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Looming Danger and Dangerous Looms: Violence and Weaving in Exeter Book *Riddle 56*

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Violence in the Exeter Book riddles is not a new topic. Many discussions of these fascinating texts focus on the way in which commonplace objects are personified and then attacked, bound, mutilated and/or killed.¹ This violence, which is both carried out by humans and at the same time frequently punctuated by expressions of human empathy for the wounded objects, has been explained as acceptable because it occurs in the safe, playful and inverted world of the riddle.² Indeed, Ruth Wehlau notes that, as with the saints' lives, '[p]art of the pleasure in reading the riddles comes from the idea of violence as spectacle, combined with our knowledge that the violence is confined to the words'.³ The loom riddle,⁴ which is *Riddle 56* according to the numbering in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (hereafter ASPR),⁵ is one of these texts, and the violent imagery here is particularly problematic because it characterizes the construction

¹ See, for example, 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); Jerome Denno, 'Oppression and Voice in the Anglo-Saxon Riddles', *Papers Presented at the 35th International Congress on Medieval Studies, 2000* <<http://www2.kenyon.edu/AngloSaxonRiddles/Denno.htm>> [accessed 19 January 2011]; Ruth Wehlau, *The Riddle of Creation: Metaphor Structures in Old English Poetry*, Studies in Humanities: Literature-Politics-Society (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 102–5; Jonathan Wilcox, '“Tell Me What I Am”: The Old English Riddles', in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. by David F. Johnson and Elaine M. Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 46–59.

² See, in particular, Edward B. Irving, Jr., 'Heroic Experience in the Old English Riddles', in *Old English Shorter Poems*, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (New York: Garland, 1994), pp. 199–212 (p. 199); Marie Nelson, 'Four Social Functions of the Exeter Book Riddles', *Neophilologus*, 75 (1991), 445–50; Elinor Teele, 'The Heroic Tradition in the Old English Riddles' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2004), pp. 205 and 226.

³ Wehlau, p. 105.

⁴ The major authorities on this riddle's solution are Frederick Tupper, Jr., whose *Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston: Ginn, 1910), pp. 192–93 offers the solution 'web and loom', which George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie support in their edition of *The Exeter Book*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), p. 350. Craig Williamson similarly includes the solution 'web and loom' in his *Old English Riddles of The Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 305, and Bernard J. Muir defers to the solutions of Williamson and Donald K. Fry in his own edition, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, 2 vols (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994), ii, p. 575. Fry's article, 'Exeter Book Riddle Solutions,' *Old English Newsletter*, 15.1 (1981), pp. 22–33 (p. 24), lists other proposed solutions including 'lathe', 'flail' and 'execution', but 'loom' still maintains the highest level of support at the time of his survey of riddle solutions.

⁵ There are a variety of approaches to numbering the Exeter Book riddles, and the loom riddle in particular ranges between number 54 and 57 depending on the editor. This paper uses the numbering assigned by the ASPR,

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of an object that was beneficial to humans — that is, cloth. From the perspective of textiles research, this violence is off-putting — cloth usually plays a positive role because it is essential to human culture and since ‘its constituent fibers can evoke ideas of connectedness or tying’, it is frequently employed as a metaphor for society.⁶ However, such an approach of construction-through-destruction is wholly appropriate to the world of riddles, which show how the raw material in nature is turned into the ‘cooked’ objects of culture:

The riddles not only present objects in anthropomorphic guise; they also arrange them in anthropocentric systems of order. Virtually everything that they name has a function. What the riddles prize above all is the way things turn to the welfare of humankind. Rarely is the ‘raw’ stuff of nature introduced (a deer’s antlers, an ox’s hide) without its being brought into relation to the ‘cooked’ elements of culture (a pair of inkwells, a set of leather goods).

The riddles thus domesticate the elements of nature and turn them to human use.⁷

However, even with this raw-cooked or living-dead opposition recognized as part of the riddling tradition, the loom riddle remains a complicated text. Both the loom and the fabric being woven upon it are ‘cooked’, manmade artifacts, indicating that the violence inherent in the construction-from-destruction motif is working differently here. Given this context, it seems time for a fresh reading of *Riddle 56*, which scholarship has, until now, generally only addressed in passing.⁸

In focusing on the violent imagery of the loom riddle, the following discussion endeavours to offer a more comprehensive reading of the riddle and pose some new questions. Accepting that violence is an important part of the riddling genre, as outlined above, this paper will not look at *why* violence is associated with weaving, but rather at how this association functions and what this means for our interpretation of the riddle at large. By arguing that this association functions primarily through the poem’s use of heroic imagery — with the violence being related to warfare, torture and execution — I shall demonstrate how the loom riddle sets itself apart from many other domestic riddles. While this may initially strike the reader as odd, I shall further outline the way in which the use of this heroic imagery emphasises the high status of crafted objects, in which category cloth is quite firmly situated. With the recognition of the importance of the craftsman in Old English poetry, the association between heroic violence and weaving becomes all the more appropriate.

Turning first to the poem itself, the loom riddle reads:

Ic wæs þær inne þær ic ane geseah
winnende wiht wido bennegean,

from which all citations, unless otherwise stated, are taken. Muir’s edition maintains ASPR numbering, and Williamson’s edition of the riddles numbers this *Riddle 54*.

⁶ A. Weiner, and Jane Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), p. 2.

⁷ John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), p. 54. Niles employs the terminology of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. by John and Doreen Weightman (London: Cape, 1970; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), originally published as *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964). This anthropological study views cooking as a cultural process and outlines the way in which mythological depictions of the raw and the cooked correspond to a nature/culture binary.

⁸ There are no lengthy discussions devoted entirely to *Riddle 56*, although one article does refer to it within the context of other loom riddles and the actual mechanism of the warp-weighted loom: Erika von Erhardt-Siebold, ‘The Old English Loom Riddles’, in *Philologica: The Malone Anniversary Studies*, ed. by Thomas A. Kirkby and Henry Bosley Woolf (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1949), pp. 9–17. Other discussions of this riddle occur in editions of the text and in passing references in articles and books. Teele devotes several pages to heroic echoes and analogues in the poem (pp. 153–55).

holt hweorfende; heapoglemma feng,
 deopra dolga. Daroþas wæron
 weo þære wihte, ond se wudu searwum
 fæste gebunden. Hyre fota wæs
 biidfast oþer, oþer bisgo dreag,
 leolc on lyfte, hwilum londe neah.
 Treow wæs getenge þam þær torhtan stod
 leafum bihongen. Ic lafe geseah
 minum hlaforde, þær hæleð druncon,
 þara flana, on flet beran.⁹

I was inside there where I saw a wooden object wounding a certain struggling creature, the wood turning;¹⁰ it received battle-wounds,¹¹ deep gashes. Darts were woeful to that creature, and the wood skillfully bound fast. One of its feet was held fixed, the other endured affliction, leapt into the air, sometimes near the land. A tree, hung about by leaves, was near to that bright thing [which] stood there, I saw the leavings of those arrows, carried out onto the floor to my lord, where the warriors drank.

It is fair to say that for a modern reader, a cursory glance at *Riddle 56* would be unlikely to yield the solution ‘loom’, or ‘web and loom’, which I shall sketch out below. That the imagery of a struggling creature suffering from battle-wounds and deep gashes while being bound fast beside a tree does not immediately bring weaving to mind is partly indicative of the poem’s removal from its historical context — a context in which looms played a much more important role than they do in modern life. One of the looms in use at this time, with archaeological evidence supporting its existence in Anglo-Saxon contexts, was the vertical, warp-weighted loom.¹² This type of loom was used in many parts of medieval Europe, and survived in some areas of modern Scandinavia.¹³ Marta Hoffmann, who surveyed the warp-

- ⁹ Krapp and Dobbie, p. 208 (with modifications explained below). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. The ASPR edition makes several emendations to the manuscript reading of the riddle. In line 7, the MS reads ‘biid faeft’, which Krapp and Dobbie, Williamson (p. 101) and Muir (p. 328) all emend to ‘biidfast’. In line 12, the MS reads ‘flan’, which Krapp and Dobbie emend to ‘flana’, arguing that ‘*para flana*, followed by a noun parallel to *lafe*, seems more probable here’ than previous emendations (p. 350). This prompts them to supply the word ‘geweorc’, which does not appear in the MS. Williamson emends to ‘flana’ (p. 101), maintaining that the genitive is governed by ‘lafe’, which frequently takes the genitive in the riddles and thus does not require a parallel accusative noun (p. 307). Muir similarly emends to ‘flana’ (I, 328), and so this is the reading that I have adopted.
- ¹⁰ The syntax of the first two and a half lines is fairly ambiguous because of the nature of the reported vision. Both the subject of the infinitive verb ‘bennegean’ (‘to wound’) and the object being wounded are potentially in the accusative. This is further complicated by the use of apposition, making it unclear which terms refer to the object that is wounding and which to that being wounded. Williamson reads ‘wido’ and ‘holt hweorfende’ as appositives (p. 306), and Bosworth and Toller take these as the subject, making the ‘ane’ and ‘winnende wiht’ the object, as I have attempted to show in my translation. See Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898), *Supplement* by T. Northcote Toller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921; repr. London: Lowe and Brydone Ltd., 1966), digital edition (Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2010), s.v. *bennian* <<http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/>> [accessed 5 July 2011].
- ¹¹ The term ‘heapuglemm’ is a *hapax legomenon*, as is the second component of the compound, ‘glemm’, which appears in Wulfstan’s homily *Her Ongynð be Cristendome* (see Dorothy Bethurum, *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), pp. 200–10 (p. 202, l. 45)). For ‘glemm’, the *Dictionary of Old English* notes some ambiguity with regard to the definition, offering ‘? stain, ? wound’: *The Dictionary of Old English: A-G*, ed. by Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos and Antonette di Paolo Healey (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, University of Toronto, 2008) [on CD], s.v. For ‘heapuglemm’, Bosworth and Toller, perhaps taking their cue from the first element, offer ‘a wound got in fight’ with no reference to difficulties defining the term.
- ¹² Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, rev. edn (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), p. 287.
- ¹³ Marta Hoffmann, *The Warp-Weighted Loom: Studies in the History and Technology of an Ancient Implement*, Studia Norvegica, 14 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964), p. 6.

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weighted loom's use and distribution, argued that this type of loom 'has remained practically unchanged from the earliest times down to the present. It is the oldest loom known to have been used in Europe, and it is of this loom and its products that we find traces in the Swiss Neolithic Age'.¹⁴ Hoffmann also offers a straight-forward description of weaving, stating:

The basic characteristic of weaving is that two systems of threads cross each other at right angles: one — the warp — is stretched taut, while the other — the weft — is introduced as the work proceeds, and is bound in place by the warp threads.¹⁵

Already, we can see how the stretching of one system of threads and the moving and binding of another relates to the riddle's description of this bound and struggling creature.

In order to fully contextualize this riddle, an explanation of the mechanism of the warp-weighted loom is necessary (see Figure 1). The following description of this piece of equipment relies heavily on Gale Owen-Crocker's research on textiles presented in *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*.¹⁶ The warp-weighted loom consisted of two uprights with a horizontal beam across the top, and would have rested against the wall or roof so the uprights were tilted. Warp threads were attached to the top beam, and kept taut with weights attached at the bottom. Half of the threads would be pulled in front of and half placed behind the shed rod, a cross bar fixed between the uprights and frequently situated toward the bottom of the loom. Sitting in brackets attached to the uprights was the heddle rod, which was movable, attached only to the warp threads at the back of the loom. When the heddle rod was pulled away from the loom, the weaver could move the back threads forward and change the shed, the space between the warp threads through which the weft threads were passed. The warp threads relate to the poem's description of the struggling creature's bound foot and jumping foot: of the two rows of warp threads, one remains in place while the second row moves with the change of shed.¹⁷ The weft threads could be passed through the shed by means of a needle or a shuttle, and Erika von Erhardt-Siebold argues that the piece of wood which wounds the web in the riddle — and the battle scars which result — refer to one of these implements.¹⁸ The threads of the fabric were straightened with bone or wood picks when they clung together and, because the weft would be left quite loose in order to stop it from pulling too tight and causing the cloth to contract, it would have to be beaten upwards with a sword-shaped beater. The fabric picks and sword beater also arguably appear in the riddle, in the reference to the darts that wound the creature.¹⁹ As for the nearby tree, hung about by leaves, this is likely the distaff standing near the loom, whose wool or flax would have gone in to the making of the web.²⁰ Finally, the 'laf', the leavings which are carried to the lord in the hall, refers to the finished cloth, the struggling web having now been fully subdued.

Looms like these were essential parts of Anglo-Saxon life, since the work of clothing the family through spinning and weaving was done at the household level.²¹ The loom would of course be an obvious candidate for the riddling genre because the riddles so often find their

¹⁴ Hoffmann, p. 5.

¹⁵ Hoffmann, p. 5.

¹⁶ Owen-Crocker. See in particular pp. 286–91.

¹⁷ Erhardt-Siebold, p. 15; and Williamson, p. 307.

¹⁸ Erhardt-Siebold, p. 15.

¹⁹ Erhardt-Siebold, p. 15; F. H. Whitman, *Old English Riddles* (Ottawa: Canadian Federation for the Humanities, 1982), p. 140.

²⁰ Erhardt-Siebold, p. 15.

²¹ Penelope Walton Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England, AD 450–700*, CBA Research Report, 145 (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2007), p. 47.

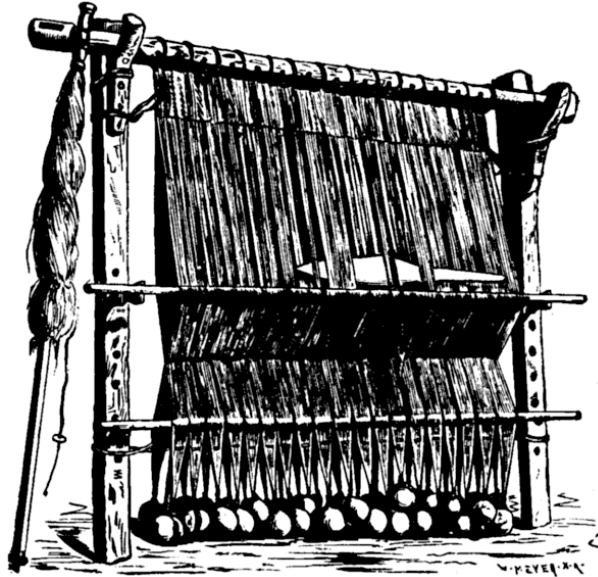


Figure 1: A Faroese warp-weighted loom in the Copenhagen Museum. Taken from Oscar Montelius, *Civilisation of Sweden in Heathen Times*, trans. by the Rev. F. H. Woods, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1888), p. 160, via H. Ling Roth, *Ancient Egyptian and Greek Looms* (Halifax: Bankfield Museum, 1913), p. 34 (as it appears on the Project Gutenberg website, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/25731/25731-h/25731-h.htm>> [accessed 1 June 2011]).

subject matter in the commonplace.²² Furthermore, as riddle theory makes clear, it is the function of riddles to play with the limitations and parameters of the riddler's society.²³ In approaching the question of how the violent association is functioning in *Riddle 56*, it is useful to ask what in the riddler's society is being played with here.

Many domestic riddles play with the concept of gender, and so we may use this as an starting point, and one which seems fairly obvious given that weaving was women's work in the medieval period.²⁴ Thus, some have read this poem as an inversion of two types of work

²² There are, for example, several riddles referring to products, tools and animals associated with agriculture, including 21 (plough), 34 (rake), 42 (cock and hen), 52 (flail), 82 (harrow), the ox/bull riddles (12, 38 and 72) and the onion riddles (25 and 65). Similarly, several refer to domestic objects and food/drink, such as 27 (mead), 45 (bread dough), 49 (oven), 54 (churn), 58 (well sweep), 81 (weathercock), the bellows riddles (37 and 87) and the key(-hole) riddles (44 and 91). This list is meant to be representative rather than exhaustive, and so I have not included riddles with contested meanings.

²³ Wilcox, p. 58; Roger D. Abrahams, 'The Literary Study of the Riddle', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14 (1972), 177–97 (p. 182).

²⁴ The major discussions of Anglo-Saxon weaving all place this activity within the realm of women. While some, like Owen-Crocker and Walton Rogers, are more concerned with the technology and process itself, many discussions of weaving approach this task through the lens of gender studies and women's roles. The notable studies here are Christine Fell's *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984) and Jane

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generally divided by gender.²⁵ With weaving being the work of women and battle the work of men in the Anglo-Saxon period, the fact that these two spheres of work are mapped onto one another is very interesting. However, while this is a valid line of inquiry, it is also important to note that the weavers and their gender are not actually referred to in this text, unlike in some riddles where women are clearly present and involved in domestic labour. Notable in this context are *Riddles 25* and *45*, solved as ‘onion’ and ‘bread dough’.²⁶ In these poems, two of the ‘obscene’ riddles of the Exeter Book, women are presented as rather fearless sexual aggressors.²⁷ Their physical appearances, class, personalities and actions are all described. The appearance of the woman in *Riddle 25* is indicated by the terms ‘ful cyrtenu’ (‘very pretty’; 6a) and ‘wundenloc’ (‘curly-haired’; 11a).²⁸ Her class is explicitly mentioned when she is referred to as a ‘ceorles dohtor’ (‘free man’s daughter’; 6b), while *Riddle 45* depicts instead a ‘bryd’ (‘bride’; 3b) who is a ‘peodnes dohtor’ (‘ruler’s daughter’; 5b). Both women are proud-minded or -hearted, one ‘modwlonc’ (*Riddle 25* 7a) and the other ‘hygewlonc’ (*Riddle 45* 4a). While *Riddle 45* is much shorter and does not refer explicitly to the woman’s appearance, her clothing is implied by the term ‘hrægle’ (4b), which is both a cloth used to cover the bread

Chance’s *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), both of which have been very influential. Similarly, Michael Enright’s *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996) and Maren Clegg Hyer’s ‘Textiles and Textile Imagery in Old English’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1998) have a strong focus on the role of women as literal or metaphorical weavers. For an archaeological perspective, see Nick Stoodley, *The Spindle and the Spear: A Critical Enquiry into the Construction and Meaning of Gender in the Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series, 288 (Oxford: Hedges/Archaeopress, 1999). This study’s analysis of data from Anglo-Saxon burials finds that weaving tools were primarily female grave goods (esp. pp. 31, 33, 75 and 136).

²⁵ See, for example, Russell G. Poole, *Viking Poems on War and Peace: A Study in Skaldic Narrative*, Toronto Medieval Texts and Translations, 8 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 138–40.

²⁶ Krapp and Dobbie, pp. 193 and 205.

²⁷ Edith Whitehurst Williams, ‘What’s So New about the Sexual Revolution?: Some Comments on Anglo-Saxon Attitudes toward Sexuality in Women Based on Four Exeter Book Riddles’, *Texas Quarterly*, 18 (1975), 46–55 (p. 48).

²⁸ There is some debate as to the nature of ‘wundenloc’, a term which occurs four times in Old English poetry: once here and three times in *Judith* at lines 77b, 103b and 325a, where it twice describes the heroine herself and once the rest of the Hebrew nation. It is unclear whether these twisted locks are curly or braided, with editors, dictionaries and commentators frequently coming to different conclusions. For those who support the ‘curly-haired’ reading, see Williamson, p. 464; John P. Hermann, *Allegories of War: Language and Violence in Old English Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), pp. 191–92; and Susan Kim, ‘Bloody Signs: Circumcision and Pregnancy in the Old English *Judith*’, *Exemplaria*, 11 (Fall 1999), 285–307. For those who support the ‘braided hair’ reading, see Bosworth and Toller, s.v.; J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th edn (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1960), s.v.; and Teele, p. 132. Several offer both readings, such as *Judith*, ed. by Mark S. Griffith, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: The University of Exeter Press, 1997), p. 222; and Tupper, p. 125. I am inclined to support the ‘curly-haired’ theory for two reasons. Firstly, since the term most frequently describes *Judith* and other Hebrew figures, we may read curly hair as a more appropriate distinguishing feature of a cultural group than bound or braided hair would be, as Hermann notes (p. 191), especially given that Anglo-Saxon women also bound their hair (see Gale R. Owen-Crocker, ‘Women’s Costume in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries and Textile Production in Anglo-Saxon England’, in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings*, ed. by Catherine E. Karkov (New York: Garland, 1999), pp. 423–85 (esp. pp. 435–7)). Secondly, the simplices ‘wunden’ and ‘locas’ appear together in line 104 of *Riddle 40* (Creation), and the corresponding lines of Aldhelm’s Latin version of this riddle (*Enigma 101, De creatura*) clearly refer to curls (see in particular lines 44–7 in *Through a Glass Darkly: Aldhelm’s Riddles in the British Library MS Royal 12.C. xxii*, ed. by Nancy Porter Stork, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts, 98 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), p. 233). If we take the Latin into consideration when translating the Old English, it would seem that, in this riddle at least, the ‘wundne locas’ are curls rather than braided locks.

dough and a garment that hides the sexual encounter. Furthermore, the use of ‘gripan’ (‘to grip’; *Riddle 25 7b*) and ‘grapian’ (‘to seize’; *Riddle 45 3b*), focuses attention on the women’s hands, a somewhat violent tool of seduction according to the double entendre-reading, or of domestic labour according to the solutions ‘onion’ and ‘bread dough’.

The highly gendered and sexualized approach to women and their work evident in these two riddles could easily have been applied to weaving in *Riddle 56*, but it is not. In its approach to the labour of weaving, *Riddle 56* maintains a greater focus on the construction of cloth itself rather than the weavers. Indeed, this trend can be read across the Old English poetic corpus at large. There is only one instance in the poetry where the textile-maker is the focus, and this is actually a reference to embroidery, rather than to weaving. This is, of course, the famous passage in *Maxims I*, which asserts: ‘Fæmne æt hyre bordan geriseð’ (‘a woman belongs at her embroidery’; 63b).²⁹ However, all of the references to actual weaving or woven objects focus upon the object rather than the creator of the object.³⁰ Such an emphasis on the product rather than the producer sets Old English poetry as distinct from other medieval representations of weaving, such as the supernatural women who weave a bloody banner in the Old Norse *Darraðarljóð*,³¹ a poem which is often read in conjunction with this riddle.³² This is a very important distinction, and one which creates problems for those who would use this poem as evidence in broader discussions of gender and work.

Returning to the question of what in the riddler’s society is being inverted and played with here, we can now safely say that it does not appear to be gender. Other popular areas for the riddles to probe include class, which provides another possible approach to the use of violent imagery in the poem. Riddles dealing with domestic chores often include imagery of forced servitude, such as the enslaved plough of *Riddle 21*³³ which is ‘bunden cræfte’ (‘skillfully bound’; 7b) and driven along with spikes piercing its back and head (11–13a), or the fettered prisoners steered by a slave-woman in *Riddle 52*, often solved as ‘flail’. Indeed, the ox/bull riddles all allude to binding and slavery at some point, with *Riddle 72* describing the ox as ‘bunden under beame’ (‘bound under a beam’; 13a) where it endures work (‘weorc þrowade’; 14b). That this forced servitude involves being subjected to violence is clear in the final lines (15b–18):

Oft mec isern scod
sare on sidan; ic swigade,
næfre meldade monna ængum
gif me ordstæpe egle wæron.

Often iron injured me, sore on my sides; I kept silent, never proclaimed to any of men if
the spear-stabs were painful.

²⁹ T. A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1976), p. 66.

³⁰ This statement applies to the production of objects and artifacts. I should emphasize that I am excluding metaphorical weaving because there are several instances where Old English poetry refers to weavers of abstract concepts, including words (*Elene* 1237a), fate (*Guthlac B* 1351a; *The Riming Poem* 70a) and peace (*Beowulf* 1942a; *Elene* 88a; *Widsið* 6a). The focus in these instances is on concepts rather than objects, and yet the concepts are similarly attributed with value. However, as I argue elsewhere, gender is not necessarily implied in any of these contexts. For more on this see my forthcoming ‘Representations of Weaving and Binding in Old English Poetry’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge).

³¹ For a recent edition, see Poole, pp. 116–18.

³² The first to make this connection is F. Dietrich, ‘Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs: Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum*, 11 (1859), 448–90 (p. 476). For other discussions, see Poole, pp. 138–39; Teele, p. 153; Hyer, p. 139; and Karen Bek-Pedersen, ‘Are the Spinning Nornir Just a Yarn?’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 3 (2007), 1–10.

³³ Krapp and Dobbie, p. 191.

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This association between beasts of burden and slavery seems appropriate, especially considering slaves would have had close contact with these animals. Indeed, David Pelteret maintains that ploughing was the most common job for male slaves in Anglo-Saxon England.³⁴ However, while there is much binding and violence, there are no prisoners or slaves at work in *Riddle 56*. Thus, once again the answer appears to be no: the loom riddle does not deal with class or servitude; this seems to be an attribute of agricultural riddles instead.

The sexual violence employed by women working in the domestic sphere and the violence of slavery imposed upon objects used in agriculture, at a basic level, are both linked with food growth and production. While it would seem to make sense for weaving, as a similar widespread domestic chore, to be associated through shared imagery with this food production, and while all of our modern conceptions of medieval women's work would encourage us to see this connection, this is simply not the case. The violence in *Riddle 56* has nothing to do with gender or class. Instead, weaving is depicted in terms of battle, torture and execution, and the association seems to be with heroic literature.

Two of the battle words that associate the riddle's imagery with martial violence are the 'heapoglemma' ('battle-wounds'; 3b) and 'deopra dolga' ('deep gashes'; 4a) caused by the wooden object in line 2. As noted above, these probably refer to the piercings of the shuttle through the web's body, but as wounds they are associated with battle through the first element of the first compound. While the term 'heapuglemm' only appears in this riddle, compounds beginning with *heapu-* are very common in heroic discourse. A search of the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* reveals sixty-three compounds in poetry with *heapu-*³⁵ as the first component, the vast majority of which occur in *Beowulf*. Eight of these are proper names and the rest adjectives or nouns that can be placed within the realm of heroic diction, given their concern with battle.³⁶ The wounds described here may, in a poetic context, also hold associations with religious tribulation and martyrdom. There are fifteen other instances of the term *dolg* ('wound') and the related past participle, *gedolgod* ('wounded') in Old English poetry, ten of which describe Christ's crucifixion and the torture of saints.³⁷ Of the remaining five, two of them refer to violence done upon evil figures in *Judith* (107a) and *Beowulf* (817a) and two refer to battle wounds and medical ailments.³⁸ The final instance is ambiguous because it occurs in the unsolved *Riddle 53* (6a), in a description of a tree that has been mutilated and enslaved for human use. Several solutions have been offered for the riddle, including 'battering ram',³⁹ which would indicate that the connotations are martial ones. However, it has also been solved as 'cross' and 'gallows',⁴⁰ in which case the use of this term could be a reference to the torture

³⁴ David Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England: From the Reign of Alfred Until the Twelfth Century*, Studies in Anglo-Saxon History, 7 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995), p. 117.

³⁵ Variant spellings include: *heaðu-*, *heapo-* and *heado-*.

³⁶ The most common second components are *-wielm* ('burning'; *Elene* 579a, 1305a; *Beowulf* 82b, 2819a; *Genesis B* 324a; *Exodus* 148a; *Andreas* 1542a), *-rinc* ('warrior'; *The Metres of Boethius (Metre 9)* 45a; *Judith* 179a, 212b; *Exodus* 241a; *Beowulf* 370a, 2466a) and *-rof* ('brave'; *The Menologium* 14a; *The Phoenix* 228a; *Beowulf* 381a, 864a, 2191a). Interestingly, *heapuwylm* is frequently applied to descriptions of hell, while *heapurinc* and *heapurof* are generally more straightforward descriptions of brave fighters.

³⁷ See *Christ III* (1107b, 1206b, 1454a), *The Dream of the Rood* (46b), *Riddle 59* (chalice) (11a) and *Andreas* (942a, 1244a, 1397a, 1406a, 1475a).

³⁸ See *Riddle 5* (shield) (13a) and the *Metrical Charm, Wið Waterælfadde* ('Against Water-Elf Disease'; 12a).

³⁹ Fry lists other solutions including 'spear', 'phallus' and 'cross', but notes that 'battering ram' has the most support (p. 24). This is the solution that Krapp and Dobbie (pp. 348–39) and Williamson (p. 297) list.

⁴⁰ F. H. Whitman solves the riddle as 'cross' in his 'Significant Motifs in *Riddle 53*', *Medium Ævum*, 46 (1977), 1–11; and Jonathan Wilcox puts forward a strong case for 'gallows' in 'New Solutions to Old English Riddles:

and execution of martyrs and the crucifixion of Christ. The higher quantity of occurrences in religious contexts would seem to suggest that, although the term could be applied to other contexts (and frequently was in prose, of course), as poetic diction, it also frequently carried religious connotations.

Indications of torture may also be read in the description of the weighted warp-threads: ‘Hyre fota wæs / biidfæst oþer, oþer bisgo dreag’ (‘One of its feet was held fixed, the other endured affliction’; 6b-7). The phrase ‘bisgo dreag’, can mean either ‘endured affliction’ or ‘worked busily’,⁴¹ and thus points to a double meaning at work here. The ‘affliction’ sense of the term *bysgu* notably appears also in *Juliana* (625b), *Guthlac A* (714b) and *Beowulf* (281a), and of course other affliction terms are prevalent in the torture scenes of saints and martyrs in Old English. Obviously affliction can equally be endured in battle, indicating that the imagery here is once again applicable to both war and martyrdom.

Another place where the imagined struggle arguably carries connotations of both warfare and torture is in lines 4b–6a, where

[...] Daroþas wæron
weo þære wihte, ond se wudu searwum
fæste gebunden

Darts were woeful to that creature, and the wood skillfully bound fast.

As discussed above, these darts seem to be either the fabric picks or possibly the points of a toothed weaver’s beater.⁴² Such beaters were similar to swords in form, and there is at least one find of a beater having been refashioned out of a pattern-welded sword, as well as others possibly fashioned from spear-heads.⁴³ Thus, the association between the weaver’s beater and weapons links the imagery to warfare and heroic diction. In this particular passage, the wood that is bound fast relates to the bound construction of the loom. Not only is the wood a bound object, but it is also doing the binding, as it holds the creature fast. Hence, both the loom and the fabric are bound, in their construction and in their servitude to humans. This multi-layered binding of construction and service is, of course, common in other riddles, and several of the armament riddles employ references to binding to emphasize their situation. *Riddle 23* (bow),⁴⁴ for example, ends with the statement ‘nelle ic unbunden ænigum hyran / nymþe searosæled’ (‘unbound I will not obey anyone unless skillfully tied’; 15–16). The indication here, as with the loom riddle, is both one of service to the bow’s human owner and of its construction, in that a bow must be properly strung in order to function properly.

The nature of the riddles makes them some of the most useful Old English poetic texts for discussions of material culture. And, indeed, if we look at other large wooden constructions known to the Anglo-Saxons, we find that the imagery of violence in *Riddle 56* is heightened. Niles draws attention to the loom as a type of *hengen* (‘cross/rack’).⁴⁵ He notes ‘the physical resemblance of a *hengen* that is used to hang or stretch criminals to a *hengen* that is used to support the weaving apparatus of a loom’, remarking that one of Ælfric’s homilies joins

Riddles 17 and 53’, *Philological Quarterly*, 69 (1990), 393–408.

⁴¹ The *DOE* offers the following definitions for *bysgu*: ‘activity, occupation; work, toil, labour’ (s.v., sense 1.) and ‘affliction, trouble, anxiety, care’ (s.v., sense 2.). For *dreogan*’s connotations of suffering and endurance, see senses A.2.a. ‘to endure, suffer; *deap(-cwale) dreogan* “to die” ’ and B.2. ‘to suffer’. For its connotations of labour, see senses A.1. ‘to do, perform, work, carry out’ and B.1.b. ‘*dreogan unstill* / *bysig* “to be busy” ’, which the *DOE* gives as the main sense of this particular passage.

⁴² Erhardt-Siebold, p. 15.

⁴³ Owen-Crocker, p. 276.

⁴⁴ Krapp and Dobbie, p. 192

⁴⁵ Niles, p. 81.

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imagery of weaving with that of a torture device.⁴⁶ The relevant passage from the *Homilies of Ælfric* reads:

Ða het Aurelianus on hengenne afæstnien
þone halgan wer, and aþenian his lima
swa swa man webb tyht; ac he nan word ne gecwæð.⁴⁷

Then Aurelianus commanded that the holy man be fastened to a rack and that his limbs be drawn out just as one stretches the weft; but he did not say a word.

This example lends credence to the torture reading of the loom riddle, as does the description of the harmful wooden object in terms of ‘holt hweorfende’ (‘the wood turning’; 3a), which could imply the stretching out of its victim. Niles indicates that the Anglo-Saxons clearly had knowledge of the rack because elsewhere Ælfric refers to the rack used to torture St. Vincent as a ‘hengen’, a structure which is different from the gallows to which he is later moved:⁴⁸ ‘ahoð hine on þære hengene, and hetelice astreccað ealle his lima, þæt þa liþa him togaan!’⁴⁹ (‘hang him on the rack, and violently stretch out all his limbs so that his joints are separated!’). The rack’s ability to tear limbs as outlined here could be reflected in *Riddle 56*’s description of the struggling creature’s wounds.

In addition to the possibility that the poem refers to a torture device, we may equally read the constructed object in the context of a gallows. Andrew Reynolds argues that execution cemeteries ‘are characterised by untidy, and in many cases excessively violent’ deaths either by beheading or by hanging, which was the most common method of execution.⁵⁰ Furthermore, there is archaeological evidence for a two-post gallows at several execution sites including Sutton Hoo in Suffolk and South Acre in Norfolk,⁵¹ as well as pictorial evidence for such two-post constructions in the Anglo-Saxon illustrated Hexateuch, where the gallows’ uprights and crossbeam resemble a warp-weighted loom.⁵²

The gallows is, of course, also frequently referred to in Old English literature, not the least in descriptions of martyrdom. If we read the poem as linked to the torture of religious heroes, as evidenced by the diction of the *milites Christi* and by the *hengen* passages in Ælfric discussed above, then the gallows is a fitting construction to consider. Of course, stoic acceptance in the face of tribulation, imprisonment and torture are all common elements in the Old English poetic saints’ lives, notably, *Guthlac*, *Andreas* and *Juliana*. This stoicism is something the saints have in common with other Old English heroes,⁵³ which suggests parallels between the two genres, as well as between secular warriors and *milites Christi*. Another commonly drawn upon example is the martial diction of *The Dream of the Rood*,⁵⁴ as applied to both Christ

⁴⁶ Niles, pp. 81–82.

⁴⁷ Ælfric, *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, ed. by John C. Pope, Early English Text Society, o. s., 259–60, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), II, 745.

⁴⁸ Niles, p. 74.

⁴⁹ Ælfric, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies, The Second Series: Text*, ed. by Malcolm Godden, Early English Text Society, s. s., 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 146.

⁵⁰ Andrew Reynolds, ‘Executions and Hard Anglo-Saxon Justice’, *British Archaeology*, 31 (1998), 8–9 (p. 8).

⁵¹ Reynolds, p. 9.

⁵² Niles, p. 71. The picture in the Hexateuch (London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Claudius B IV) occurs at folio 59.

⁵³ Thomas D. Hill, ‘The Unchanging Hero: A Stoic Maxim in *The Wanderer* and its Contexts’, *Studies in Philology*, 101 (2004), 233–49 (p. 236).

⁵⁴ *The Vercelli Book*, ed. by George Philip Krapp, ASPR, 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), pp. 61–5.

and the cross,⁵⁵ which aligns the religious hero with an undeserved violent death upon the gallows. The cross is referred to as a *gealga* ('gallows') on three occasions, twice as a simplex (10b, 40b) and once as the first element in the compound 'gealgtreow' ('gallows-tree'; 146a), and is depicted as taking on the suffering of Christ (46-51a), who is eager to redeem mankind through his crucifixion (41). As demonstrated by the violent descriptions of Christ's death on the gallows as well as by archaeological evidence and prose descriptions of torture, it is safe to say that Anglo-Saxons writers were certainly aware of the potentially painful outcomes of judicial punishment. Indeed, we need only look at the extant law codes to find a trail of missing fingers, hands, eyes and noses, which marked the committing of a crime upon the human body.⁵⁶

Thus, the wounds and violence of *Riddle 56* may be situated within a number of contexts — battle, torture and execution — all linked by their inherent violence. This violence is, furthermore, associated with heroic depictions in Old English poetry, whether of actual fighters or of Christ and his martyrs. Indeed, even executions of non-religious figures find their way into heroic poetry, such as the passage from *Beowulf* that depicts a father lamenting his son who has been hanged as a criminal (2444–59). Furthermore, the gallows is included in a long list of violent deaths and maimings available to humans in *The Fortunes of Men* (33–42). Because that gallows-death is accompanied by a description of the raven, one of the beasts of battle, it is arguably placed in a context of war and battle-related violence, acting as a further reminder that, as Adrien Bonjour put it, 'death is foreordained for every man on earth'.⁵⁷ Given all of this, we can see that drawing parallels between the common domestic task of weaving and imagery of violence through battle, torture and execution causes the riddle to transgress boundaries of genre and register, moving it from the quotidian realm to the heroic.

Finally, in case the violent encounter itself is too ambiguous, the last two and a half lines of the poem tie the riddle firmly to the heroic world of lord and retinue:

[...] Ic lafe geseah
 minum hlaforde, þær hæleð druncon,
 þara flana,⁵⁸ on flet beran

I saw the leavings of those arrows, carried out on the floor to my lord, where the warriors drank.

The images presented in these lines are interspersed, but remain clear examples of heroic diction. Each half-line contains at least one term relevant to heroic poetry, and all together they draw the picture of a hall-setting quite thoroughly. *Hlaforð* ('lord') is, of course, used commonly in Old English poetry, occurring sixty-three times in total. While it may be used in religious contexts as well as of worldly lords, in conjunction with the rest of the terms, it is

⁵⁵ See particularly lines 33b–47 where Christ is described in terms of a hero: 'efstan elne mycle' ('he hastened with great courage'; 34a), 'strang ond stiðmod' ('strong and resolute'; 40a), 'modig on manigra gesyhðe' ('brave in the sight of many'; 41a) and the cross as his faithful, unbending retainer: 'þær ic þa ne dorste ofer dryhtnes word / bugan oððe berstan' ('I did not then dare there, against the word of the Lord, to bend or burst'; 35-36a), 'Ealle ic mihte / feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod' ('I was able to fell all those enemies, yet I stood fast'; 37b-38), 'Ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan, / feallan to foldan sceatum, ac ic sceolde fæste standan' ('yet I did not dare to bend to the earth, to fall to the corners of the earth, but I had to stand fast'; 42a-43), 'hyldan me ne dorste' ('I did not dare to bend myself'; 45b).

⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of this legal context of mutilation and torture in Old English literature, see Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, 'Body and Law in Late Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 27 (1998), 209–32.

⁵⁷ Adrien Bonjour, 'Beowulf and the Beasts of Battle', *Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association*, 72 (1957), 563–73 (p. 566).

⁵⁸ See note 9 above.

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placed within the heroic realm. *Flan* ('arrow') rather obviously finds its place in heroic diction because it is a weapon-term, as is *laf* ('leavings, remnant'), when used of swords — although here it literally refers to the finished web. *Laf* occurs frequently in verse, either as a simplex or as the second element in a compound. According to Phyllis Portnoy, the two most common uses of *laf* are 'survivor', at about 34% of instances, followed by 'sword' at 29%.⁵⁹ *Beowulf* once again dominates the poetic uses, followed by *Genesis A*.⁶⁰

In addition to these weapon terms, the hall is evoked in the formulaic description of men drinking. This formula, 'þær hæleð druncon', in line 11b also occurs in line 1b in *Riddle 55*, the poem directly preceding the loom riddle in The Exeter Book. *Riddle 55*, a poem similarly inflected with heroic imagery, is one of the riddles whose solution has not yet achieved scholarly consensus. Suggestions include 'shield', 'scabbard', 'harp', 'cross', 'gallows', 'swordrack', 'tetraktys' and 'swordbox', with 'cross' and 'swordrack' maintaining the most support.⁶¹ More recently, the solution of 'mead barrel' or 'drinking bowl' has been suggested.⁶² However, Niles has argued against this suggestion because, in his opinion, bowls and barrels are too different from the gallows referred to in the poem.⁶³ Furthermore, he questions how these objects tie in with the riddle's description of the object offering weapons to its lord.⁶⁴ The solution which Niles himself offers is perhaps more in line with scholarly trend: **wæpen-hengen* ('weapon-rack').⁶⁵ If this were a two-post structure, like the warp-weighted loom, then we have both an explanation for the similarities between the two poems and also the reference to the gallows: when hung with a mail-coat, this object could resemble both.⁶⁶ In addition to the formulaic reference to men drinking in *Riddle 56*, *flet* is also a term consistent with the heroic imagery of the hall. It occurs no less than fifteen times in *Beowulf*, sometimes as a simplex and sometimes as the first element of a compound. As well as its frequent use in heroic contexts, the entire half-line 'on flet beran' is also a formula repeated in *Riddle 55* (2a). It would seem that these two riddles are bound together by their imagery of a person bearing an object onto the hall floor where the warriors drink.

Thus, one set of images — the lord and retinue drinking on the floor of the mead-hall — appears to be depicted in the positive light of celebration and camaraderie, as is typical of this sort of scene. However, the second set of images — the leavings and the work of arrows which are carried out onto the mead-hall floor — is not as easy to interpret. Is this a victorious presentation of a defeated foe? Is the *laf*, the remains of the struggling creature, a token of the battle, like the swords so often named by this term in heroic poetry? Or is this a loss for the

⁵⁹ Phyllis Carole Portnoy, 'The Riddle of the Remnant: Solving OE *Laf*', *Papers Presented at the 35th International Congress on Medieval Studies, 2000* <<http://www2.kenyon.edu/AngloSaxonRiddles/Portnoy.htm>> [accessed 19 January 2011].

⁶⁰ *Beowulf* contains thirteen instances of the term *laf* (455b, 795b, 1032a, 1488b, 1688a, 2036b, 2191b, 2563b, 2611b, 2628b, 2829b, 2936b, 3160b), while *Genesis A* has five (1343a, 1496b, 1549b, 2005b, 2019a).

⁶¹ Fry, p. 24. Krapp and Dobbie favour 'swordrack' (p. 350), while Williamson (p. 300) remains uncertain, offering the guess 'that the creature is an ornamented sword box and that somehow (either by an unknown wordplay or because of some unknown similarity of function or design) the box is being compared to a gallows or rood in the riddle' (p. 301). Tupper argues that it refers to any vertical pole that contains a crossbeam, a solution which simultaneously explains the imagery of the cross, the gallows and the swordrack (p. 189).

⁶² Keith P. Taylor, 'Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-head-tree: A Reconsideration of Old English Riddle 55', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 94 (1995), 497–512.

⁶³ Niles, p. 69.

⁶⁴ Niles, p. 70.

⁶⁵ Niles, p. 75.

⁶⁶ Niles, p. 84.

war-band?: the *laf* could just as easily be referring to a companion, just as Beowulf refers to Wiglaf as the final remnant of their tribe in his last speech: ‘þu eart endelaf usses cynnes, / Wægmunðinga’ (‘you are the final remnant of our kin, of the Wægmunðings’; 2813–14a).⁶⁷

Given this analysis, it seems fair to say that the imagery of the loom riddle is quite clearly concerned with the heroic, and the violence depicted carries associations of battle, torture and execution. That being said, this connection is initially surprising given that most of the riddles describing objects through heroic imagery can be associated with battle in some way. The obvious example is the sword of *Riddle 20*, but also the bow of *Riddle 23*, and the horns of *Riddles 14* and *80*. The use of heroic imagery in all of these is appropriate because the objects are artifacts that would be used by noble warriors. But the loom is an object used by women, and not just noblewomen — its use is universal. Furthermore, there is a parallel association between weaving and war in *Riddle 35* (mail-coat). This riddle exists not only as a part of the Exeter Book collection, but also as the Northumbrian *Leiden Riddle*, both of which are versions of a translation of Aldhelm’s Latin *Enigma 32, De lorica*.⁶⁸ This poem is a first-person description of a mail-coat, which identifies itself in the negative:

Mec se wæta wong, wundrum freorig,
of his innape ærist cende.
Ne wat ic mec beworhtne wulle flysum,
hærum þurh heahcræft, hygeþoncum min.
Wundene me ne beoð wefle, ne ic wearp hafu,
ne þurh þreata geþræcu þræd me ne hlimmeð,
ne æt me hrutende hrisil scribeð,
ne mec ohwonan sceal am cnysstan.
Wyrmas mec ne awæfan wyrda cræftum,
þa þe geolo godwebb geatwum frætwað.
Wile mec mon hwæpre seþeah wide ofer eorþan
hatan for hælepum hyhtlic gewæde.
Saga soðcwidum, searoþoncum gleaw,
wordum wisfast, hwæt þis gewæde sy.

The wet plain, wonderfully cold, bore me out of its womb. I know in my mind I was not wrought of wool from fleeces, with hair through great skill. I am not wound about with a weft, nor do I have a warp, nor does thread resound in me through threatening attack, nor does a whirring shuttle glide upon me, nor must the beater strike me anywhere. The worms which adorn fine yellow cloth with trappings did not weave me together with the skills of the fates. Nevertheless widely over the earth someone calls me a joyful garment for warriors. Say with true words, clever with skilful thoughts, with very wise words, what this garment is.

The association in *Riddle 35* is the flipside of that in *Riddle 56*: here we have an object of war described in relation to the domestic task of weaving, whereas in *Riddle 56* we have an implement of weaving described in relation to war and violence. The crucial question, then, is why the loom and the act of weaving upon it are so associated with heroic violence.

If we look at where weaving, binding and braiding terms are applied in the larger context of Old English poetry we find that this association is actually not so strange. When construction

⁶⁷ *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, ed. by Robert D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, 4th edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

⁶⁸ The text of *Riddle 35* is taken from Krapp and Dobbie, p. 198. For an edition of the *Leiden Riddle*, see Elliott van Kirk Dobbie’s *The Minor Poems*, ASPR, 6 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), p. 109. For *De lorica*, see Stork, p. 139.

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through weaving and binding is applied to objects, they are invariably objects of high status. Examples include religious cloths, like the temple veil that is torn during the crucifixion in *Christ III* (1134b), as well as tapestries and banners, like those on the walls of Heorot after Beowulf has defeated Grendel (994b–6). Halls are also frequently described as having been constructed from bound timbers, with the formulaic system *x-bendum fæst* used in *Beowulf* no less than six times (722a, 998b, 1878b, 1918a, 2086b, 3072b) and also once in *Guthlac B* (955b). Expensive metal-work is similarly woven, bound or braided, and this includes everything from interwoven mail-coats, to wire-wound swords and helmets, and even the jewel encrusted gates of Paradise in *Christ I* (308b–310a). When used abstractly, weaving and binding are applied to the creation of the world, fate, magic and even language where words are woven into poetry.⁶⁹ These weaving and binding terms are powerful, and they are associated with acts of great artistry. Such an appreciation of the artistry that went into weaving fabric of quality is not unlike that attributed to the smith, a highly esteemed figure in Old English poetry, and one whose own work is elsewhere imagined in relation to textile-production: ‘on him byrne scan, / searonet seowed smiþes orþancum’ (‘a mail-coat shone on him, an armour-net sewn by the skills of the smith’; *Beowulf* 405b–6). Thus, because weaving and binding are used of artistic construction in general, and because this construction is already associated with high status, it is appropriate that weaving should be placed in a heroic register in the poem. There seems in fact to be a great deal of logic to the inversions of riddles.

A final note of emphasis should be placed on the way in which the loom riddle carves out a space for the creative aspects of a domestic chore within the ethic of the war-band and the mead-hall. The craftsman is, of course, just as essential to the lord and to the war-band as he or she is to the household because noblemen, like farmers, need to be clothed and armed with the implements of their trade. And, of course, God, as the creator of the world, is the ultimate craftsman, as Wehlau emphasizes:

The supreme architect is God, who is often called *meotod* (measurer) and *scyppend* (‘shaper’). These terms are so commonly used as to be barely noticeable. Nevertheless, they make clear the predominant metaphors underlying Anglo-Saxon concepts of Creation, and these metaphors are concerned with artistic skills.⁷⁰

Thus, in creating objects through the weaving and binding together of elements, humans both emulate God’s example and, perhaps more controversially, imagine God in their own image.

⁶⁹ See note 30 above.

⁷⁰ Wehlau, p. 16. See also Kathryn Hume, ‘The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3 (1974), 63–74 (p. 74), where she discusses descriptions of heaven and hell as influenced by the idea-complex of the ‘hall’ and ‘anti-hall’.