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<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>文化学園大学紀要 人文・社会科学研究 23(2015-01) pp.61-67</td>
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<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>2015-01-31</td>
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Poetic Connotations of Clothes in the Anglo-Saxon Period (Part 1):
Examples from the Riddles in the Exeter Book

Naoko Shirai

According to The Oxford English Dictionary, the word for ‘clothes’ (wæd) first appeared in King Alfred’s Boethius (c888). The editor interprets wæd as ‘a garment’ in this context as, ‘Although now the unrighteous king Neron aroused himself, with all his radiant clothes’ (Đeah nu se unrihtwisa cynig Neron hine ʒescyrpʒe mid eallum þam ʒestum wædum). As wæd is likely to be the etymological origin of the modern word ‘weed,’ it seems valid to interpret the literal meaning of the word as ‘a garment.’¹ However, in poetry, there are contextual differences in the usage of wæd, as a both a singular and compound word, that reveal the semantic range of the term in Anglo-Saxon English. This is particularly true of its usage in the Riddles of the Exeter Book, where many of the secular poems are concerned with domestic items such as furnishings, cattle, animals, and nature. Most of the poems utilize prosopopoeia and conclude with the

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exhortation to ‘Say what I am called.’ Thus a study of everyday objects and scenes from the literature of the time may reveal an insight into Anglo-Saxon thinking.

The meaning of wæd in the early Anglo-Saxon period is usually interpreted as ‘a suit of clothes’; however, by the year 1000, it became the collective noun ‘clothing’ and was extended into metaphorical meaning as ‘covering’ by 1200. This indicates that the meanings attributed to wæd are more complex than provided by the OED and this article will explicate its usage in the Riddles and compare its secular meaning with its religious connotations.

To begin, the famous Riddle 9 is significant, because its solution, which is agreed to be, ‘cuckoo,’ provides an example of wæd in an explicit context. In this poem, a mother bird is covering a baby cuckoo with her ‘clothes’ in the nest. The chick is fostered by its false mother who, personified as a woman, embraces and protects it. As the cuckoo says:

Mec on þissum dagum  deaden ofgeafun
fæder ond modor;  ne wæs me feorh þa gen,
ealdor in innan.  Pa mec an ongon
welhold mege  wedum þeccan,
heold ond freoðode.  hleosceorpe wrah,
swa arlice  swa hire agen bearn,
obþæt ic under sceate— swa min gesceapu væron —
ungleðum wearð  eacen gæste.  

Me in these days, abandoned dead
Father and Mother, still no life in me
life inside. Then one began for me
the very faithful, covered with clothes,
held and protected, covered with a protecting garment,
so kindly, as her own child,
until I under her bosom, so my fates were,
unrelated became the mighty spirit.

In this riddle, ‘with clothes’ (wedum) implies a ‘covering’ for the chick, as the instrumental for the verb ‘covered’ (þeccan). Together with ‘covered with a protecting garment’ (hleosceorpe wrah), this may elicit a basic connotation of ‘covering’ in other riddles in which the word wæd appears. It will also prove useful to compare wæd with hrægl (trappings), one of the synonyms for ‘garment’ in Old English.

Interestingly, the next exemplar of wæd appears in another bird song, Riddle 40 where it is
given the connotation of ‘cover’ or ‘hidden’ in clothing. Here, the phrase *wlanc under wædum* can be interpreted as ‘with a pride hidden under her clothes’ as follows:

Ic seah wyhte    wrætllice twa
undearnunga    ute plegan
hæmedlaces;     hwitloc anfeng,
wlanc under wædum,    gif þæs weorces speow,
fæmne fyllo.    (1-5a)

Here, the mating cock and the hen, the solution of the riddle, are personified to make a match and breed their offspring. The solution to the riddle is suggested by the final line: a woman to fullness (*fæmne fyllo*). Moreover, the key phrase *wlanc under wædum* refers to the hen, a woman, who probably hid (covered) her swollen belly under her feathers (clothes). The first three lines of the riddle indicate the match as ‘the marriage-game’ where, in the woman’s resulting pregnancy, a baby (fullness) under the clothes, *wæd* is used as the word for covering.

Although its form is not exactly the same as *wæd*, the word *gewæde* in the following riddle provides another exemplar of ‘covering.’ *Riddle 35*, whose solution is a mail coat, has two examples of *gewæde* that provide it with the clear connotation of ‘protection,’ particularly in the combination with the word ‘hopeful’ (*hyhtlic*) in line 12b as follows.⁶

Wyrmas mec ne awæfan    wyrda cræftum,
þa þe geolo godwebb    geatwum frætwæð.
Wile mec mon hwæþre sæþeah    wide ofer eorþan
hatan for hæleþum    hyhtlic gewæde.
Saga soðcwidum    searoponcum gleaw,
wordum wisfæst,    hwæt þis gewæde sy.    (9-14)

The worms did not weave me, with the power of speech,
then the yellow precious web, adorned with ornaments,
Desires me the man, however, wide over the earth
command in front of men, a hopeful garment.
Say with a true word, with clever ingenuity,
Wise in words, what this garment is.

Here, lines 9-11 suggest that the speaker might not be referring to silk woven clothes, but a different kind of clothing. The phrase hyhtlic gewæde ‘a hopeful garment’ suggests the clothes should be strong enough to protect a person against an attack because hyhtlic is added to the connotation of gewæde, the garment, as an implicit ‘covering of a body.’

Just as the final instance of wæd in this riddle is interpreted as ‘covering,’ The Phoenix contains a close association of wæd with a covering cloth. Although the poem is one individual song in the Exeter Book, it contains an expedient compound expression to suggest that wæd is metaphorically employed to describe the frost and the snow that covers the earth in winter.7 As the poet says:

þær hi wraðe metað,
fodorþege gefean. þonne forst ond snaw
mid ofermægne eorþan þeccað
wintergewædem. (247b-250a)8

there she encountered an anger,
little food, when frost and snow
with power, covered the earth
with the garment of winter.

Here, the compound phrase ‘with the garment of winter’ (wintergewæadem) is an analogy for ‘frost and snow’ that ‘covered the earth’ (eorþan þeccað), and ‘the garment of winter’ is almost a kenning of ‘frost and snow’ in Old English poetry. This part of The Phoenix as a seasonal poem focuses on the harsh winter of northern Europe and the joy of expecting spring. Accordingly, wæd is also closely related to winter in the form of a compound with ‘cover’ (þeccað) in this context.

The connotations of wæd as a protective cover also has religious significance found in biblical references to clothing. A common phrase in the bible, ‘tearing one’s clothes’ symbolises a particular feeling for the Hebrews such as ‘lamentation,’ ‘despair,’ ‘pain,’ or ‘anger.’9 Although this idea is found in some of religious poems of the Exeter Book, such as Juliana 595b, the word hrægl ‘trappings’ is preferred instead of wæd. A remarkable example of wæd, however, is also seen in the biblical poems in the Exeter Book. In the end of Azarias, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of
Babylonia, cruelly orders a group of young men be burnt to death, but God protects them from
the fire. Significantly, \textit{wæd} symbolises their defence against the flames personified as evil as
follows:

\begin{quote}
Ne forhogodon þæt þa halgan, siþðan hi hwætmode
woruldcyninges weorn gehyrdon,
ac eodon of þam fyre, feorh unwemme,
wuldre gewlitegad, swa hyra wædum ne scod
gifre gleda nið. \hfill (184-188a)
\end{quote}

The holy did not neglect, since the brave ones
of the king of the world, the words they heard
against the fire, their lives intact,
embellished with the glory, therefore did not harm their clothes
The greedy, evil fire.

Here, the word of God protects the brave, and the greedy evil fire does not harm the \textit{wæd}, the
clothes that covered them; and an implicit metaphor pertains between the protective word of
God and \textit{wæd}. A similar usage of \textit{wæd} as protection from fire is also found in \textit{Azarias, Juliana}
591b where a holy woman is also put to the torch. However, as the text reveals, the flames could
not damage her ornament, garments, hair, skin, body, or limbs (\textit{Næs hyre wloð ne hrægl, ne feax
ne fel fyre gemæled, ne lic ne leoþu}).\textsuperscript{10} As it is clear from the Old English lines, the author of
\textit{Juliana} prefers the word \textit{hrægl} in this context.\textsuperscript{11} Furthermore, here \textit{hrægl} as ‘trappings’
connotes the protection of the woman’s beauty, which remained intact, ‘Then, the female saint
still stood, her beauty uninjured’ (\textit{Đa gen sio halge stod ungewemde wlite}).\textsuperscript{12}

In conclusion, it should be noted that there are not as many examples of the word ‘clothes’ in
the \textit{Riddles} as expected from a work that purportedly concerns the everyday, and \textit{wæd} as
garment seems to have been given a metaphorical connotation as both covering and protection
as evidenced by the \textit{Exeter Book}. Some critics argue that the word should be interpreted
alliteratively since Old English poems are composed in metrics. However, determining the
meanings of \textit{wæd} would require comparison with other examples of Old English terminology for
clothing and this exercise is sometimes very limited. For example, Williamson (1977) restricts
\textit{wæd} to denote ‘garment, and dress.’\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, as shown in this article, there is a rich vein
of metaphorical uses of \textit{wæd} as ‘covering’ in the \textit{Riddles}, which is further extended to ‘protection’
by the use of \textit{hrægl}. Further research on the biblical references in the \textit{Exeter Book} when read
intertextually with the Latin texts on which they are based is required to fully explicate the
metaphorical meanings of *wæd* as clothing.

NOTES

1. *Wæd* as ‘weed’ was an archaic word for clothing and was used to refer to a person’s sex, profession, condition in life, etc. See Lesley Brown, ed., *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 3648.

2. The *OED* gives an example of the meaning of ‘clothing’ from *Daniel* 103, (c1000), ‘Then, to the young troop, it was a lack of food and clothes’ (*Þæt þam ȝengum þrym gad ne wære wiste ne wæde*). The *OED* also mentions the figurative meaning of ‘covering’ in *Ormulum* 8171, (c1200), ‘All the cover was torn up when found there, all was taken off the best robe’ (*All þatt wæde þatt tær was Uppo þe þære fundenn, All was itt off þe bettste pall*). John A. Simpson and Edmund S. C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).


4. All citations of the riddles in this paper are from Williamson.

5. A study of *hrægl* will be presented in a forthcoming article.

6. Williamson argues that *Riddle 35* (33 in his version) is translated from the Latin text, Adhelm’s *Riddle 33, Lorica*. In general, as he argues, the Old English riddler uses two lines to translate one line of the Latin, though the order of the lines is rearranged, and, in some cases, there is a departure from the Latin text. According to his theory, *gewæde* cannot be regarded as a direct translation of the Latin. See Williamson 243-5.

7. *The Phoenix* is a moral and religious tale, symbolising the Resurrection.

8. Krapp and Dobbie.

9. See 2 Samuel, Chapter I, verse 2, ‘It came even to pass on the third day, that, behold, a man came out of the camp from Saul with his clothes rent, and earth upon his head: and so it was, when he came to David, that he fell to the earth, and did obeisance.’, and verse 11, ‘The David took hold on his clothes, and rent them; and likewise all the men that were with him;’. The Holy Bible; Authorised King James Version, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1983), 377-8.


11. The most likely author of *Juliana* is considered to be Cynewulf, but the authorship of this work, discussed by many scholars, is still unknown. See Krapp and Dobbie 287-8.


13. A variety of translations of *wæd* including ‘robe’ ‘dress’ ‘apparel’ ‘clothing’ ‘garment’ and ‘covering’