An Anthology of Medieval English Popular Literature

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Proverbs and Riddles

The proverb and the riddle are two very ancient forms of ‘wisdom literature’, found in the ancient near East (there are examples of both forms in the Bible) and in pre-Conquest Britain (Old English gnomic verses and maxims, and riddles). And both are found throughout the world. The forms of the two seem to be related. It has been suggested that they have the same ‘deep structure’: the proverb is, as it were, an ‘answer’ to the riddle’s unspoken enigmatic and covert question. Certainly they sometimes share the same image or topic: a French riddle asks ‘which of all the household utensils is always readily available?’ [a candlestick], and a proverb remarks ‘a candlestick is always ready for any candle.’ Neither proverbs nor riddles are well-known or frequently used in modern Western societies (at least outside the world of children), but in the Middle Ages they were esteemed and commonly used.

The proverb, ‘a short pithy saying in common recognised use ... some homely truth expressed in a concise and terse manner’ (OED), is constantly used by medieval authors, and often appears in manuscript collections. Proverbs are sometimes attributed to wise sages like Solomon or ‘Alfred’, sometimes said to be in common use, ancient, the property of peasants and rustics. They seem to have existed in both an oral and a written tradition, and to have moved easily from one

1 Gray writes ‘Alfred’ in quotation marks; one might as well put such quotes around other names such as Solomon. Once a figure has acquired a reputation for wisdom, many sayings are ascribed to him (rarely, her) whether he wrote them or not. Gray explains this further, below.
to the other. Some seem to have had their origin in the ‘folk’, others apparently have a ‘literary’ origin (often from the Bible or Aesop). As in modern ‘traditional’ societies, they seem to have had a variety of social and rhetorical uses: in argument and oratory, as a means of making generalisations, as ‘normative’ vehicles of satire, as expressions of social discontent. Some characteristics of the proverb probably appealed to sophisticated authors. For all its firmness in generalising, the proverb’s ‘truth’ does not always prove to be absolute. It often seems to need, or invite, some contextualisation or interpretation. Quite often we find proverbs which express opposing views: dreams are true / dreams are false, for example. This fluidity and flexibility was exploited by writers such as Chaucer. There was a body of ‘proverbial similitudes’ (warm as wool, etc); these as well as common (and perhaps overused) proverbs could be enlivened or revivified by writers, thus in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (2. v. 1276) Pandarus ‘felte iren hot, and he bigan to smite’.²

The examples in this section have been chosen to illustrate briefly some of the characteristics and literary potential of proverbs. We begin with some Early Middle English examples, attributed to figures of wisdom, like King Alfred, then further examples from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The use of proverbs in literary texts is illustrated by the *Owl and the Nightingale*. There was obviously an interest in poems of general wisdom and instruction: moral proverbial verses were sometimes painted as *tituli* in secular buildings like the Percy castles at Leconfield and Wressel, and the sixteenth-century ‘Painted Room’ in Oxford contained a set of the ‘precepts in –ly’ (for example, ‘in the mornynge earlye serve God devoutlye’).³ I have illustrated this briefly with a couple of moral carols. The vividness of some proverbs seems to call for visual depiction. England cannot rival the achievement of the Netherlandish artists, but there is a nice depiction of ‘shoeing the goose’ (that is, performing useless and nonsensical tasks).⁴ We continue with proverbs in epitaphs and end with an extract from the proverb contest

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² Whiting I 160.
³ At no. 3, Cornmarket St; there are other similarly inscribed walls in the vicinity, for example in what is now a Pizza Express in the adjoining Golden Cross.
⁴ A reference to English carvings (there is a similar proverb in French): one is among the choir stalls at Beverley Minster, another at Whaley (Lancs). The latter is captioned: ‘who so melles hym of yat al men dos, let hym cum heir and shoe the gos.’ The feet of geese being driven to market might be dipped in tar to protect them from damage on the road, since they could not be shod. Whiting G 389.
between *Solomon and Marcolfus*, which illustrates many of the qualities of the proverb tradition: its oppositions, and its combination of high-minded wisdom with a crude and vulgar realism.

The Riddle, ‘a question or statement intentionally couched in a dark or puzzling manner, and propounded in order that it may be guessed or answered, especially in pastime; an enigma or dark saying’ (*OED*), seems to imply a kind of contest: an audience is challenged by a questioner. It is not surprising to find that riddle contests are common throughout the world’s traditional societies, and in the history of literature. A riddle will usually have only one answer, though some are ambiguous, encouraging the audience to think of a possible obscene solution (see no. xiv), and perhaps sometimes ‘doubly ambiguous’ with the more literal solution returning to shame the obscene thoughts of the audience? In some of the early riddle-contests ‘pastime’ gives way to a very grim context: the forfeit for failure is death, as in the story of the princess Turandot, who tested her suitors with riddles.⁵ There is a vestige of this remaining in our nos xv & xvi (although, in xv, the threatening fiend is seen off by the maid with some briskness). However, in most, ‘pastime’ seems ever present: the riddles are genuinely ‘demandes joyous’ (see D, below). And there is some delight in the artful and playful strategies which mislead the audience, making a riddle the verbal equivalent of those trick pictures in which a duck may be a rabbit, depending on how we interpret the ‘signs’. Lurking behind the riddle is the rhetorical figure of ‘enigma’ which seems to have fascinated some writers — and some preachers and theologians — presenting the ‘paradoxes of the faith’ or reflecting, like Nicholas of Cusa, on ‘learned ignorance’.⁶

Our selection illustrates something of the nature of the riddle. We begin with examples from manuscripts and early prints, some of them demonstrating that riddles, like proverbs, can have an amazing longevity. In manuscripts, riddles are not recorded in the very large numbers that proverbs are, but they are obviously ‘there’, as is a liking for puzzles (see nos xiii & xiv). Examples of riddle-contests

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⁵ The story of Turandot, famous because of Puccini’s opera, was based on part of a twelfth-century Persian epic.

⁶ Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) contributed to European history and culture notably by his writings on ‘learned ignorance’.
are followed by a number of ‘riddling’ poems, one of which (no. xvii) sounds rather like a nursery rhyme — but has an ‘adult’ conclusion. The religious examples are especially interesting: they include a witty riddling poem on ‘earth’ (no. xxi; compare ‘Remember O man that thou art dust …’, and the proverbial ‘Earth must to Earth’),\(^7\) and a very interesting example (no. xxii) of an enigmatic presentation of a traditional devotional image, the significance of which is gradually revealed by the central figure. We end with a brief example of the way in which enigma was used in narrative.

### A. Proverbs recorded in Manuscripts and Prints

#### i) Proverbs of Alfred\(^8\)

‘Maxims’ were used and collected in pre-Conquest times, and are found in Early Middle English versions. The Anglo-Saxon king was remembered as a wise and learned sage, but there is no evidence that the historical ruler ever produced a collection of proverbs. His name seems to be used rather to confer a certain authority. Alfred’s name is sometimes attached to individual proverbs. The collection (not absolutely fixed), known as the Proverbs of Alfred, is early (perhaps from the twelfth century).

Thus queth\(^9\) Alvred, 
‘Wythute wysdome
Is weole\(^9\) wel unwurth;\(^9\)
For thei o mon ahte\(^9\)
Huntseventi\(^9\) acres,
And he hi hadde sowen\(^9\)
Alle mid reade\(^9\) golde,
And that gold greowe
So gres\(^9\) doth on eorthe,
Nere he\(^9\) for his weole\(^9\)

\(^9\) Whiting E 22.  
\(^8\) These are in Hall’s Selections (vol. 1, pp. 20 & 23; notes in vol. 2).  
\(^9\) MED gives ‘seventy’, citing this text among six other quotations.
A. Proverbs recorded in Manuscripts and Prints

Never the [w]urther,º better off
Buteº he him of frumtheº unless from the beginning
Freond iwrche,º he makes friends
For what is gold bute stonº but stone
Bute if hit haveth wis mon?º unless a wise man possesses it

... Thus queth Alvred,

‘Ne schal tuº nevere thi wif thou must not
By hire wlyteº choose,º beauty choose
For nevere none thinge
That heo to the bryngeth,º which she brings to you (= a dowry)
Ac leorne hire custe,º but learn her qualities
Heo cutheth hi wel sone’º she makes them known very quickly

ii) From The Book of St Albans¹⁰

Too wyves in oon hous, Too cattys and oon mous,
Too doggis and oon boon: Theis shall never accorde in oon.

iii) From MS Balliol 354, the early-sixteenth century book of Richard Hill¹¹

4. It is a sotill mowse, that slepith in the cattis ere
6. A bird in hond is better than thre in the wode
24. Mani hondis makith light werke
23. When the stede is stolen shit [shut] the stable dore
31. Between two stolis [stools] the ars goth to ground

¹⁰ In The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse, no. 309. This and the next (iii) are cited in Simple Forms (see the whole chapter, entitled Proverb); at p. 169, where Gray remarks ‘There is no need to catalogue all the Middle English examples’.
¹¹ EETS ES 101, in section VI Proverbs — a long treasury of proverbs in English and Latin, pp. 128–41. Numbers above are those on Richard Hill’s page 128.
iv) Miscellaneous Proverbs

To trust myche in dremes is ful gret abusion

And alle be hit that sum folkis say To truste on dremys nys but triflle play, Yet oon may mete the dreme wel yn his s[w]evyn As afterward that shalle bifalle him evyn

For al is noght trewe that faire spekyt

Hunger makth hard beanes sweete

Tharfor men seye, and wel ys trowed, ‘The nere [nearer] the cherche, the fyrther fro God’

As it is seide in olde proverb — ‘pore be hangid be the necke, a riche man bi the purs’

Wo [who] wyll have law, must have monye

He that in yowthe no vertu wyll yowes [use] In aeg al honor shall hym refuse

B. Proverbs in Literary Texts

v) The Owl and the Nightingale

The Owl’s answer to the Nightingale’s criticisms (see above, ch. 6, xxvi); vv. 625–38

… Yet thu me telstº of other thinge, accuse
Of mine bridesº seist gabbinge,º chicks you speak falsehood
That horeº nest nis noght clene: their

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12 Whiting D 387, 388.
14 Whiting S 583.
15 A well-known proverb that appears in a number of collections. See Richard Hill’s book, p. 133.
16 Ibid. p. 130. Whiting C 251.
17 Cited (inter al.) in Owst, Literature and Pulpit, p. 43.
18 Spoken by Understanding in an early English morality (Mind, Will and Understanding, aka Wisdom) among the Macro Plays published inter al. by EETS.
19 A common proverb (Whiting Y 30), 1151 in the Index of Middle English Verse.
Hit is fale other wighte imene, to many other creatures common
Vor hors a stable and oxe a stalle for in
Doth al that hom wule thar falle, that will fall from them there
An lutle children in the cradle little
(bothe chorles an ek athele)
doth al that in hore yoethe their youth
That hi vorleteth in hore dugethe give up when they are adults
Wat can that yongling prevent
hit bihede how child
Yif hit misdeth, it is forced to by necessity
hit mod nede does wrong
A vorbisne is olde ivurne proverb
That node maketh old wif urne ... need run
[vv. 679–700]
Ac notheles, yut upe thon, but as against that
Her is to red wo hine kon, here counsel to him that knows
Vor never nis wit so kene is wit so keen
So thane red him is a wene; as when counsel is in doubt
Thanne erest kumed his yephede only then comes cunning
Thone hit is alre mest on drede. when most of all in jeopardy
For Alvered seide of olde quide — Alfred a saying
And yut hit nis of horte islide: still it is not forgotten
‘Wone the bale is alre hecst distress highest of all
Thane is the bote alre necest remedy nearest of all
Vor wit west among his sore, greater
An vor his sore hit is the more.
Vorthi nis nevere a mon redles therefore helpless
Ar his horte bo witles, before without reason
Ac yif he forlost his wit but if loses
Thonne is his redpurs al toslit: counsel-bag cut open
Yif he ne kon his wit atholde preserve
e Ne vint he red in one volde does not find counsel fold (of the bag)

20 See Stanley’s note to this line: the proverb is well known not only in English. His Appendix gives a table of Proverb Literature (pp. 160–3).
21 Gray cites this proverb in his introduction to Sir Aldingar, above; Whiting B 18, 22.
22 See Stanley’s notes to vv. 694 & 696: the ‘bag of tricks’ idea is found in several versions of The Fox and the Cat.
Vor Al[ver]id seide, that wel kuthe —

Evreº he spac mid sothe muthe:

‘Wone the bale is alre hecst

Thanne is the bote alre nest …

[vv. 751–70]

… Wi atuitestuº me mine unstrengthen

An mine ungrete and mine unlengthe,

An seist that ich nam noght strong

Vorº ich nam notherº gret ne long?

Ac thu nostº never wat thu menst,

Bute leseº words thu me lenst:

For ich kanº craft, and ich kan liste,

An tharevore ich am thus thriste.

Ich kan wit and song mani eine,

Ne tristeº ich to non other maine;

Vor sothº hit is that seide Alvred,

‘Ne maiº no strengthe ayen red.’

Oft spetº wel a luteº liste

Thar muche strengthe sholde miste:

Mid luttle strengthe thurgh ginneº

Castel and burg meº mai iwinne;

Mid liste me mai walles felle

An worpe ofº horse knightes snelle,

Uvel strengtheº is lutel wurth,

Ac wisdom [ne wrth never unwrthº] …

23 See Stanley’s note to v. 762 (and to vv. 769–72): this is also the subject of much proverbial wisdom.
vi) A Balade attributed to Squire Halsham

The worlde so wide, th’aire so remuable,\(^9\) changeable
The sely\(^9\) man so litel of stature, helpless
The grove and grounde\(^9\) and clothinge so mutable. earth
The fire so hoote and subtil\(^9\) of nature, ethereal
The water never in oon\(^9\) — what creature the same
That made is of these foure, thus flyttyng,\(^9\) shifting
May stedfast be as\(^9\) here in his lyving?\(^2\) in respect of life

The more I goo the ferther I am behinde,
The ferther behind the ner\(^9\) my ways\(^9\) ende, nearer journey’s
The more I seche the worse kan I fynde,
The lighter leve\(^9\) the lother for to wende,\(^9\) easier to leave more loath to go
The bet\(^9\) y serve the more al out of mynde.\(^9\) better forgotten
Is thys fortune, not I,\(^9\) or infortune? I know not
Though I go lowse,\(^9\) tyed am I with a lune.\(^9\) free leash (for a hawk)

vii) Keep Thy Tongue

Kep\(^9\) thi tunge, thi tunge, thi tunge; guard, watch
Thi wykyd tunge werkit me wo.

Ther is non gres that growit on ground,
Satenas\(^9\) ne peny-round,\(^9\) satin-flower penny-flower, sheep’s bane\(^2\)

Wersse then is a wykyd tunge

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\(^{24}\) In The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse (p. 385, no. 156); a whole poem made from proverbs and proverbial matter. The note (p. 591) says it may be by Lydgate.

\(^{25}\) This is printed in The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse (no. 198).

\(^{26}\) It is not clear from flower-books what these are. Satin-flower (glossed in the anthology as ‘a poisonous plant’) may be honesty, or chickweed; Peny-round is perhaps pennywort, a plant with rounded leaves (OED). An online search finds only a South American ‘satin-flower’; penny-flower may be honesty, and sheep’s bane a species of pennywort.
That spekit bethe\(^{e}\) evyl of frynd and fo.  \(\text{both}\)

Kep thi tunge …

Wykkyd tunge makit\(^{e}\) ofte stryf  \(\text{makes}\)
Betwyxe a good man and his wyf;
Quan\(^{e}\) he shulde lede a merie lyf,
Here qwyte\(^{o}\) sydys waxin ful blo.\(^{o}\)  \(\text{white} \quad \text{livid}\)

Kep thi tunge …

Wykkyd tunge makit ofte stauns,\(^{o}\)  \(\text{dissension}\)
Bothe in Engelond and in Frauns;
Many a man wyt spere and launs
Throw wykkyd tunge to ded\(^{e}\) is do.  \(\text{death}\)

Kep thi tunge …

Wykkyd tunge brekit bon,
Thow the self\(^{o}\) have non;  \(\text{itself}\)
Of his frynd\(^{o}\) he makit his fon\(^{o}\)  \(\text{friend} \quad \text{foes}\)
In every place qwer that he go.

Kep thi tunge …

Good men that stondyn and syttyn in this halle,
I prey you, bothe on and alle
That wykkyd tunges fro you falle,
That ye mowun to hefne go.

Kep thi tunge …

\textbf{viii) Proverbs appear in epitaphs …}^27

Farewell, my frendis! The tide abidith no man:
I moste departe hens, and so shall ye.
But in this passage, the best song that I can

\footnotesize{27 \text{The first of these is in } \textit{Index of Middle English Verse}, no. 765; and see Gray, ‘A Middle English Epitaph’. They include ‘Time and tide wait for no man’, and ‘End comes to the longest day’.
Is *Requiem Eternum*— I pray God grant it me!

When I have endid all myn adversite,
Graunte me in Paradise to have a mancyon.
That shede his blode for my redempcion.

**ix) Most eloquently in the fictional epitaph of Graunde Amour,**

*in Hawes’s Pastime of Pleasure*

O mortall folke, you may beholde and se
How I lye here, somtyme a mighty kyght.
The ende of joye and all prosperyte
Is dethe at last, through his course and might.
For though the day be never so longe
At last the belles ryngeth to evensonge.

**x) Adages as embodiments of ancient wisdom**

In the *Adagia* of Erasmus adages (like later emblems) took on the nature of gnomic utterances, darkly and deeply meaningful, ‘often having inner senses far more moral than it would ever occur to a modern reader to give them’.

**Know Time**

*Nosce Tempus*: know time. Opportunitie is of such force that of honest it maketh unhonest, of damage avauntage, of pleasure grevaunce, of a good turne a shrewd turne, and contrarywyse of unhonest honest, of avauntage damage, and brefly to conclude it cleane chaungeth the nature of thynges.

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28 Rest Eternal, a phrase from the burial service. Medieval Latin is often incorrect (it would normally read *eternam*).
29 Stephen Hawes, *The Pastime of Pleasure* (there are a number of editions), in Chapter XLII.
30 Erasmus, *Adages*, trans. Phillips *et al*. Other editions, of selected Adages, may be consulted.
31 From Taverner’s *Proverbs and Adages*, cited in *Simple Forms*, p. 170.
In the Old English period the dialogues of the rival sages Solomon and Saturn present a debate. In the late Middle Ages Solomon’s opponent was his parodist, the ugly, churlish Marcolphus, whose earthy proverbs are modelled on the proverbial lore of the peasants, and present a world view quite opposed to that of the king. The Latin version appeared in vernacular form; the English version of Leeu was printed at Antwerp in 1492.

Upon a season heretofore as king Salomon, full of wisdom and richesse, sate upon the kings sete or stole [throne] that was his fadres Davyd, sawe coming a man out of th’Este that was named Marcolphus, of visage greatly myshapen and fowle; nevyrethe lesse he was right talkatyf, elloquend, and wyse. His wif had he wyth hym, whiche was more ferefull and rude to beholde. This Marcolf was of short stature and thykke. The head had he great; a brode forhede rede and full of wrinkelys or frouncys [creases]; his erys hery [hairy] and to the myddys of chekys hangyng; great yes [eyes] and rennyng; his nether lyppe hangyng lyke an horse; a berde harde and fowle lyke unto a gote; the hands short and blockyssh [gross]; his fyngres great and thycke; rounde feet and the nose thycke and croked; a face lyke an asse, and the here of his heed lyke the heer of a gote. His shoes on his fete were ovyrmoche chorlyssh and rude, and his clothys fowle and dirty; a short cote to the buttockys; his hosyn hinge [hung] full of wrynkelys, and alle his clothes were of the moost fowle colore …

... Salomon sayde, ‘I have herd of the that thou kanst right wele clatre [chatter] and speke, and that thou art subtyle of wyt, although that thou be myshapyn and chorlyssh. Lete us have betwene us altercacion. I shal make questyons to the, and thou shalt therto answere.’ Marcolfus answeryd, ‘He that singyth worste begynne furste.’ Salomon: ‘If thou kanst answere to alle my questyons I shall make the ryche, and be named above all other withyn my reaume.’ Marcolphus: ‘The physician promysyth the seeke folke helthe whan he hath no power.’ Salomon: ‘I have juged betwixt two light women whiche dwellyd in oon house and forlaye [smothered] a chylde.’ Marcolphus: ‘Were erys [ears] are, there are causes; where women be, there are wordys.’ Salomon: ‘God yave wysdam in my mouth; for me lyke is none in all partys of the worlde.’ Marcolphus: ‘He that hath evyll neighborys praysyth himself.’ Salomon: ‘The wykkyd man fleyth, no man folwynyg.’ Marcolphus: ‘Whan the kydde rennyth, men may se his ars.’ Salomon: ‘A good wyf and a fayre is to hir husbonde a pleasure.’ Marcolphus: ‘A potfull of mylke muste be kepte wele from the katte …’

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32 Brewer tells us that characters such as the Parson of Kalenborowe, and Owlglass, developed from the Marcolf figure (Medieval Comic Tales, p. xxvi).

33 For this text, see The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf, eds Bradbury and Bradbury.
[Because of the king’s hostility, Marcolphus flees and hides in an old oven, having made footprints in the snow with the foot of a bear. When these are discovered the king sets out hunting and is led to the oven …]

… The king Salomon descended from hys hors, and began to loke into the oven. Marcolphus laye all crokyd, hys visage from hymwarde; had put downe hys breche into hys hammes that he might se hys arshole and alle hys other fowle gere. As the king Salomon, that seyng, demawnded what laye there, Marcolphus answeryd, ‘I am here.’ Salomon: ‘Wherefore lyest thou thus?’ Marcolphus: ‘For ye have commanded me that ye shulde nomore se me betwixt myn yes. Now and ye woll not se me betwixt myn yes, ye may se me between my buttockys in the myddes of myn arsehole.’ Than was the king sore movyd [provoked]; commanded his servauntyys to take him and hange hym upon a tre. Marcolphus so takyn sayde to the kyng: ‘My lord, well it please you to yeve me leve to chose the tre whereupon that I shall hange.’ Salomon sayde, ‘Be it as thou hast desired, for it forcyth not on what tre that thou be hangyd.’ Than the kynges servauntes token and leddyng Marcolph wythoute the citie and through the vale of Josaphath, and ovr the hyghte of the hylle of Olyete from thens to Jericho, and cowde fynde no tre that Marcolf wolde chese to be hanged on. From thens went they ovr the flome Jordane, and all Arabye through, and so forth all the grete wyldernesse unto the Rede See, and nevyrmore cowde Marcolph fynde a tre that he wolde chese to hange on. And thus he askapyd out of the dawnger and hands of King Salomon, and turnyd ayen unto hys house and levyd in pease and joye.

D. Riddles

xii) From the Demaundes Joyous (1511)\(^{34}\)

3) Who was Adams moder? (the earth)
4) What space is from the hyest space of the se to the deepest? (but a stone’s cast)
6) How many calves tayles behoveth to reche from the erthe to the skye? (one, if it’s long enough)
9) Whiche parte of a sergeaunte love ye best towarde you? (his heels)
11) Which is the moost profitable beest, and that men eteth leest of? (bees)
12) Which is the broadest water and leest jeopardye to passe over? (dew)

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\(^{34}\) These are printed in [Solomon] The Dialogue of Salomon and Saturnus, ed. Kemble, pp. 287–92; there are fifty-four Demaundes (including these thirteen), with answers. See also The Demaundes Joyous, ed. Wardroper.
15) Why dryve men dogges out of the chyrche? (because they make no offering)

16) Why come dogges so often to the churche? (because they think the altar-cloth is a table-cloth, for dinner)

19) What beest is it that hath her tayle bytweene her eyen? (a cat washing its bottom)

25) Wherfore set they upon chyrche steples more a cocke than a henne? (if a hen laid eggs up there, they would fall)

41) Which was first, the henne or the egge? (the hen, when God made her)

42) Why doth an ox or a cowe lye? (because it cannot sit)

45) What tyme in ther yere bereth a gose moost feders? (when the gander is on her back)

xiii) A Puzzle

Water frosen, Caines brother; So hight my leman, and no other.35

xiv) A Riddle with ambiguous solution36

I have a hole above my knee And pricked yt was and pricked shal be
And yet yt is not sore And yet yt shal be pricked more.

E. Riddle Challenges

xv) The Devil and the Maid37

Wol ye here a wonder thynge
Betwyxt a mayd and the foule fende?

Thys spake the fend to the mayd:
‘Belove on me, mayd, today.

35 That is, Yssabel: Ice and Abel; in The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse, no. 332 ii.
36 Cited, with references and solution (a sheath) in Simple Forms, p. 185.
37 Inter diabolus et virgo, Child no. 1. Gray follows the version in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS. D. 328, fol. 174 b, which he may have edited himself.
Mayd, mote y\(^o\) thi leman\(^o\) be,  
Wyssedom y wolle teche the:

All the wyssedom off the world,  
Hyf thou wolt be true and forward\(^o\) holde,

What ys hyer than ys [the] tre?  
What ys dypper\(^o\) than ys the see?

What ys scharpper than the thorne?  
What is loder\(^o\) than the horne?

What [ys] longger than ys the way?  
What ys rader\(^o\) than ys the day?\(^o\)

What [ys] bether\(^o\) than is the bred?  
What ys scharpper than ys the dede?\(^o\)

What ys grenner than ys the wode?  
What ys sweeter than ys the note?\(^o\)

What ys swifter than ys the wynd?  
What ys richer than ys the kynge?

What ys yeluer\(^o\) than ys the wex?\(^o\)  
What [ys] softer than ys the flex?\(^o\)

But\(^o\) thou now answer me,  
Thou schalt for sothe\(^o\) my leman be.'

‘Jesu, for thy myld[e]\(^o\) myght,  
As thu art kynge and knight,

Lene\(^o\) me wisdom to answere here ryghth,  
And schylde me fram the foule wyghth.\(^o\)
Heweneº ys heyer than ys the tre,  
Helle ys dypper than ys the see.

Hongyr ys scharpper than [ys] the thorne.  
Thonder ys lodder than ys the horne.

Loukyngeº ys longer than ys the way,  
Synº ys rader than ys the day,

Godys flesseº ys betur than ys the brede,  
Payne ys strenger than ys the dede.º

Gras ys grenner than ys the wode,  
Love ys swetter than ys the note.

Thowtº ys swifter than ys the wynde,  
Jesus ys richer than ys the kynge.

Saferº ys yeluer than ys the wexs,  
Selke ys softer than ys the flex.

Now, thu fende, stylº thu be;  
Nelle ichº speke no more with the!'  

---

**xvi) King John and the Bishop**³⁸

Off an ancient story Ile tell you anon,  
Of a notable prince that was called King John,  
In England was borne, with maine and with might;  
Hee did much wrong and maintained litle right.  
This noble prince was vexed in veretye,º  
For he was angry with the Bishopp of Canterbury;  
For his house-keeping and his good cheere,  
Theº rode post for him, as you shall heare.

---

They rode post for him very hastilye;
The king sayd the bishopp kept a better house than hee:
A hundred men even, as I [heard] say,
And fifty gold chaines, without any doubt,
In velvet coates waited the bishop about.
The bishopp, he came to the court anon,
Before his prince that was called King John.
As soone as the bishopp the king did see,
‘O,’ quoth the king, ‘Bishopp, thow art welcome to mee.
There is noe man soe welcome to towne
As thou that workes treason against my crowne.’
‘My leege,’ quoth the bishop, ‘I wold it were knowne
I spend, your grace, nothing but that that’sº my owne;
I trust your grace will doe me noe deareº harm
For spending my owne trew gotten geere.’º property
‘Yes,’ quoth the king, ‘Bishopp, thou must needs dye,
Eccept thou can answere mee questions three,
Thy head shalbe smitten quite from thy bodye,
And all thy living remayne unto mee.
First,’ quoth the king, ‘tell me in this steade,º
With this crowne of gold here upon my head,
Amongst my nobilitye, with joy and much mirth,
Lett me know within one pennye what I am worth.
Secondlye, tell me without any dowbt
How soonº I may goe the whole world about;
And thirdly, tell mee orº ever I stinte,º before stop
What is the thing, bishop, that I doe thinke.
Twenty dayes pardon thoustº have trulye, you shall
And come againe and answere mee.’
The bishop bade the king god night attº a word;
He rode betwixt Cambridge and Oxenford,
But never a doctor there was soe wise
Cold shew him these questions or enterprise.
Wherewith the bishopp was nothing gladd,
But in his hart was heavy and sadd.
And hyed him home to a house in the countye,
To ease some part of his melancholye.
His half-brother dwelt there, was fierce and fell,
Noe better but a shepherd to the bishoppe himself;
The shepherd came to the bishopp anon,
Saying, ‘My lord, you are welcome home!
What ayles you,’ quoth the shepherd, ‘that you are soe sadd,
And had wonte to have beene soe merry and glad?’
‘Nothing,’ quoth the bishopp, ‘I ayle att this time;
Will not thee availe to know, brother mine.’
‘Brother,’ quoth the shepheard, ‘you have heard itt,
That a foole may teach a wiseman witt;
Say me therefore whatsoever you will,
And if I doe you noe good, Ile doe you noe ill.’
Quoth the bishop, ‘I have beene att the court anon,
Before my prince is called King John.
And there he hath charged mee
Against his crowne with traitorye.
If I cannott answer his misterye,
Three questions hee hath propounded to mee,
He will have my land soe faire and free.
And alsoe the head from my bodye.
The first question was to tell him in that stead,
With the crowne of golde upon his head,
Amongst his nobilitye, with joy and much mirth,
To lett him know within one penye what hee is worth.
And secondlye to tell him without any doubt
How soone he may goe the whole world about,
And thirdlye to tell him, or ere I stint,
What is the thinge that he does thinke.’
‘Brother,’ quoth the shepard, ‘you are a man of learninge;
What neede you stand in doubt of soe small a thinge?
Lend me,’ quoth the shepard, ‘your ministersº apparel,
Ile ryde to the court and answere your quarrel.’º
The shepard hee came to the court anon
Before [his] prince that was called King John.
As soone as the king the shepard did see,
‘O,’ quoth the king, ‘Bishopp, thou art welcome to me.’
The shepard was soe like the bishopp his brother,
The king cold not know the one from the other.
Quoth the king, ‘Bishopp, thou art welcome to me
If thou can answer me my questions three.’
Said the shepard, ‘If it please your grace,
Show me what the first quest[i]on was.’
‘First,’ quoth the king, ‘tell mee in this stead,
With the crowne of gold upon my head,
Amongst my nobilitye, with joy and much mirth,
Within one penny what I am worth.’
Quoth the shepard, ‘To make your grace noe offence,
I thinke you are worth nine and twenty pence,
For our lord Jesus, that bought us all,
For thirty pence was sold into thrall
Amongst the cursed Jewes, as I to you doe showe —
But I know Christ was one penny better then you.’
Then the king laught, and swore by St Andrew
He was not thought to bee of such a small value.
‘Secondlye, tell mee without any doubt
How soone I may goe the world round about?’
Saies the shepard, ‘It is noe time with your grace to scorne,
But rise betime with the sun in the morne,
And follow his course till his oprising,
And then you may know without any leasing,
And this [to] your grace shall prove the same,
You are come to the same place from whence you came
[In] twenty-four houres, without any doubt.
Your grace may the world goe round about,
The world round about, even as I doe say,
If with the sun you can goe the next way.’
‘And thirdlye tell me or ever I stint,
What is the thing, bishoppe, that I doe thinke?’
‘That shall I doe,’ quoth the shepheard, ‘for veretye,
You thinke I am the bishopp of Canterburye.’
‘Why, art not thou? The truth tell to me,
For I doe thinke soe,’ quoth the king, ‘by St Marye.’
‘Not soe,’ quoth the shepheard, ‘the truth shalbe knowne:
I am his poore shepheard, my brother is att home.’
‘Why,’ quoth the king, ‘if itt soe bee,
Ile make thee bishopp here to mee.’
‘Noe, sir,’ quoth the shepard, ‘I pray you be still,
For Ile not bee bishopp but against my will,
For I am not fit for any such deede,
For I can neither write nor reede.’
‘Why then’ quoth the king, ‘Ile give thee cleere
A patentº of three hundred pound a yeere:/licenced privilege
That I will give thee franke and free;º/unconditionally
Take thee that, shepard, for coming to me,
Free pardon Ile give,’ the kings grace said,
‘To save the bishopp, his land and his head;
With him nor thee Ile be nothing wrath;
Here is the pardon for him and thee both.’
[He takes it back to the bishop, whose heart is ‘of a merry cheere’; the shepherd
announces that he will no longer ‘crouch nor creep’ before him, nor keep his sheep.]

F. Poetic Uses of Enigma

xvii) I have a yong susterº

I have a yong suster
Fer beyondyn the se,
Many be the drowryisº/love tokens
That cheº sente me. 

39 In The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse, no. 192.
Che sente me the cherye
Withoutyn ony ston,
And so che ded\(^o\) the dowe\(^o\) did dove
Withoutyn ony bon.

Sche sente me the brer\(^o\)
Withoutyn ony rynde\(^o\)
Sche bad me love my lemman\(^o\)
Withoute longgyng.

How shuld ony cherye
Be withoute ston?
And how shuld ony dowe
Be withoute bon?

How shuld ony brer
Ben withoute rynde?
How shuld [y] love myn lemman
Without longyng?

Quan the cherye was a flour,
Than hadde it non ston.
Quan the dowe was an ey\(^o\) egg
Than hadde it non bon.

Quan the brer was onbred,\(^o\) unbred (= still in seed)
Than hadde it non rynd.
Quan the maydyn hath that che lovit,
Che is without longing
Religious writings sometimes make use of ‘enigma’.

xviii)\(^{40}\)

Byhalde merveylis: a mayde ys moder.
Her sone her fader ys and broder;
Lyfe faught with dethe and dethe is slayne;
Most high was lowe — he styghe\(^{6}\) agayne. \textit{rose up}

xix)\(^{41}\)

A God, and yet a man?
A mayde, and yet a mother?
Witt wonders what witt can
Conceave this or the other.

A God, and can he die?
A dead man, can he live?
What witt can well replie?
What reason reason give?

God, Truth itselife doth teache it;
Mans witt sinkes too farr under,
By reasons power to reach it —
Believe, and leave to wonder.

xx)\(^{42}\)

\textit{Mirabile misterium};\(^{43}\)

In forme of bred ys Godes Son.

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\(^{40}\) In \textit{A Selection of Religious Lyrics}, no. 71.
\(^{41}\) \textit{Ibid.} no. 72.
\(^{42}\) In the \textit{Digital Index of Middle English Verse}, no. 3379, A Song of the Host.
\(^{43}\) Miraculous mystery.
Man, that in erth abydys here,  
Thou must beleve withouten d[e]re⁰  
without difficulty  
In the sacrament of the auter  
That God made hymself at hys soper.  
  Mirabile …

Thowgh yt seme whit, yt ys rede,  
Yt ys flesshe, yt semeyth⁰ bred,  
appears to be  
Yt ys God in his manhed,  
As he hong upon a tre.  
  Mirabile …

Thys bred ys brokyn for you and me  
Which priestes consecrate, as ye may se,  
Which, flesshely man in Deite,  
Dyed for us upon a tre.  
  Mirabile …

Erthe toc of erthe erthe wyth woh,  
Erthe other erthe to the erthe droh,⁰  
drew  
Erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh,⁰  
pit  
Tho hevede⁰ erthe of erthe erthe ynoh,⁰  
had sufficient

xxi)⁴⁴

xxii) The first sixty lines of a religious visionary poem.⁴⁵

The meaning of the enigmatic images gradually becomes clear. This poem also provides an introduction to our following section.

In the vaile of restles mynd  
I sowght in mownteyn and in mede,⁰  
meadow  
Trustyng a treulofe⁰ for to fynd.  
truelove

⁴⁴ In A Selection of Religious Lyrics, ed. Gray, no. 86a; Whiting E 22.  
⁴⁵ Ibid. no. 43 (pp. 41–5).
Upon an hyll than toke I hede, took I heed
A voyse I herd (and nere I yede) nearer I went
In gret dolour complaynyng thro, grief then
‘See, dere soule, my sydes blede.

Quia amore langueo. because I languish for love

Upon this mownt I fand a tree, found
Under thys tree a man sittyng;
From hede to fote wowndyd was he, wounded
His hert blode I saw bledyng,
A semely man to be a kyng
A gracioso face to loke unto.
I askyd hym how he had paynyng, suffering

He said, ‘Quia amore langueo.

I am treulove, that fals was never.
My sister, mannys soule, I loved hyr thus;
Bycause I wold on no wyse dissevere part
I left my kyngdome gloriouse.
I purveyd hyr a paleis preciouse,
She flytt, I folowyd, I luffed her soo
That I suffred thes paynes piteuouse

Quia amore langueo.

My faire love, and my spouse bryght.
I saved hyr fro betyng, and she hath me bett; beaten
I clothed hyr in grace and hevenly lyght,
This blody surcote she hath on me sett. surcoat
For langyng love I will not let love-longing give up
Swete strokys be thes, loo!
I haf loved ever als I hett, as I promised

Quia amore langueo.

I crownyd hyr with blysse, and she me with thorne,
I led hyr to chamber, and she me to dye;
I brought hyr to worship,\(^o\) and she me to skorne, \(h\)onour
I dyd hyr reverence, and she me velanye.\(^o\) \(sh\)ame
To love that loveth is no maistrye,\(^o\) \(is\ no\ hard\ thing\)
Hyr hate made never my love hyr foo\(^o\) — \(f\)oe
Ask than no moo\(^o\) questions whye, \(m\)ore

Quia amore langueo.

Loke unto myn handys, man!
Thees gloves were geven\(^o\) me whan I hyr sowght; \(g\)iven
They be nat white, but rede and wan,\(^o\) \(l\)eaden-coloured
Embrodred\(^o\) with blode (my spouse them bowght!); \(e\)mbroidered
They wyll not of\(^o\) — I lefe them nowght!\(^o\) \(I\ do\ not\ take\ them\ off\)
I wowe\(^o\) hyr with them where ever she goo.\(^o\) \(w\)oo \(g\)oes
Thees hands full friendly for hyr fowght,

Quia amore langueo.

Marvell not, man, thof\(^o\) I sitt styll — \(t\)hough
My love hath shod me wondyr strayte,\(^o\) \(w\)ondrously tight
She boklyd\(^o\) my fete, as was hyr wyll, \(b\)uckled
With sharp nailes (well thou maist waite!)\(^o\) \(m\)ay observe
In my love was never dissaite,\(^o\) \(d\)eceit
For all my membres I haf opynd hyr to;\(^o\) \(o\)pened to her
My body I Made hyr hertys baite,\(^o\) \(b\)ait for her heart

Quia amore langueo.

In my syde I haf made hur nest —
Loke\(^o\) in me, how wyde a wound is here! — \(l\)ook
This is hyr chamber, here shall she rest,
That she and I may slepe in fere\(^o\) ‘\(t\)ogether

G. Enigma in Narrative

Middle English literature provides numerous examples, but it is difficult to illustrate this briefly. In romances, protagonists are sometimes confronted with ‘hard questions’ (like ‘what is it that women most
desire?’) which determine the movement of the plot. Romances often have mysterious figures, sometimes with enigmatic names; sometimes nameless, or apparently visitants from the Otherworld or shape-shifters (like the Green Knight); they contain enigmatic scenes or events (as in *Huon of Burdeux* when the ship approaches a mysterious ‘high rock’ surmounted by a thick wood and a high castle with towers of alabaster — which turns out to be the rock of Adamant with the masts of wrecked ships and the bones of their crews). We end therefore with a shorter ‘narrative’, in the famous Corpus Christi Carol, where there has been considerable argument over the interpretation.

xxiii) The ‘Corpus Christi Carol’

Lully, lulley; lully, lulley,
The fawconº hath born my makº away.  \textit{falcon} \textit{mate}

He bare hym up, he bare hym down,
He bare hym into an orchard brown,
   Lulley ...

In that orchard ther was an hall,
That was hangid with purpill and pallº \textit{rich purple fabric}
   Lulley ...

And in that hall ther was a bede;
Hit was hangid with gold so rede.
   Lulley ...

And yn that bed thyr lythe a knyght,

\begin{itemize}
\item \text{46} In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.
\item \text{47} In *Huon of Burdeux*, ed. Lee, p. 370 ff.
\item \text{48} It is difficult to decide whether we are dealing with a self-conscious use of enigma involving a fusion of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’, or whether it is the result of changes or attempts at clarification which occurred during the transmission of a mysterious poem about the body of a dead knight. Compare the modern variants in our chapter Ballads (ix), Three Ravens, and the Scottish carol in the Appendix (xii).
\item \text{49} In *The Oxford Book of Medieval Verse*, p. 524 (no. 247). *Corpus Christi* means Body of Christ.
\end{itemize}
His wounds bleding day and nyght.
  Lulley ...

And by that bedes side ther kneleth a may, maid
And she wepeth both nyght and day.
  Lulley ...

And by that beddes side ther stondith a ston,
'Corpus Christi' wretyn theron,
  Lulley ...