

Anglo-Saxon Word Play

A Riddle from the 8th Century – in modern English and Anglo-Saxon (Old English)

Often I must war against the wave and fight against the wind. I strive against them together when, shrouded by the sea, I go to seek the earth. My homeland is strange to me. If I become still, I am mighty in the conflict. If I do not succeed in that, because they are stronger than me, at once with rending they will put me to flight. They want to carry off what I must keep safe. I defeat them in that, if my tail endures and the stones are able to hold fast against me in my strength. Ask what is my name.

Old English version – recognize any words?

Oft ic sceal wiþ wæge winnan ond wiþ winde feohtan, somod wið þam sæcce, þonne ic secan gewite eorþan yþum þeaht; me biþ se eþel fremde. Ic beam trong þæs gewinnes, gif ic stille weorþe; gif me þæs tosæleð, hi beoð swiþran þonne ic, ond mec slitende sona flymað, willað oþfergan þæt ic riþian sceal. Ic him þæt forstonde, gif min steort þolað ond mec stiþne wiþ stanas moton fæste gehabban. Frige hwæt ic hatte.

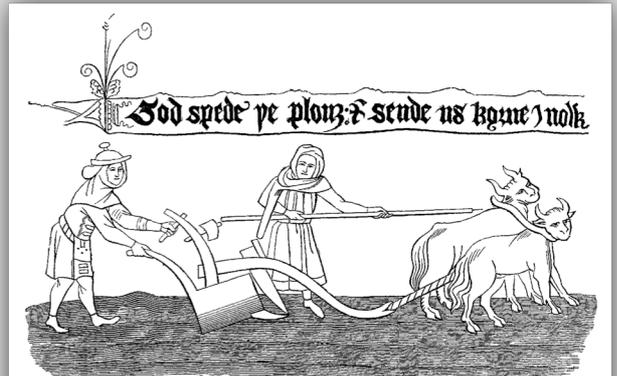


Fig. 18.—Ploughmen.—Fac-simile of a Miniature in a very ancient Anglo-Saxon Manuscript published by Shaw, with legend "God Spede þe Plough, and send us þone enow."

Some Anglo-Saxon riddles for you to solve:

- ❖ I am all on my own, wounded by iron weapons and scarred by swords. I often see battle. I am tired of fighting. I do not expect to be allowed to retire from warfare before I am completely done for. At the wall of the city, I am knocked about and bitten again and again. Hard-edged things made by the blacksmith's hammer attack me. Each time I wait for something worse. I have never been able to find a doctor who could make me better or give me medicine made from herbs. Instead the sword gashes all over me grow bigger day and night.
- ❖ **Ask me for a hint about this one if you need it:** I was abandoned by my mother and father. I wasn't yet breathing. A kind woman covered me with clothes, kept me and looked after me, cuddled me as close as if I had been her own child. Under that covering I grew and grew. I was unkind to my adopted brothers and sisters. This lovely woman fed me until I was big enough to set out on my own. She had fewer of her own dear sons and daughters because she did so.
- ❖ **This one is about a creature and its home:** My home is not quiet but I am not loud. The lord has meant us to journey together. I am faster than he and sometimes stronger, but he keeps on going for longer. Sometimes I rest but he runs on. For as long as I am alive I live in him. If we part from one another it is I who will die.
- ❖ When I am alive I do not speak. Anyone who wants to, takes me captive and cuts off my head. They bite my bare body. I do no harm to anyone unless they cut me first. Then I soon make them cry.
- ❖ A wonderful warrior exists on earth. Two dumb creatures make him grow bright between them. Enemies use him against one another. His strength is fierce but a woman can tame him. He will meekly serve both men and women if they know the trick of looking after him and feeding him properly. He makes people happy. He makes their lives better. But if they let him grow proud, this ungrateful friend soon turns against them.

Now write your own and try it out on the class.