GAMENUNG MID WORDUM

PAUL REMLEY
Ann Arbor, Michigan

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 trivia-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 dictionarization) 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 flyting-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 harassment (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 muð (mouth), and possibly bring in the subject of one's modor (mother). It might be questioned whether a mago (man) was properly reconciled with his mægð (clan, tribe). And a poet's evocative image of the sand (beach) might well conjure images of sund (swimming). One inspired versifier managed to string together the words lif (life), leof (dear), lufu (love), lof (praise), alyfan (to allow), 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 decades. 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 reference, 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). 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:

"ðær is ece bryne ... ðær is ece gryne, ðær is wanung, granung" ("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 mann (man) was intrinsically filled with man (sin). But any individual wer (man) could hold great wære (faith). Such a hæleð (man) was halig (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 weorod (host), in addition to the whole woruld (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 swat (battle-sweat, blood) in their swaðu (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 logogriph sports an unintelligible series of runes, denoting the Old English terms wynn (joy), is (ice), beorc (birch), eoh (horse), hægel (hail), ac (oak), ðorn (thorn) eoh again, feoh (mon-

ey), æsc (ash), ear (ground), sigel (sun), and peorð (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-æ-ea-s-p. The best anyone has come up with to unravel this is the anagram pea beah-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-cramped 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:

H 5 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-conjured 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 twenty years or so, with an entirely different definition
("habitat"). Longer Anglo-Saxon anacyclics include:

cildlic (childlike)	nagan (not to have)
cilic (haircloth)	naman (names)
ciric (church)	napan (to overwhelm)
demed (deemed)	nesen (saved from)
demmed (dammed)	rodor (heaven)
deped (baptized)	sænæs (promontory)
dered (injured)	salas (ropes)
muðum (with mouths)	seles (halls)
nabban (not to have)	sesses (benches)
nacan (boats)	setes (seats)
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-Sax-
ons. 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 lu-
cid, as the word <u>foga</u> does not exist in Old English. However, the
puzzle-poser probably knew that in an erlier orthography overworked
scribes were wont to write their B in the form of an F. The correct
resolution, then, is <u>boga</u> (bow). That this riddle may have been
told ofttimes to a highly absorbent crew around a roaring fire surely
added to its perplexity. A. J. Wyatt, an early commentator, envis-
ioned the scene much like this:

" My Wyrd, you shoddy <u>scop</u>! Man-Wife-Horse was bad enough!
What excuse can you make for your AGOF ðing?"

" 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 sug-
gests " We put B for F -- BOGA. <u>Huru</u>! 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 stylists 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.