument. I will outline how the poet of ‘Riddle 18’ describes the process of divine Creation through paradoxical descriptions conveying God’s ineffability, commenting on how this is complicated by the creation of the poem itself. Yet, as the enigmatical poem evades meaning, I will argue that the riddle at once pursues

the concept of Creation and conveys how full attainment of meaning is impossible. This illustrates the nature of human understanding as being one of partial knowledge and partial ignorance, a concept of mediaeval Christianity. I will prove, thereby, that this riddle is not simply a proclamation of God's might, but the creatively contradictory style shows how life's enigmatic nature makes meaning impossible to fully grasp; the incomplete nature of human knowledge thereby affirms the essentiality of religious faith.

Firstly, I will outline how the meaning of Creation is characterised as divine and incomprehensible. The riddle begins with contradictory descriptions; despite the formulaic structure, they confound one another and build to no clear answer, conveying a sense of a truth beyond mortal comprehension. 'Ic eom mare þonne þes middangeard' is contrasted to being 'læsse þonne hondwyrm'. The subject is greater than the entire earth and lesser than an inconspicuous single creature within it. Both the 'middangeard' and 'honywyrm' are alike, however, in that both are paradoxically hidden in plain sight. The world is all around us; yet, the entire world is impossible to grasp all at once; you may chance upon a single earthworm, but most likely, you will pass by it without a second thought. Further, divine Creation is 'mare þonne' and ''læsse þonne' than these already escaping visions. Michelet comments on how an essential aspect of the human experience as illustrated in *Christ and Satan* is this very inability to grasp Creation fully, in contrast to Christ (Michelet 58-9). Thus, the riddle positions the reader in the role of humankind in contrast to the deified speaker who can conceive of the entire 'middangeard' and the single 'hondwyrm' at once (line 1-2).[1]

[1] All citations of 'Riddle 18' in this essay are from 'Riddle 18' in *Old English: An Introduction*, edited by R. C. Kerry, J. S. Key, and C. Rauer. St Andrews, School of English, 2014, p. 70.

Similarly, the speaker confounds mortal conventions through their state of being. Though they refer to themselves in the first-person present, ‘ic eom’ (line 1), their presence and existence is diffused among ‘ealle flodas’ (line 3-4). They paradoxically exist singularly and within a sweeping expanse, emphasised in the contrast of ‘ealle’ to ‘eom’: the alliterative echo relates the two words, heightening their contrast and paradoxical affinity, being both of the divinity. Additionally, the speaker is at once ‘wide ræce ofer engla eard’ (line 7-8) and ‘gefylle / ealne middangeard’ (line 7-9). The paradox here is twofold. The speaker is at once ‘ræce’ to the heavens and ‘gefylle’ the entire earth, suggesting incomprehensible vastness. This deity exists everywhere on earth and is yet all the time extending beyond it. Additionally, the heavens are referred to as ‘wuldres eþel’, ‘glory’s home’ (line 6-7 gloss). This echoes the Old English Poem, ‘The Dream of the Rood’. The narrator, who has heard the story of the Cross, reflects at the end of the poem, of how they long to ‘wuniaþ on wuldre’ ‘þǣr is blis myċel, / drēam on heofonum’ (‘The Dream of the Rood’, line 135-140). Thus, the presence of the speaker in this region, ‘wuldres eþel’, conveys divinity as it evokes a place impossible for mortals to fully envision. A memorial space, ‘wuldres eþel’, connotes afterlife, a conception of the world beyond present reality: not the earthly actions that were glorified but the transcendent concept of glory itself (‘Riddle 18’, line 7). It is a region only accessible, as ‘The Dream of the Rood’ describes, to those ‘heonon / ġewiton of worulde drēamum’, ‘mid hēahfædere’ (line 132-4).

Now, I will turn to how the poet challenges the conception of Creation as incomprehensible to human understanding through the creative work itself. Various scholarship has been done on mediaeval concepts of poetic creation. Writing on the natural world in Old English poetry, Neville notes that the poet’s ‘ability to contain the natural world in words’ is a proclamation of their ‘power’ as the poet too creates harmony from the

inexplicable mass that is the world (195-7). Wehlau comments on the self-contained mythology of Old English poetry, highlighting how its motifs frequently correlate acts of creation with ‘meaning in words’ (Wehlau 8, 54). Williamson suggests that the riddle requires the reader to inhabit its unique world, describing how this creation depends upon the reader’s intellectual participation (Williamson 36-7). Another interesting detail to note is that the described object in an Old English riddle was known as ‘wiht’, meaning ‘creature’ (Wilcox 47). The poet themselves, thereby, engages is creating a kind of ‘being’ through its uniquely slanted linguistic perspective. As aforementioned, the opening of the riddle paradoxically describes God’s magnitude and existence in the minute. The language of the poet, too, balances opposites. The word ‘hondwyrm’ (line 2), for instance. Williamson, in reference to the ‘Bookworm Riddle’ comments that ‘wyrm’ in Old English could mean both insect and dragon (Williamson 42). If we envision the potential capacity of this word to connote ‘dragon’ and ‘earthworm’ at the same time, we can see an alike paradoxical dual harmony as aforementioned of God (line 2 gloss). In the phrases, ‘swiftre þonne sunne. Sæs me sind ealle / flodas on fæðmum’ we see similar linguistic creativity, In the alliterative ‘swiftre’, ‘sunne’, and ‘sæs’, the rhythm picks up to create a linguistic replica of the swiftness of the sun (line 3-4). Additionally, the enjambment created by the phrase, ‘sæs me sind ealle flodas on fæðmum’ replicates the described ‘fæðmum’ of God as the line beneath likewise ‘embrace[s]’ (the line above (line 4 gloss). In the quick series of phrases, ‘grundum ic hrine, / helle underhnige, heofonas oferstige’, the speaker enacts the quick, dynamic movements described (line 5-6). By structuring the syntax so the nouns, ‘grundum’, ‘helle’, ‘heafonas’, come before the verbs, ‘hrine’, ‘underhnige’, ‘oferstige’, the poet illustrates quick, miraculously shifting images; the image of 'helle’ is followed by ‘heofonas’ before the reader can envision physical progression from place to place. Within the language,

transformative visions flash simultaneously, mirroring how the divine exists in multiple states and spheres of Creation at once. The final line is the characteristically elusive, 'saga hwæt ic hatte' (line 10). Though dramatising the unanswerable, the final words also illustrate linguistic power. The alliteration of 'sylfum' with 'saga' suggests a relationship with the 'self' of the speaker, and the act of speaking, to 'saga' (line 10 gloss). This suggests a correlation between the divine speaker and linguistic expression, both of which can create their own reality. The final phrase turns to the reader themselves; the poet has created and now, it is time, for the reader to create something of their own. Yet, even this is, of course, complicated. The firm tone of the final phrase demands a static answer. Yet, this is the crowning paradox. To perhaps counter Williamson's concept of the reader's power of meaning, I argue that the riddle suggests that to truly know the answer, 'Creation', in all its expanse, is, as aforementioned, an ability of God alone (Williamson 36-7). The reader can only know the word or concept of 'Creation'. The answer, thereby, paradoxically illustrates mortal ignorance, not, as one might expect, a true understanding of meaning. This concept, when something 'remains a mystery in itself no matter how fully known it is', is described by Northrop Frye as 'intrinsic mystery' (Frye 88). Despite, therefore, the creative search for meaning prompted by the poet, the poet also shows how the riddle itself, like life and Creation, can never be fully demystified.

As I have shown, 'Riddle 18' complicates the ineffability of divine Creation through language, questioning the very existence of meaning. Thus, the poem personifies the human condition as one of only partial knowledge of life, affirming the essentiality of religious faith. As Dailey writes, 'the true and whole nature of things, of *wihta* or creatures, in the Christian Anglo-Saxon world, is only knowable by divinity itself' (Dailey 470). The process of the riddle, therefore, is not to simple truth, but an understanding of life's 'intrinsic mystery'

(Frye 88): a reality that can only be truly understood by one ‘mare þonne þes middangeard’ (line 1).

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