Of all living languages, English stands out as an ever-fluent fountainhead of verbal curiosities. Under the relentless scrutiny of the modern horde of minutia-minded logomaniacs, English has afforded a triva-trove of wordy gems. English has graciously submitted to combings, coinings, and mutilations which would have all but exhausted many denser tongues' gaming potential. And, as each successive issue of Word Ways reaffirms, English language wordplay gushes on. Much of the reason for this is that English is perhaps the best referenced of all languages. While other major tongues have yet to compile a single "unabridged" dictionary, Modern English has a half-dozen decent ones to choose from. Definitive dictionaries of Old English, Middle English, and Early Modern English are approaching completion. Each of these will absorb virtually the entire surviving corpus of words from each period. When these old-period lexicons are finished, new floodgates will open for further dredging of English language arcana. In view of the modern-day outpouring of energy given over to capricious word games, it may be comforting to discover that the earliest speakers of our language were similarly fond of gaming with words.

While there is little difference in the amount of vital import to be found in the logological dalliance of the Old English and Modern English periods, the areas of intrigue are highly divergent. Modern logologists are literally obsessed: they are concerned with subtleties and exactitudes of letter sequences of written words. The unprecedented standardization (and dictionary-ization) of language has allowed the logologist to view words as combinations and permutations of graphemic units. Wordplay has taken on the cold precision and theorization of modern mathematics. Anglo-Saxon scribes, however, were confronted with an emerging orthography, spellings varying within closely adjoining dialectal areas, and such precision was impossible. Old English wordplay stems largely from an oral tradition. It is imbued with much of the whimsical awe that the Anglo-Saxon commoner felt while pondering his fragments of Babel, occasionally reflecting lightness against the backdrop of commotion shadowing his turbulent times.

The Old English period (about 450-1050 AD) spanned an era in which an effective verbal command of words was revered. A warrior's reputation was based largely upon his ability to boast, and to back up his vaunting with brash battle-play. Reputation was an all-important concern, as a forceful legacy guaranteed an enduring memory in the mind of one's clan after the unavoidable defeat. Emotionally, it in-
sured an ongoing earthly life after death. And it was far better to die
than to live having failed to fulfill a boast. Wordplay-cum-swordplay
was an ultimately self-consuming indulgence for those seeking hero
status. Insult contests were common, an oral tradition that went on
to flourish in the flying-matches of 15th century Scottish poets (word-
tussles in which two opponents took turns vilifying each other with
hate-spates of abusive verse), and is still found today in various
ghettoized rituals of mutual hamstring (called "playing the dozens", etc.).
On a more peacable oral plane, poets and singers were highly
regarded during the Old English period, both by boisterous ceorls
reveling around a balefire, and noble eorls draining jewel-encrusted
alecups in their high hall. The scops, often illiterate, were fond of
ornamenting their songs with layers of verbal legerdemain, adding
to the overall dazzling quality of their performance.

The singers' wordplay bridged incongruities and similarities in
the aural/semantic aspect of their words. Or, shall we say, they
produced an onslaught of weak puns. It was not uncommon for a poet
to make an observation concerning the proximity of one's mod (mind)
to one's modor (mother). It might be questioned whether a mago (man) was
properly reconciled with his mceg (clan, tribe). And a poet's evoke-
active image of the sand (beach) might well conjure images of sun
(swimming). One inspired versifier managed to string together the
words lif (life), leof (dear), lufu (love), lof (praise), alyfan (to al-
low), leaf (leaf), geleafa (faith), and gelyfan (to believe) over a
number of lines.

Although examples of such wordplay are fairly common, the bulk
of them were systematically ignored by staid-minded scholars for dec-
ades. Certain critics would cite them as examples of failings of the
"lesser" Old English poems, but explain away the ample punning in
Beowulf as "mere alliteration". Then it was pointed out that the word
geong (meaning "young") in line 2018 of the poem does not alliterate
with geong (meaning "gone") is the next line or any other word in the
vicinity.

Actually, such a cover-up was wholly unnecessary. Most of these
fillips are weak puns only when viewed from a modern frame of ref-
erence, and do not indicate an Anglo-Saxon fondness for what is now
considered "the lowest kind of wit". What is present is not so much
a slapdash sequence of banal puns as a fairly sophisticated use of a
rhetorical device known as paronomasia. The Old English examples
constitute the earliest pre-Joycean, contrived coalescence of sound
and sense in our language. Similar-sounding words were a source of
great mystical fascination for the ancients. Many of these puns are
entirely humorless in intent, having been ascribed to the mouths of
kings and saints.

It is said that Saint Gregory, upon encountering a shipment of
English slave-boys, commented that the fairheaded Angle boys were
as beautiful as engla (angels), and since they were from the district
of Deira they should be saved from wrath (de ira, in the Pope's
Latin). Gamenode

Even to his
assailer of
the most
of the effe-
word
"where"

To his
puns, con-
Other chur-
verbal indi-
ations as lo-
soaked mi-
tained hide-
The Old
ning. Of o-
contained o-
wield or pr-
to Hi-
tale of No-
the fold (o

Ev
paron-
Frequent-
leave swath

The fi-
Index Exonil
century
set of sol-
with fair (d
of bedevil-
aspect of
Anagrams

One ci
noting the
(horse),
Gregory had, as was befitting for one of his lofty stature, gamenode mid his wordum (gamed with his words).

Even today, echoes of Wulfstan (archbishop of York and early-day assailer of heathen hedonists) might send shivers down the spines of the most contentedly debauched 20th century pleasure reptiles. Much of the effectiveness of Wulfstan’s hellfire sermonizing derived from the wordgaming with which he infused his harangue:

"ær is ece byrne ... ær is ece gryne, ær is wanung, gramung" ("where is eternal burning, where is eternal horror, where is moaning, groaning")

To his credit, Wulfstan avoided overly blatant use of outright puns, concentrating on a general ambience of punnish assonance. Other churchmen of his time were regrettably less subtle in their verbal indulgence. They produced puns based on diverse associations as loosely dispersed as the religiously inspired and/or mead-soaked mind could muster. The various names for mankind all contained hidden layers of theological meaning. On one hand man (man) was intrinsically filled with man (sin). But any individual wer (man) could hold great weor (faith). Such a wæl (man) was wæl (holy). The Old English names for the Almighty had equal potential for punning. Of course god (God) was god (good). But another designation contained even greater implications: weard (God, in the sense of ward or protector) controlled Wyrd (Fate). He also controlled his wæor (host), in addition to the whole wорuld (world), which thanks to Him was geworden (came about). Also, a churchman telling the tale of Noah’s ark could hardly help but note the contrast between the fold (dry earth) and the flod (flood).

Even the language of the fierce warrior contained the raw material for paronomastic plays. It was a rare battle which was gefeoht (fought) in which someone did not emerge feohleas (moneyless). Frequently gold (gold) was ageald (paid). And the defeated would leave swut (battle-sweat, blood) in their swa~u (track).

The first masterwork of English language wordplay is a collection of nearly 100 riddles found in the Exeter Book (also known as the Codex Exoniensis). These conundrums were created by some of 7th century England’s most cleverly perverse ponderers. With brutally tortuous foresight, the Anglo-Saxon enigmatists failed to include a set of solutions to their arcana. While answers have been established with fair certainty for many of the riddles, others have been sources of bedevilment for generations of scholars. Perhaps the most enticing aspect of the Exeter Riddles is their inclusion of the first traces of English-language logology.

Anagrams

One cryptic logograph sports an unintelligible series of runes, denoting the Old English terms wynn (joy), is (ice), beorc (birch), eoh (horse), hægel (hail), ac (oak), þorn (thorn) eoh again, feoh (money), Latin).
ey), esc (ash), ear (ground), sigel (sun), and peor (the name of the rune). An anagrammatical sequence is apparently implied in the initial letters of these words: w-i-b-e-h-a-d-e-f-a-e-s-p. The best anyone has come up with to unravel this is the anagram peah-swifeda (ring-tailed peacock). This is unlikely, however, as it relies upon dubious renderings of several letters and diphthongs.

Substitution Ciphers

The anagrammatic approach has also been used to analyze another murderous Exeter logogriph. This baffler dispenses with the runic rigmarole, but is made all the more cryptic by a total lack of vowels, and doubts about several key graphemes, one of which seems to have been lost to the ages:

H W M () M X L K F W F Q X X S

One scholar, assuming copious miscopying on the part of a (no doubt) hand-crammed Anglo-Saxon scribe who wrote L for I, K for R, and W in one case instead of the letter D and in another the numeral 5, rendered the series thusly:

H5 M M X I R F D F G X X S

From this he anagrammed sugu mid 5 ferhum (a sow with a litter of 5 pigs). To get the vowels in this anagram, the scholar assumed that the author had employed a partial substitution cipher where, instead of writing a vowel, the puzzle's author wrote the following consonant in the alphabet: E became F, and U became X (this was in pre-V days).

While this antiquarian's hard-condured anagram is almost surely fanciful, his consonant-for-vowel substitute scheme made way for a far more plausible and wholly unanagrammatic rendering (assuming several emendations in the original text):

H (P) M (P) M X L K F (R) F Q X X S

H O M O M U L I E R E Q U U S

This is a Latin rendering of "man-wife-horse" (homo-mulier-equus), that has been suggested as a kenning for "ship" (but don't ask why ...). The whole interpretation is far from conclusive, and, as one commentator quipped, "This is one of the riddles one wishes at the bottom of the Bay of Portugal".

Palindromes

There is no evidence that the Anglo-Saxons enjoyed or even were aware of palindromes. This is not to imply that there were no palindromes in the English language at that time. The earliest known palindromes in the English language include ece, Wulfstan's word meaning "eternal", a word which has reentered our language within

the last two centuries ("habitat")

Reversals

While this may seem to unravel their post- their the riddle. In fact, one commentator quipped, "AGOL ("AGOL"

This riddle is usually solved by means of palindromes. This is sufficiently accurate to indicate a likely solution, but the other parts of the riddle are unsolved. This seems to imply that the author of the riddle practiced a kind of fidelity to the puzzle-poet's original, as the puzzle-poet's scribes were known to have added to their texts fidelity to the original.

"My Wife" What? Take this, and you have an answer to the riddle.

"After..." The suggestion is, of course, full cups, a solution to the riddle.
the name of a (no I, K for the numer-verse, as phthongs.

alyze another the runic book of vowels, seems to have the last twenty years or so, with an entirely different definition ("habitat"). Longer Anglo-Saxon anacyclics include:

- cildlic (childlike)
- cliche (haircloth)
- ciric (church)
- demed (deemed)
- demmed (dammed)
- deped (baptized)
- dered (injured)
- medubum (with mouths)
- nabbann (not to have)
- nacan (boats)
- nafan (naves)

Reversals

While the earliest speakers of English may have been ignorant in their post-barbaric innocence of the treasure-hoard of palindromes in their throaty tongue, they were well aware of the concept of reversals. In fact, one of the riddles bluntly begins:

"AGOF is min noma eft onhwyrfed"
("AGOF is my name turned around again")

This riddle, like the others, is narrated by its solution, personified by means of prosopopoeia, a device used elsewhere by the Anglo-Saxons. This device allowed, among other things, a treatise on marital fidelity to be narrated by a hunk of wood. After its AGOF opening, the riddle goes on to define its answer skirtingly in oblique allusions. This seems altogether unnecessary, as the first line makes it clear that the answer is FOGA, the reversal of AGOF. One wishes that the practitioners of Old English word-deviltry would have been so lucid, as the word foja does not exist in Old English. However, the puzzle-poser probably knew that in an earlier orthography overworked scribes were wont to write their B in the form of an F. The correct resolution, then, is boga (bow). That this riddle may have been told oftentimes to a highly absorbent crew around a roaring fire surely added to its perplexity. A. J. Wyatt, an early commentator, envisioned the scene much like this:

"My Wyrd, you shoddy scop! Man-Wife-Horse was bad enough! What excuse can you make for your AGOF ging?"

"Take it easy, you heathen illiterate!" rejoins the poet, "What we once wrote F we now write B. Got it?"

After several moments of grunting cogitation, a retainer suggests "We put B for F -- BOGA. Huru! That's a wicked one!"

The poet, upon receiving his share of laughs, foot-stamps and full cups, proudly entertains requests for a second recitation of the riddle.
Acrostics, Etc.

As earlier examples of academically wrenched anagrams suggest, Old English riddles have inspired more than their share of sloppy scholarship. The most extreme case, perhaps, involves the "First Riddle" of the Exeter collection. In a time when the vast majority of Old English poems were unattested as to authorship, scholars strove to attribute as many poems as possible to the pens of the only two stylistics they had names for: Cynewulf and Cyneheard. Such was the fate of the First Riddle. The first word of the poem is leodum (for (my) people). Cyn is a synonym for "people". Therefore, the 19th century mind reasoned, the poem is attributable to Cynewulf, or at least part of him. There is no need to subject the reader to the details of how the -ewulf element was deduced. Simply stated, it incorporates a combination of acrostic and charade patterned after the Old Icelandic method, runes are present, if not the runes themselves their names, and in some instances not their names but synonyms for their names, with liberal emendation wherever necessary.

The sad fact is that the First Riddle is now known not to be a riddle at all, but a mere poem, and is no longer included in the corpus of enigmata. There is no further evidence that the Anglo-Saxons composed acrostics or charades.

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With this brief and somewhat popularized survey of Old English wordplay, it is hoped that the reader has been made aware once again of the extent to which wordplay can be found in the darker pockets of the English language. Though one might oftentimes not guess it, the examples presented in this article are exclusively English. I feel that they are good words, although they might not be considered so by some. Casting aside the negative connotations often associated with words such as "archaic" and "obsolete", one realizes that these words are exalted by the fact that they have withstood the test of time. This ongoing survival makes the criteria often found in today's contests and crossword puzzles (which would value-judge certain words as "good" and others, such as those found in Old English, as "bad") seem momentary and trifling.

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As with any other activity, careful effort must be spent in the appraisal of the words that are found. For example, a word's presence in the English language, whether it is a regular part of the language or something found only in old texts, can have a significant impact on its value. Words like "archaic" and "obsolete" are often used to describe words that are no longer commonly used, but this does not mean that these words are not valuable. On the contrary, they can often be useful in many different contexts.

1. Take a common word and change one letter to make a new word.
   Lest it be 
   it's a common word
   As in this case
   It's a way of trying to see if the word is still spoken.

2. Pluck the word from its context, and give it a new one.
   The word may mean something different in the new context, which can add a new layer of meaning.

3. Take a word's pronunciation and make it sound like another word.
   This can be a difficult task, but it can be done with care.

4. If you are unsure of the word's pronunciation, refer to a dictionary or other reference source.