Literary and Historical Notes.

THE LATIN RIDDLE IN THE EXETER BOOK.

On folio 129b of the Old English Exeter Book, inserted almost at the end of the manuscript among the last few of the many vernacular verse riddles in this collection, are five lines of Latin, now usually distinguished as Riddle 90 (or 89), which have given rise to much speculation. The text, with normal abbreviations expanded, runs as follows:

mirum uidetur mihi lupus ab agno tenetur
obcubuit agnus et caput uscera lupi
dum starem et mirarem uidi gloriam magnan (sic)
dui lupi stantes et tertium tribul (sic)
III pedes habebant cum septem oculis uidebant.

There are several obvious errors, some perhaps due to the scribe's sudden change-over at this point from one language to another: a dative seems necessary after obcubuit, and mirarem, magnan, duo and tribulantes are generally accepted as corrections. Some further changes have been put forward for metrical reasons. Franz Dietrich, who made the first intensive study of Old English riddle material, has been followed by most modern commentators in taking the lines as an altered or corrupted version of approximate hexameters with a marked caesura and medial rhymes. An alternative view is simply lines with six main stresses in the style of the so-called hypermetrical lines found in batches in Old English verse, and this seems a preferable conclusion if we take into account that the lines are in a codex otherwise devoted to Old English poems. Medial rhymes are established by altering to mirum mihi uidetur in line 1, by adding rupi after agnus in line 2, and by substituting parem for magnan in line 3. By including all these changes, and adding some punctuation, we should arrive at a normalised text as follows:

Mirum mihi uidetur: lupus ab agno tenetur,
obcubuit agnus rupi et caput uscera lupi.
Dum starem et mirarem, uidi gloriam magnan:
dui lupi stantes et tertium tribulantes
quattuor pedes habebant, cum septem oculis uidebant.

There has been a recent objection to such a drastic normalising. One must concede that the number of changes involved is considerable in so few lines, and that we are producing thereby a type of verse which in the circumstances, with no other specimens of Latin verse in this MS. and nothing at all similar in the way of consistent medial rhymes in Old English verse except one very obscure poem, it would be hard to parallel satisfactorily. The metrical changes are not very violent ones, however (we should have a kind of rhyme already in line 3 without substituting parem), and do not disturb the sense; in fact in one instance, the addition of rupi as a dative in line 2, the sense as well as the rhyme is improved. Since it is logical to think of the lines as a riddle like their surroundings, there is a slight possibility that some of the distortion in the received text is a deliberate extra puzzle and is due to the composer himself, who has after all left fairly clear clues for its correction. It is a fact that medial rhymes in most Old English verse come only as a sporadic adornment, it is a fact that these Latin lines inserted in an Old English verse manuscript have even when grammatically corrected only two clear rhyming lines (4 and 5) out of five: so that the normalising is still far from a certainty.

Whether we have consistent rhyme or not, neither the literal sense nor the problem of solving the lines is much affected. Indeed, the solution of the piece as a riddle is still wrapped in doubt, as are the solutions of an uncomfortably high proportion of the neighbouring vernacular riddles. The full list of guesses is long and complicated, hardly worth resurrecting in much detail, and I mention here only a few more noteworthy ones. Dietrich at first took lupus, line 1, for a pike-fish and lupi, line 4, for two hop-vines, with a number of buds (oculis) and tendrils (pedes, 5) in which the creature was entangled. He then gave up this entanglement in favour of a second guess, lupus as a "perch," with the whole riddle a play-

1 Dietrich, Zeitsschrift für deutsches Altertum xi (1859) 486, xii (1865) 250.
on the name Cynewulf, the poet who signed his name in runes in four Old English poems on religious themes. Both ideas seem very obscure and far-fetched, and the second one is in part motivated by the theory, then current and now generally rejected, that Cynewulf was also the author of all the Exeter Book riddles. A similar involved charade on this writer’s name was produced by the two Erlemanns. The chief alternative view was put forward by Henry Morley, who took agnus, line 1, to refer to the symbolic Agnus Dei, Christ the Lamb of God, overcoming lupus, the devil. An ingenious but much less attractive variant of this is Henry Bradley’s idea that the poem concerns the conversion by the Lamb of God of a certain Wulfstan, in derivation “Wolf-stone” from lupus “wolf” and rupi “rock” meaning “stone”! Neither of these makes much attempt at explaining the last three lines, the second “wonder” (gloriam magnam or paren) which the poet says he saw, namely two “wolves” standing and worrying a third, with a precise number of feet and eyes between them.

It seems to me that in considering afresh these puzzling lines, the right depth of caution is reached only if we are set on rejecting the ambiguous, the over-problematic and ingenious, and above all base our suggestions on what we know is consistent with Anglo-Saxon ideas. One cause for the number of radically different guesses made in the past has been the ambiguity of the term lupus, which in Latin and for an Anglo-Saxon as well could have several senses. Not only “wolf” but pikefish, hook, briar, horse’s bit and some others could be justified from Latin lexicons and, what is more important in the circumstances, from extant Old English glosses of the Latin word. In addition, we have to remember an important semantic development of the Old English equivalent word wulf, from the animal “wolf” to the figurative value “outlaw, robber” or any criminal who deserved hunting down and executing, a derived meaning which is used frequently in Old English poetry. With so much variety, the identity of lupus in our first line hardly seems a safe starting-point for conjecture. We are on firmer ground with the word agnus, which can mean nothing except either the literal “lamb” or the Scriptural figure, Christ the “Lamb of God” without blemish or spot.

Henry Morley’s suggestion does in fact seem to me to be quite a natural connection of ideas. The objection sometimes made to it that it involves us in theological subjects not found in any of the other vernacular riddles in the MS. (so far as there is agreement about their solutions), is scarcely valid. It is generally agreed that the making of these riddles was a monkish pastime, and there seems no reason why ecclesiastics should not have made up riddles and puzzles on theological themes as well as on everyday objects. One might even suggest that since this is a rather novel theme for a riddle, it may explain why a fresh medium, Latin, was used for it.

But we can fully justify Morley’s guess only if we are prepared to take the consequences and explain from it the whole poem, and not just one or two terms in it. The opening two lines would then allude either to a known incident in Christ’s life wherein He was victorious in a personal conflict with the devil, or to a more general conception of the devil as being dealt a mortal blow by Christ’s triumph on the Cross. For the first possibility one might put forward the popular incident of Christ’s temptation for forty days in the wilderness (in Mark i, 12 f., Matthew iv, 1-11, Luke iv, 1-13). But the second, more general conception seems the more likely. We should have no need to read obscure symbolism into the details of the Lamb being on a rock (occbuit rupi) and seizing the entrails of an inveterate foe the Wolf. The rock, if indeed the word rupi is to be admitted at all into the text, might refer to the sepulchre, “hewn out of rock” (Mark xv, 46; cp. Matthew xxvii, 60, Luke xxiii, 53), in which Christ was lain after the triumph on the Cross; and the Wolf’s entrails could be taken for the essence of the devil’s power thereby wrested from him. The verb obcumbo (occubito) is frequently used in Latin in a secondary sense “fall dead, die,”

4 E. Erlemann, Archiv fur das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Lit. cxi (1903) 59; F. Erlemann, ib. cv (1905) 391.
and *occubuit* more than once glosses the Old English *gecrang* (*gecrong*), "fell," which can have a common similar implication of death.  

I hesitate to urge these last two explanations as more than conjectures, but at least if we are to read into the first two lines some allusion to the triumph of Christ over the devil, it would be a natural sequence of ideas to look for a reference to the Crucifixion in the remaining three. This I do consider very possible. We may put emphasis on the choice of the word *gloriam* in line 3 as a variant of *mirum* in the first line; if the triumph on the Cross were indeed in the composer's mind, the term "glory" would be particularly fitting for the Crucifixion scene. The term *lupi*, line 4, in the basic sense "wolves" was as we noted often associated in Anglo-Saxon thought with outlaws or criminals fit only to be hanged. The three "wolves" in line 4 might well be Christ and the two malefactors crucified one on each side of Him (in Mark xv, 27 f., Matthew xxvii, 38, Luke xxiii, 32 f., John xix, 18) and quite properly described as *stantes*, "raised up" because stretched out on their crosses, and *tribulantes*, "harassing" or "closely pressing," that is flanking, Christ to right and to left. The regular sense "harassing" for *tribulantes* could however be accepted as an allusion to the Scriptural references that the two thieves joined with the priests and scribes in mocking Christ; Mark xv, 32 and Matthew xxvii, 44.

The last line of the Latin, specifying that the three "wolves" had four feet and saw with seven eyes, is difficult, and I would not claim that the following solution is more than tentative. We may have to do here with "four feet" as the four extremities of each of the three crosses, and with "seven eyes" as the pair of natural eyes in each of the crucified men added on to the traditional five wounds of piercing through which Christ suffered on the Cross, that is the two nails in the hands, the two in the feet, and the spear driven through the side (as in John xix, 34). The idea of five wounds, not the more logical four with only one nail through the two feet, is quite in keeping with earlier medieval and in particular with Anglo-Saxon traditions concerning the Crucifixion.  

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8 Cf. Wright-Wülkner, op. cit., 35. 25. 460. 10.  
9 Cf. Beatrice White, *Mod. Lang. Review* xli (1945) 206, citing the Old English vision-poem 'Dream of the Rood,' lines 8 f., which mentions should however feel more confident of this explanation of the numbers if the MS. read not *habebant, uidebant* but the singular *habeat, uidebat*, which would make a much clearer allusion just to Christ's Cross and His five wounds. But at least we are assigning an integral place in the allusion of the poem to the precise numbers given in line 5, instead of taking them, as in Dietrich's first guess for example, as haphazard specifications. Finally, the only safe alternative I see to the above attempt at explaining the lines in Latin as a riddle is to take them to refer straightforwardly to two remarkable incidents concerning an actual lamb and actual wolves; and to that we should logically have to add that these were incidents presumably known to the composer and his first readers but quite lost on us to-day. This seems a somewhat barren and ineffectual conclusion to reach. Though the details in the suggestions made above are certainly not free from doubt, I do consider there are better grounds for pressing some such symbolical interpretation which does not stretch rational limits too far.

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