

〈研究ノート〉

## A Departing Spirit: The Sense of Hearing in *Riddle 7*

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旅立つ聖霊—謎詩7における聴覚表現

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**要 旨** アングロ・サクソン文学の中で扱われる動物は、非常に豊かな表現でその特徴が描かれている。作者がどのような特徴を観察するかによって、その動物が表す意味が詩の鑑賞に大きく影響している。*The Exeter Book*には多くの動物が登場する。特に謎詩と呼ばれるジャンルに描かれる動物たちの特徴は、詩の行数が短いだけに、作者の視点が明確に表されている。本稿では、アングロ・サクソン文学でも特に好んで使われる鳥類の中の、「白鳥」の扱われ方に焦点を当て、白鳥が様々な詩の中で「放浪」を表す寓意として扱われていること、そして放浪をイメージさせるものが白鳥の外見ではなく、その出す「音」であることを指摘する。現代人は特に視覚に頼り、白鳥を含め動物の特徴を主にその形状として捉えるが、アングロ・サクソン人の想像力は視覚の圧倒的な情報量を減じ、それ以外の五感、特に聴覚に訴える表現に優れている。本稿で取り上げる謎詩7では、「白鳥」が渡り鳥であるがゆえに、その飛翔する際の羽の音が人々に旅立ちを促すという聴覚に訴える手法が用いられている。

キーワード The Sense of Hearing The Exeter Riddles Swan

*The Exeter Book* contains some inscrutable poems, which are classified as 'riddles' by most scholars. It is a book full of wit and wisdom as exemplified in its variety of religious, heroic, and elegiac themes. However, very few comprehensive studies of the riddles have occurred in this decade; on the contrary, individual riddles have been discussed specifically from an archaeological, literary, or linguistic point of view.<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on *Riddle 7* and the metaphorical meaning of 'swan', and it is one of many attempts to establish a definitive interpretation of the Exeter riddles. To discuss the swan metaphor, Bitterli's etymological research concerning the riddle, perhaps the sole example of the 'swan' argument in recent studies, will be examined and critiqued.<sup>2</sup>

Most scholars currently acknowledge that the meaning of *Riddle 7* is 'swan'.<sup>3</sup> There are three reliable clues that indicate this. Firstly, just like in other respective riddles, a rune is written at the end of the poem; the letter *h* (=C) following *Riddle 7* most likely stands for *cygnus* (swan) in Latin.

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Secondly, the poem accentuates the feathers of a bird, which leads one to believe that the riddle's solution could be avian in nature and likely begin with the letter 'c' (or, alternatively 'n').<sup>4</sup> The following excerpt also seems to support the 'bird' hypothesis:

Hrægl min swigað, þonne ic hrusan trede,  
oppe þa wic buge, oppe wado drefe.  
Hwilum mec ahebbað ofer hæleþa byht  
hyrste mine, ond þeos hea lyft,  
ond mec þwide wolcna strengu  
ofer folc byreð. Frætwe mine  
swogað hlude ond swinsiað,  
torhte singað, þonne ic getenge ne beom  
flode ond foldan, ferende gæst.<sup>5</sup>

My clothing keeps silent, when I walk on the ground,  
or when I stay in the house, or disturb the waters.  
Sometimes take me away over the houses of men  
my decorations, and this high sky,  
and me brings the power of clouds  
over the sons of people. My trappings  
sound loudly and make melody,  
sing splendidly, when I am not resting on  
the waters and the ground, a departing spirit.

The expression that refers to a bird's flight herein is: 'and me brings the power of clouds over the sons of people' (*ond mec þwide wolcna strengu ofer folc byreð*). A similar expression appears in *Riddle 57*, 'A Flying Bird (Swallow)' where it reads: 'This air brings the little creature over the hill-height' (*Ðeos lyft byreð lytle wihte ofer beorghleoþa*).<sup>6</sup> When compared to *Riddle 7*, a modern reader will likely conclude that a bird is the solution to *Riddle 7*, since 'clothing' (*hrægl*) and 'trappings' (*frætwe*) are the subjects of both lines. These two words, no doubt, refer to 'bird feathers' according to the context.

Lastly, an analysis of compound words reveals a possible association between 'swan' and 'feather' in other Old English verses. *The Phoenix* provides the best example of this connection on line 137 'swan's feather' (*swanes feðre*), where the poet states that no other sound on the earth, including a swan's feather, surpasses the beautiful voice of the phoenix. This compound word reflects the fact that a swan's feather is highly valued.

In addition to these supportive elements in the riddle's title, Bitterli observes that *The Exeter Book's* scribe compiled riddles with similar themes into groups when he states, 'The scribe copied a second thematic group, this time consisting of four bird riddles: no.7, the "swan" (OE *swan* - *swon*); no.8, the "nightingale" (OE *nihtegale*); no.9, the "cuckoo" (OE *geac*); and no.10, the "barnacle goose" (MLat. *bernaca* - *bernekke* - *bernecta*).'<sup>7</sup>

Since we have acknowledged that the 'swan' is the most likely answer to *Riddle 7*, let us ponder why the poem describes it so eloquently; why are its feathers so important to an Anglo-Saxon audience? Interestingly, depictions of swans in Anglo-Saxon literature are more aural than visual, and tend to involve the animal's voice and the sounds of its wings. When the swan is not in flight, its clothing (*hrægl*, a metaphor for feathers) remain silent (*swigað*). In contrast, its trappings (*frætwe*, also an allusion to feathers) sound loudly (*swogað hlude*), create a melody (*swinsiað*), and sing splendidly (*torhte singað*) when the swan is flying.<sup>8</sup> The poet intentionally uses these auditory verbs in a specific sequence such as *swogað*, *swinsiað*, and *singað* to evoke his Anglo-Saxon audience's sense of hearing. Regarding the sound of the swan's wings, Bitterli attempts to persuade readers by citing a magnificent discovery of modern sciences when he comments that, 'The Mute Swan is almost always silent—hence its modern name—but when it is flying, its broad wings produce a strong, throbbing noise, described by ornithologists as a "loud, penetrating, rhythmic singing sound resembling *vaou-vaou-vaou*" that is audible for one to two kilometres and is peculiar to this species.'<sup>9</sup> Although Bitterli's discussion of the mute swan's characteristics is thought provoking, it is unnecessary to isolate one species from the others specifically since Anglo-Saxon audiences were incapable of discerning them—a fact that Bitterli admits himself.<sup>10</sup> The most striking attribute of *Riddle 7* is not scientific, but its poetic, aural allusions, which demonstrate the Anglo-Saxons' ability to recognise a swan by its distinctive sound.<sup>11</sup>

To delve deeper into the presence of bird sounds in *The Exeter Book*, we can also examine *The Seafarer* and *The Husband's Message*. Both poems are considered Anglo-Saxon elegies whose characters are vagrants or in exile. In *The Seafarer*, several kinds of birds are used to create an elegiac motif. For example, in lines 20-22, a swan's singing voice prompts the seafarer to recall his acquaintances' laughing in a hall:

(iscaldne wæg.) Hwylum ylfete song  
 dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor  
 ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera,  
 mæw singende fore medodrince.<sup>12</sup>

(the icy-cold way.)<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the swan's song  
 I made myself pleased with, a sea-bird's song  
 and a curlew's voice,<sup>14</sup> instead of people's laughter,  
 A sea-gull is singing, instead of mead-drinking.

The above passage exemplifies Anglo-Saxon appreciation of the swan's 'voice', which included not only the sound of its wings but also the bird's singing. The seafarer states that 'a swan's song' (*ylfete song*) can console his weary heart that is isolated from his friends. In this case, the voice of swan is emphasised just as the other birds' songs are. Although Whitman, as Bitterli cited, argues that the word swan applied only to the mute and not to the whooper (*ylfetu*) swan, this distinction is unimportant.<sup>15</sup> Anglo-Saxon poets were bound to metrical restrictions; the i-sound in '*iscaldne*' (icy-cold) and '*hwilum*' (sometimes) demonstrates how both words could influence the use of '*ylfete*' in line 1. Bitterli also points out the ambiguity of Whitman's stance, noting that although, 'some Anglo-Saxon glossaries make a distinction between *swan* for Latin *olor*, "swan", and *ylfetu*, for Latin *cygnus* "swan". . . this distinction is not consistently maintained.'<sup>16</sup> An Anglo-Saxon audience, just as a contemporary one, would not make a distinction between the two.<sup>17</sup>

Just as the voices of swans, sea-birds, curlews, and sea-gulls in lines 20-22 symbolise a desire to return home, Anglo-Saxon poets tended to associate bird sounds with 'departure'. The cuckoo bird and its encouragement to travel is a well-known example of this, as shown in lines 53-54 of *The Seafarer* when it says, 'Likewise a cuckoo advises with a sad voice, sings the summer-guardian' (*Swylce geac monað geomran reorde, singeð sumeres weard*).<sup>18</sup> The words related to departure, 'on the watery way, far away to depart' (*on flodwegas feor gewitan*; l.52) and 'for the path of exile far away sets forth' (*wræclastas widost lecgað*; l.57) appear both before and after lines 53-54.<sup>19</sup> This demonstrates that the cuckoo's voice symbolizes a yearning to depart for the sea during the summer. *The Husband's Message* provides another example of cuckoo as the harbinger of summer on line 23 when it states, 'so that you should trouble the sea, after you hear on the edge of a hill, sings a sad cuckoo in the woods' (*þæt þu lagu drefde, sibban þu gehyrde on hliþes oran galan geomorne geac on bearwe*).

In *The Wanderer*, the poem's narrator sees a bird and is reminded of exile in line 47, 'bathing are the sea-birds, with wide wings/feathers' (*baþian brimfluglas, brædan feþra*).<sup>20</sup> The same poem contains yet another example of this theme on lines 81b-82a; 'Some are carried off by a bird over the high wave' (*sumne fugel opbær ofer heanne*

holm).<sup>21</sup> In these lines, the bird is depicted as a carrier of the dead, flying over the sea to remove a fallen soldier from the battlefield. Although *The Wanderer's* author does not explicitly mention a bird's sound, he implies that the bird represents a spirit that has departed life.

Returning to the final lines of *Riddle 7*, one can find the clearest example of a metaphorical reference to a bird in the words, 'departing spirit' (*ferende gæst*). Herein, the poet refers to the swan as a departing spirit, simultaneously reminding the audience of the summer, exile, and departure.<sup>22</sup> In this riddle, a swan is represented through the use of sound-expressions; by referring to the sense of hearing, the poet reminds the audience of departing on a journey, evoking their awareness that the swan is a migrant bird. In contrast with modern readers' dependence on the sense of sight, Anglo-Saxon poets' aural imaginations may have been sophisticated enough to craft a riddle as complex as our interpretation suggests.

#### NOTES

- 1 Most earnest attempts to study the Exeter riddles recast them into a modern translation as in Chris McCully, *Old English Poems and Riddles*, Manchester: Carcanet Press (2008), Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Exeter Book Riddles*, London: Enitharmon Press, revised (2008), and Craig Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2011). Since Craig Williamson's edition, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (1977), some of the literary approaches on the Old English riddles as a whole have been proposed in John D. Niles' *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers (2006), Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called: The Old English riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (2009), and Patrick J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*, University Park: Penn State Press (2011).
- 2 Bitterli focuses on the Latin tradition of riddles, and discusses several of the swan's functions in Anglo-Saxon poetry in 'Tell-Tale Birds: The Etymological Principle' in Bitterli (2009), pp.35-56.
- 3 George Krapp and Elliott Dobbie have stated that 'The solution "swan" is accepted by all scholars.' in *The Exeter Book*, in *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III*, New York: Columbia University Press (1936), p.325.
- 4 Krapp and Dobbie indicate the possible reading of the letter as 'n,' mentioning that the idea has also been supported by Trautmann and Förster. See Krapp and Dobbie (1936), p.325.
- 5 Krapp and Dobbie (1936), pp.184-185.
- 6 Several solutions can be found to this riddle including swallows, gnats, starlings, hailstones, rain-drops, storm-clouds, jackdaws, and crows. It seems certain, however, that the object should

- be 'up in the sky', and that it is most plausibly a bird. See Krapp and Dobbie (1936), pp.350-351.
- 7 In the sentences that follow, Bitterli also mentions that, 'Such signs of an ordering hand come as no surprise if we consider that the earlier Anglo-Latin riddle collections already show similar thematic links in their opening items.' See Bitterli (2009), pp.35-36.
  - 8 As to the other occurrences of *hrægl*, *frætwe*, and *hyrste*, see Bitterli (2009), p.43.
  - 9 Bitterli quotes this passage from S. Cramp, et al. eds., *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic*, 9 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press (1977-94), 1:372,377. See Bitterli (2009), p.40.
  - 10 Bitterli observes that 'Until the nineteenth century, however, no distinction was made between the three species, and in Old English they appear to have been indiscriminately referred to as *swan* – *swon* – or *ilfetu* – *ylfetu* – *ylfet(t)e*.' See Bitterli (2009), p.39.
  - 11 Although some other examples of the wings said to produce a musical noise are found in Greek traditions, the feathers are not mentioned in the original Greek poem that *The Phoenix* is based on, as Bitterli points out. See Bitterli (2009), p.41.
  - 12 Krapp and Dobbie (2009), pp.143-144.
  - 13 It is the kenning of the 'sea' in Anglo-Saxon literature.
  - 14 The reading of this Old English word is ambiguous. Any kind of bird can be suggested given its context concerning Anglo-Saxon appreciation of its voices.
  - 15 See Bitterli (2009), p.39.
  - 16 See also Bitterli (2009), p.39.
  - 17 See Note 11.
  - 18 See Krapp and Dobbie (1936), p.144.
  - 19 See Krapp and Dobbie (1936), p.145.
  - 20 See Krapp and Dobbie (1936), p.135.
  - 21 See Krapp and Dobbie (1936), p.136.
  - 22 'Guest' in modern English is another possible interpretation of the word *gæst*. This is a significant idea since swans are regarded as guests to human inhabitants due to their migrant nature.