WEAVING WORDS AND BINDING BODIES

The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature

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Contents

Acknowledgments

Finally, to all my friends and family – you know who you are – thank you so very much!

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Abbreviations

ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*
ASPR	Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
DOE	*Dictionary of Old English* (eds. Antonette diPaolo Healey et al.)
DOE Corpus	*Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (eds. Antonette diPaolo Healey et al.)
EETS	Early English Text Society
ELH	*English Literary History*
ELN	*English Language Notes*
ES	*English Studies*
JAF	*Journal of American Folklore*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
Klaeber Four	The fourth edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf* (eds. R.D. Fulk et al.)
MÆ	*Medium Ævum*
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary Online*
OEN	*Old English Newsletter*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association*
PQ	*Philological Quarterly*
RES	*Review of English Studies*

SN   *Studia Neophilologica*
SP   *Studies in Philology*
TOE   *Thesaurus of Old English*

Editions

Unless otherwise stated, all Old English poetic quotations refer to the ASPR editions. (Their numbering is also used for the *Exeter Book* riddles.) However, quotations from *Beowulf*, *Judith*, *The Metres of Boethius*, and *Solomon and Saturn I* and *II* are from Klaeber Four, Griffith's, Godden and Irvine's, and Anlezark's editions, respectively. All references to the *Vulgate* are from the *Biblia Sacra* (eds. Fischer et al.), and those to *The Hêliand* are from Behaghel's edition, while the various Latin enigmata are quoted from Glorie's CCSL edition. Unless otherwise stated, all Old English and Latin translations – which I have tried to keep as literal as possible – are my own.

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WEAVING WORDS AND BINDING BODIES

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Construction and Constriction: Introducing Human Experience in Old English Poetry

The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive survey of material and metaphorical weaving and binding in Old English poetry. There are several hundred instances of such imagery invoked in relation to objects, humans, elemental forces and complex abstract concepts in the poetic corpus. Despite its frequency of appearance and despite its use in a wide range of overlapping and contradictory (nevertheless intriguing) metaphors and thematic clusters, such connective language has received a great deal of passing or partial comment, but no thorough and exhaustive critical treatment. It is perhaps because of the scholarly reduction of the metaphorical use of binding terminology in Old English poetry to mere "cliché"[1] that the significance of the imagery has been overlooked. Given the sheer scale of this formulaic diction and imagery, however, the lack of a comprehensive analysis prevents scholars from engaging in nuanced discussion of thematics within and relationships between texts ranging from the most canonical to the relatively obscure.

The corpus includes a wide range of didactic, heroic, elegiac, and hagiographical texts, of which some have received a great deal of scholarly attention and celebration, while others have been pushed to the margins. Against precedent, this survey will include reference to certain of Ælfric's saints' lives and homiletic texts, which in past scholarship have been considered "rhythmical prose." Following Thomas A. Bredehoft's arguments that the differences between these texts and the traditional poetic canon stem from the former's status as later verse, their inclusion here seems

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1 Robinson, *"Beowulf" and the Appositive Style*, p. 64.

prudent.[2] Bredehoft's comments on metrics and poetic form have also been influential: "the assertion that the later poetry can be effectively compared to the earlier, or that later poets were, in fact, *trying* to compose verse under the same rules as earlier poets is deeply problematic. The reality is not that the poetic tradition was rigid, but rather that Sievers-Bliss formalism is rigid."[3] Despite the variety of forms, content, and intended audiences, weaving and binding remain prevalent themes throughout much of Old English poetry, both early and late.

The decision to focus the survey on poetry springs not only from necessity – there is simply too much material to permit an exhaustive analysis of the prose as well – but also from a desire to situate the poetic texts within their immediate formulaic environment, something that sets them apart from the prose corpus. Nevertheless, where significant parallels between Old English poetic, prose, and Latin texts exist, the wider tradition will most certainly be addressed.

Similarly, the choice to examine weaving and binding imagery together merits some attention. From a modern standpoint, the weaving of actual or metaphorical fabric and the binding up of a body, thing or abstract concept may appear to have little in common. The link, however, lies in the constructive uses of binding, as John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro's discussion of classical textiles emphasizes: "weaving unites what must be united. To weave is to unite, to interlace, to bind: the act is so straightforward that it requires no explanation."[4] While the constructive nature of weaving and binding is clearly evident in Old English poetry, the Anglo-Saxons were also intensely interested in constrictive binding, which could likewise be linked to textile production. An intriguing example of such a constructive-constrictive nexus relates to the image of the net, which is applied to concepts ranging from dangerous entrapments to pieces of protective armour. These associations likely stem from what Gale R. Owen-Crocker dubs the "symbiosis between cloth and metal" in the medieval period,[5]

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2 "Ælfric and Late Old English Verse"; *Early English Metre*, pp. 80–98; and *Authors, Audiences, and Old English Verse*, pp. 146–70. See also "Was Ælfric a Poet?"; and Szarmach, "Ælfric's Rhythmical Prose."

3 *Early English Metre*, p. 7. See also his discussion of the lack of scholarly appreciation for poems that do not fit the rules of traditional Old English poetry on p. 70.

4 *Craft of Zeus*, p. 10.

5 Owen-Crocker, Coatsworth and Hayward, eds., *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles*, p. 3.

with similarities between the crafts of textile production and metalwork evident at both linguistic and literary levels. As a result, in the Old English poetic corpus, terms for weaving and binding are frequently invoked together or in similar contexts.

Although many weaving instances relate to construction, while binding occurrences tend to be more concerned with constriction, both sets of terminology and imagery can be and are employed in either context. Rather than seeing them as binary, we may, perhaps, view these constructive and constrictive applications as the poles of a scale, with representations of both weaving and binding existing at various points along it. Interestingly, however, there are certain distinctions between the two sets of imagery; for example, although the Old English poetic corpus contains references to unbinding (or unlocking), no instances of unweaving are extant. Thus, while bonds may be viewed as separate entities even when employed as part of a structure, the threads of woven objects are not perceived in the same way. This difference is likely the result of binding's greater participation in constrictive contexts – the bonds that fetter a body are unlikely to be confused with a part of said body.

The poetic usage of the constructive-constrictive nature of weaving and binding appears, furthermore, to limit this imagery to certain contexts. Nevertheless, this survey will demonstrate the use of weaving and binding diction in a wide variety of situations, whether actual (the weaving of a tapestry or the tying up of a prisoner) or metaphorical (peace-weaving or the binding of the world by winter weather).

The metaphorical application of weaving and binding imagery presents its own unique set of problems, as demonstrated by ongoing debates in metaphor theory. One of the primary divisions that this theory has historically made with regard to metaphor is to distinguish between those that are creative and those that are conceptual. While creative metaphors are the conscious result of literary wordplay, conceptual metaphors are inherent to human thought itself.[6] Thus, because humans understand new things in relation to that which is already familiar, metaphor is essential to both human understanding and communication. Conceptual metaphors, then, are the "metaphors we live by." For example, the metaphor structure

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6 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 6. The application of conceptual metaphor theory to Anglo-Saxon studies has proven to be a productive methodology: see especially the introductory chapters in Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies*; and Wehlau, *Riddle of Creation*.

ARGUMENT IS WAR stands behind language referring to attacking or shooting holes in an argument or winning a disagreement. The equivalence of argument and war supports the understanding of one complex and emotionally-charged concept in terms of another, more physical one.[7]

Any discussion of metaphorical imagery must grapple with this question of consciousness. Creative metaphors may say something about the idea the poet wishes to convey, while conceptual metaphors tell us more about the thought processes lying behind a cultural group's way of thinking. Identifying Anglo-Saxon uses of metaphor is made even more difficult when we take dead metaphors into account, something that is particularly relevant to the study of a language that has undergone so much change. Dead metaphors, or metaphors that are no longer perceived as metaphorical at all, may be defined in opposition to the collections of related metaphors that can be followed through to an underlying structure, and are therefore "idiosyncratic, unsystematic, and isolated."[8] When we discuss a mountain, for example, we may refer to its "foot," but are unlikely to attribute it with a full range of other body parts.[9]

And so we have three types of metaphors to navigate – those in the foreground (creative), those that exercise power over thought processes from their place in the background (conceptual) and those that have undergone such significant semantic change that they are entirely bleached (dead). It is only by looking at sets of imagery together that we can hope to identify the nature of their metaphorical content. If no example in a group of similar images appears either to be highlighted by the poet or to be influencing the poet's thinking, then (and only then) may we have grounds to suggest that the metaphor may be dead. Although I specify "poet" here, this range of metaphor types occurs throughout Old English literature, not only in the poetry that is this survey's main concern. It should be noted that poetic analysis is especially useful where it is not immediately clear that creative metaphor is being invoked. This is because the poet's interaction with the content of the poem can to some extent be determined from the way in which he or she employs poetic and rhetorical devices in order to highlight certain passages. Such highlighting may take the form of stylistic effects, including ornamental alliteration, rhyme, assonance, and formulaic diction.[10]

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7 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 4.
8 Ibid., p. 55.
9 Ibid.
10 See Orchard, "Artful Alliteration"; and Bredehoft, *Early English Metre*, pp. 63–5, 68, 93, 148–9.

Thus, passages containing weaving and binding references that are considered to be working either concretely or with a semantically bleached sense can be re-examined through the lens of poetics to determine their level of conventionality.

It is in the context of poetic highlighting that the question of expression comes into play. Although metaphors are inherently linked to images and ideas, when we move away from the conceptual aspect to the creative, we find that metaphors may also be consciously expressed for stylistic purposes. Anglo-Saxons writers were, of course, fully capable of employing metaphors in a self-conscious manner. Texts discussing rhetoric and poetics abound in educational contexts, particularly in Anglo-Latin works influenced by classical models.[11] One example in Old English demonstrates the close link between Anglo-Saxon works and their predecessors. Here, the meaning of the Greek *metaphora* as a "transference" is mirrored in the Old English verb *abredgan* (to draw): *Sume sind gebatene* tropi, *þæt sind mislice getacnunga oððe wisan on ledenspræce abrodene of heora agenre getacnunge to oðre gelicnysse*[12] (Some are called figures of speech, which are variously symbols or Latin idioms drawn from their own meaning into another likeness). It is tempting to read this language of carrying over, dragging or even pulling in terms of the yoking together or binding of two concepts. However, it should be noted that the idea of metaphor as binding – useful and relevant as it may be – is not found in Old English.

We need not look far, however, to find indications of bound or woven language. Indeed, material objects like books occasionally stand in for the more abstract enclosures of wisdom for which Old English poetry is famous.[13] A striking example occurs at the beginning of *Solomon and Saturn I*:

Saturnus cwæð:
Hwæt! Ic iglanda   eallra hæbbe
boca onbyrged   þurh gebregdstafas,
larcræftas onlocen   Libia and Greca,
swylce eac istoriam   Indea rices.   (1–3)[14]

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11 For more on language, rhetoric and educational texts, see Gneuss, "Study of Language"; and Irvine, *Making of Textual Culture*, pp. 105–6. Irvine especially emphasizes the influence of Donatus' *Ars maior* on discussions of rhetorical tropes in the works of Augustine, Isidore, and Bede.

12 *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar*, ed. Zupitza, p. 295, section 26.

13 See chapter 8 and conclusion, pp. 231–50 and 296–302.

14 See also *Solomon and Saturn II* 4b–7a.

(Saturn said: Listen! I have tasted the books of all the islands, through braided letters, unlocked the knowledge of the Libyans and the Greeks, likewise also the stories of the kingdom of India.)

For Saturn, books hold the secrets of other civilizations. This wisdom is so material it can be "tasted" or "consumed," while the intertwined letters that hold the key to knowledge can be unlocked through interpretative skill.[15] The Anglo-Saxon poetic approach to words and the wisdom they convey – whether metaphorical or literal – is closely bound up with the skilful crafting of objects. That *cræft* in Old English signifies not only construction and cunning but also power shows how important the act of interpretation could be.[16]

The skilful control evident in Anglo-Saxon ideas of language and wisdom also ties in nicely with Old English poetry's formulaic nature.[17] Much of the imagery discussed in the following chapters is expressed through formulaic diction, which provides a linguistic framework for conveying

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15 Although the *DOE* defines *gebregdstafas* as "learning, literally 'astuteness in letters'," the use of *bregdan* in relation to a net of conspiracy in *Beowulf* 2166b–9a implies a possible play on words with a textile/construction term. *DOE*, s.v. *gebrægd-stafas, gebregd-stafas*. See also sense 2. of *gebrægd, gebregd*: "astuteness, cunning."

16 See *DOE*, s.v. *cræft*.

17 For the purposes of defining the formula, it should be noted that this study adopts Britt Mize's non-systematic model, according to which variable elements, rather than denoting a larger systematic structure, can be read as part of the formula itself. Mize's example relates to the half-lines *hwitust corna* and *corna caldest*. Despite their evident dissimilarities, these are deemed variations of the same formula, participating as they do in the formulaic template *corna x-st* (Mize uses *q* for the variable element), where *x-st* is the superlative of an adjective describing *corn*. *Traditional Subjectivities*, p. 92 (see also further discussion of this model on pp. 52n44, 89–109). I view the flexibility built into this definition as more in line with recent criticisms of the rigidity of Old English poetic theory. Thus, John Miles Foley understands the formula in terms of "not one but a variety of types of diction: alongside the classical half-line phrase stand single words, whole-line patterns, multi-line patterns, collocations, clusters, and themes." *Traditional Oral Epic*, p. 235. Similarly, Elizabeth M. Tyler advocates for a collocational model that embraces the "range of kinds of formulas which overlap with, and often cannot be separated from, other kinds of more stylistically driven verbal repetitions, on the one hand, and patterns found in everyday linguistic expression, on the other." *Old English Poetics*, p. 101. For more on the history of formulaic theory, see O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Diction, Variation, the Formula"; Orchard, "Oral Tradition"; and Tyler, *Old English Poetics*, pp. 101–22.

both traditional and borrowed knowledge.[18] Rather than static phrasing, this diction should be understood as providing "a vibrant link between language and form," according to which conventional language may act as the source, rather than merely the vehicle, of ideas.[19] With this recognition, the understanding of poetic conventions becomes all the more essential to the examination of Old English poetry, the archaic tendency of which Elizabeth M. Tyler attributes to an Anglo-Saxon desire for familiarity: "[t]he stability of poetic convention amidst the movement of history brings us back to the aesthetics of the familiar, which can both assimilate the new and allow the old to change, because it rests on a two-way relationship between language and ideas: dynamic poetry is created in the space between words (including poetic conventions) and ideas."[20]

An understanding of Old English poetics – of the relationship between the idea/image/metaphor and the conventional (or convention-subverting) language that is used to express and highlight it – is therefore essential to a survey of weaving and binding imagery in the Old English corpus. The fact that this imagery is not inherently tied to only one type of theme, scene or text (indeed, it appears in a series of thus far unrecognized formulas, collocations, themes and type-scenes), speaks to its importance to poetry itself. And so, by looking at the many applications of weaving and binding imagery in the context of poetry at large, we can hope to learn more about the conventional and formulaic nature of Old English poetics. An examination of metaphor and style together can help us determine both what the poet has deemed important enough to emphasize and what

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18 For the first, see especially John Miles Foley's discussion of traditional referentiality, which "entails the invoking of a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself, that brings the lifeblood of generations of poems and performances to the individual performance or text." *Immanent Art*, p. 7. For the second, see Andy Orchard and Thomas A. Bredehoft's recent exercises in formula-tracking, which have resulted in a new approach to poetry and poetics, known as literate-formulaic analysis. This methodological approach attempts to pinpoint signficant verbal overlaps between particular texts and known poets. As both Orchard and Bredehoft have recently demonstrated, this theory's ramifications are potentially staggering because they promise to offer previously unavailable insights into the use of texts and manuscripts in specific literary communities throughout Anglo-Saxon England. See Orchard, "Computing Cynewulf"; as well as his "Both Style and Substance"; and Bredehoft, *Authors, Audiences, and Old English Verse*.

19 Tyler, *Old English Poetics*, p. 6.

20 Ibid., p. 172.

his or her culture values most highly. Through formulaic analysis, we can begin to interpret Anglo-Saxon poetic constructions of reality.

In approaching the poetry, my immediate focus will be on weaving and binding imagery and diction. Because this imagery and the ideas behind it are my foremost area of interest, the methodology I employ will be primarily inter-textual, with occasional reference to comparative literary traditions – especially Old English prose, Latin, Old Norse and Old Saxon – when texts in these traditions act as specific analogues or sources of the texts at hand. Given that the poetic language and expression that govern this imagery are central to my approach, I will provide close readings of key passages that have been identified by means of a search for specific terms (using the searchable *DOE Corpus*). The specific terms upon which this survey will focus are the verbs *-wefan* and *-webbian* (to weave) and nouns derived from them (*web* (a woven product) and *webba* (weaver)), as well as *-bindan* (to bind) and *-feterian* (to fetter) and their nominal forms (*-bend* (bond) and *feter* (fetter)). Although these terms are common in prose as well as poetry, their rate of alliteration in poetic passages is, notably, very high, which speaks to their stylistic importance.[21] Occasionally it will also be relevant to look at related terms that frequently collocate with the former set. These include *-bregdan* (to braid), *-lucan* (to lock), *-fæstnian* (to fasten), *-hæftan* (to capture/constrain), *-sælan* (to tie), *-windan* (to wind/twist), *-wriþan* (to wrap around/tie), *-clam* (chain), *-loca* (enclosure) and *-teage* (tie). In order to restrict this study to a reasonable scope, this second set of terms will not be surveyed exhaustively.

By looking at all of the contexts in which the above sets of terminology are applied, the following discussions will both detect and analyse the conventional nature of this language – treating situations where it conforms to, reinvents, and subverts convention. For ease of comparison, I have separated my chapter discussions into three main sections, each of which

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21 See Cronan, "Alliterative Rank in Old English Poetry," p. 150: "the higher frequency of alliteration that is exhibited by the poetic vocabulary indicates that there is a stylistic dimension to alliteration alongside the structural. The restriction of a number of words to poetry has its own stylistic implications, as does the use of words in figurative or extended senses. These words distinguish the language of poetry from the realm of ordinary discourse, and contribute to the creation of a poetic world that is above and beyond the world of everyday life. The stylistic aspects of these words are highlighted by the poets' frequent use of them in alliterating positions. The structure of the verse emphasizes the stylistic dimension of its vocabulary, and thus becomes a stylistic feature itself."

deals with a broad category of weaving and binding imagery. These categories are based on my own observation of similarities and differences in the way the key terms are employed. The main questions I will pose relate to the identification of the conventions relevant to each category of weaving and binding imagery – the broad categories being those covered by sections on: material objects, bondage, and the internal and abstract. In addition to identifying the use of conventional language, I will explore how instances exemplify or play with these categorical and poetic conventions. Furthermore, I will examine the links that can be made between categories, demonstrating the usefulness and necessity of reading all of the instances together. Because the fundamental principles that govern these conventions become apparent from such links, this survey will demonstrate how thematic and stylistic analysis can be used together to reveal new insights into the Anglo-Saxon poetic mindset.

Naturally, some thematic and stylistic analysis has already been undertaken in the general field of this survey. However, as mentioned above, previous scholarship on weaving and binding language and imagery has tended to restrict itself to either passing comments or partial discussion. For example, while numerous intriguing analyses of *The Wanderer* have touched on the poem's emphasis on binding and enclosures,[22] such imagery has either been discussed in relation to this poem alone, or in relation to a select group of texts (frequently elegies). A connection has not before been made between *The Wanderer*'s mental binding and the bonds that hold Grendel's glove together, or the bodily ties and binding afflictions of *Guthlac B* because, at first, they seem to be entirely separate cases. Yet, each may be read in the context of object-construction as well as human constriction, implying that they actually have a great deal in common.

Furthermore, where extended discussion has already taken place, it has frequently employed a distinct methodology and exhibited a different focus. Maren Clegg Hyer's doctoral dissertation, "Textiles and Textile Imagery in Old English Literature," examines what poetry can tell us about the history of textiles and textile production in the Anglo-Saxon

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22 See Clark and Wasserman, "Imagery of *The Wanderer*"; Cook, "*Woriað þa Winsalo*"; Greenfield, "Old English Elegies"; Greentree, "Wanderer's Horizon"; Hait, "Wanderer's Lingering Regret"; Irving, "Image and Meaning"; Johnson, "*Werig* and *Dreorig*"; Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 110; Malmberg, "*Wanderer*: *waþema gebind*"; Mize, "Representation of the Mind"; Orchard, "Re-Reading *The Wanderer*"; Stanley, "Old English Poetic Diction"; and Wehlau, *Riddle of Creation*, pp. 46–50.

period. Conversely, in rooting my discussion in philology and poetics, this survey's methodology works in the opposite direction: it examines what weaving imagery can tell us about Anglo-Saxon poetry. At the same time, these two surveys' similar interest in textiles – only part of the picture in the case of this survey, which also discusses binding – speaks to a growing interest in the rapidly developing field of textiles history. This emerging research area has gained significant momentum in recent years, through Gale R. Owen-Crocker's pioneering work on interdisciplinary approaches to Anglo-Saxon material culture and literature, and is set to continue expanding since the publication of the *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles of the British Isles, c. 450–1450* (and associated annotated bibliography).

By engaging with weaving imagery alongside that of binding, this survey also addresses the lack of holistic treatment of the constructive and constrictive aspects of such terminology.[23] Ruth Wehlau's monograph *"The Riddle of Creation": Metaphor Structures in Old English Poetry*, though not comprehensive, comes closest to a detailed discussion of binding tropes in Old English poetry. She approaches metaphors of creation through an investigation of architecture and enclosure, arguing that Old English poetry employs these ideas as metaphors in the context of bodily and cosmic order and chaos. Her focus is on the constructive aspect of binding buildings, the body, and the world, and she treats neither the linguistic context of *bindan/bend* words nor their constrictive application. In so doing she addresses a different range of texts than those treated in this survey. Lori Ann Garner, in her recent book, *Structuring Spaces: Oral Poetics and Architecture in Early Medieval England,* focuses, like Hyer, on interrelationships between literature and material culture. While her discussion is intriguing, its specific interest in buildings overlaps only slightly with the current survey's linguistic and poetic foundation.

Overall, this survey's unique goal is to explore the poetic and cultural contexts of the Anglo-Saxon approach to created objects (construction) and bound figures (constriction), which together speak to the poetry's primarily human-centred world view. Each of the survey's three sections is made up of three to four chapters. Part I deals, in particular, with the

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23 This lack is actually quite surprising considering how common binding is to the majority of types of Old English literature. Indeed, the *DOE* records no less than ca. 675 instances of *(ge)bindan* and its past participle. See the entries for *bindan*, *gebindan* and *gebunden*.

material context of objects, and so includes discussions of poetic representations of weaving and woven products, as well as the "woven" mailcoat, and the uses of binding in the construction of buildings and objects. In looking at conventional and subversive depictions of objects, this section argues that Old English poetry maintains a focus on status and prestige objects, whose worth is measured in relation to their helpfulness to humans.

Part II examines bondage, with specific discussions of binding in nature, in imprisonment and hell, and slavery and servitude. For the most part, the depictions in this section deal with binding as constriction, with objects, natural forces, and the devil all bound and binding. The emphasis in this section is therefore once again on the human struggle for control over its situation and surroundings, demonstrating the Anglo-Saxon tendency to construct and understand the world in terms of human experience.

Moving on from this context of the bound body, Part III analyses representations of the internal world and abstract concepts. It treats the physical ties of the body, whether structural or destructive, as well as the protective binding of the heart and mind against affliction. The discussion then turns to the use of weaving and binding imagery in relation to language, creation, magic, and fate. Once again abstract forces are imagined in human terms – either because they constrict people or because they are constructed like objects through human processes of manufacture. In addition to these abstract concepts, this section explores imagery of peace-weaving. In my rejection of the peace-weaver as a strictly female role, I look to the formulaic context of the Old English to find that this image is linked to status and prestige (peace being imagined as an object of worth). The final image of the ironic peace-weaver in *Beowulf* offers a perfect example of the Anglo-Saxon poetic construction of the world as a place of both overwhelming bondage and endless opportunity for the regaining of control through creative genius. Thus, Old English poetry, with its distinctly anthropocentric view of the world, reveals that – like humans – all of creation weaves and is woven, binds and is bound.

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PART I

Webs and Rings: Experiencing Objects

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1 The Material Context of Weaving

Material objects retain a place of great importance in Old English, not just because they are tools for human use, but also because they represent the human skill that went into their construction. Thus, the frequently cited passage from Fred C. Robinson's *"Beowulf" and the Appositive Style* aligns objects with the cultural world, which he sees in binary opposition to the natural world:

> Where nature is malevolent and chaotic, artifice is reassuring, and this, I believe, explains the remarkable accumulation of appositions and compounds for man-made, as opposed to natural, things in *Beowulf*. The man-made wall, the road, the ship, the hall, and human clothing and armor are not only practically useful but also are comforting symbols of the ability of man, through skill and reason, to subdue and control the natural world.[1]

This emphasis on achieving control over one's world through the creation of objects is perhaps less readily apparent in modern, industrialized societies where object-human power dynamics relate more to ownership than construction. In these societies, craftsmanship and the non-industrial creation of objects appear to function less as symbols of collective triumph over nature and more as expressions of personal ability. The focus on skill has shifted from communal to individual. Keeping in mind such differing approaches to the skill of human construction, this chapter will examine

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1 P. 71. Robinson's approach to objects builds on George Clark's discussion of weapons and armour: "Arms and armor in *Beowulf* are human artifacts, instances of man's creative power and of his control over nature." "Beowulf's Armour," p. 409.

poetic depictions of material weaving, looking first at the contexts in which weaving diction is invoked, before turning to a discussion of the loom and an analysis of *Riddle 56*.

Cloth is an important part of most cultures because of its ability to protect the body, act as currency, and define social status. Given "how readily its appearance and that of its constituent fibers can evoke ideas of connectedness or tying," it is also frequently invoked as a metaphor for society.[2] Because of the importance and universality of cloth in any given culture and because of its aptness as a metaphor for community and social relations, we might very well expect cloth to appear prominently in the Old English poetic corpus. However, in approaching Anglo-Saxon constructions of reality, it becomes apparent that, for the purposes of the poetry at least, cloth was viewed very differently. When cloth does appear it is invariably a prestige object – like swords, halls, and other objects whose status is more readily apparent – invoked in order to indicate wealth or power. Furthermore, when the weaving process, whether material or metaphorical, is treated, it is always in a context that ties together construction, power, and control.

Poetic Representations of Textiles

Extended descriptions of weaving, like those of *Riddle 56* and *Riddle 35* (discussed below and in the following chapter), are few and far between in Old English poetry. Much of our information on textiles and textile-representation comes from brief glimpses in poems largely unconcerned with textiles. The lack of representation of textiles in Old English poetry is due partly to the nature of the poetry which survives – heroic and religious poetry tends not to dwell on domestic contexts – and partly perhaps to the commonness of weaving and textiles. This commonness is, of course, part of what makes them important to our study of their place in culture because anything essential to a cultural group is likely to be embedded in that culture's world view.

One of the references to textiles most commonly invoked by scholars is more of a comment on women's roles in Anglo-Saxon society than a description of cloth production, and it is for this reason that it has received so much attention. This is *Maxims I*'s statement: *Fæmne æt hyre bordan*

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2 Schneider and Weiner, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience*, p. 2.

geriseð (63b) (a woman belongs at her embroidery).[3] *Maxims I* is one of those texts designated by scholars as "wisdom literature,"[4] the purpose of which is "to convey in a nutshell the full range of spatial and temporal diversity."[5] A wise person is, thus, aware of such diversity, of the changing nature of the world, and the few principles that are stable.[6] Russell G. Poole traces this focus on understanding the world and the place of humanity in it to uncertainty and the desire to guard against misfortune. In doing so, he points towards psychological research that outlines the way in which "unfavourable events are not necessarily distressing so long as one has previously been inducted into the knowledge that they will come and then usually go," with education serving as a method of imparting knowledge to "neutralize" threats.[7] This suggestion that knowledge allows for power over the world and human situation is a common scholarly trend, illustrated by the definition of wisdom literature in terms of its purpose: "to suggest a scheme of life in the broadest sense of the word, to ensure its continuance, to predict its variations and to associate humanity with the fundamental rhythms of nature. It is an attempt to control life by some kind of order, to reduce the area of the unexpected and the sudden."[8] Wisdom literature's interest in patterning, order, and control makes it the ideal place to search for representations of weaving and binding.

What we have in *Maxims I*, however, is a reference not to weaving, but to embroidery.[9] This quite firmly places the context of this passage among the higher levels of society, at court, and in the convent. Indeed, with "no evidence for a parallel 'folk' embroidery tradition," Penelope Walton Rogers concludes that embroidery was likely associated with nobility.[10] Christine Fell notes that while basic tasks such as weaving and spinning may not have had class associations, the production of more expensive

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3 The importance of textiles to the concept of the "good wife" is also evident in the Bible and comparative European historical contexts. See Proverbs 31:13–24; and Büttner, "Education of Queens," pp. 204–27.

4 Although Thomas D. Hill prefers the term "sapiential" literature; see "Wise Words," p. 166.

5 Poole, *Old English Wisdom Poetry*, p. 18.

6 Ibid., p. 16.

7 Ibid., pp. 10–11.

8 Bloomfield, "Understanding Old English Poetry," p. 71.

9 For more on the surviving Anglo-Saxon embroidery fragments, see Coatsworth, "Stitches in Time."

10 *Cloth and Clothing*, p. 103.

textiles and their often complex ornamentation would be the realm of those with both money and time.[11] It is this more detailed and skilled textile craft of embroidering designs on fine cloth that is linked to noble women, whether they actually performed the work or had it commissioned.

The majority of the remaining references to textiles in Old English poetry do tend to include some element indicating their woven nature; however, these too are high status objects. The terms used in these descriptions may take the form of compounds with *web* as the second element or may simply pay particular attention to the interlinked or braided nature of the object. Such fine cloth often had religious associations, and thus might find its way into Old English poetic texts, as in the case of the temple veil that is rent in two at Christ's crucifixion. This veil is referred to as the *godwebba cyst* (1134b) (best of fine-woven cloths) in *Christ III*. *Godweb*, literally "God-web," is a compound describing cloth of the highest quality. Known as *purpura* in Latin, this heavy silk appeared in a variety of colours, and it would have been in use both for liturgical purposes and in (wealthy) secular contexts.[12] *Godweb* is thus invoked in *Christ III* not to describe everyday fabric, but to point to both the cloth's high value and its importance as a religious symbol. Hence, to the overt context of Christ's crucifixion tearing down what came before and building a new spirituality from its foundations is added another layer in which Christ, even in death, denies the importance of material wealth.[13]

Such a negative context of wealth, integral perhaps to Christian tenets,[14] is repeated elsewhere in Old English poetry, particularly in translations or adaptations of Latin works and biblical accounts. Hence, *godweb* is again invoked in relation to wealth in *The Metres of Boethius (Metre 8)*:

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11 *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 40. Fell also reminds us that toward the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, the situation was more complex. By this time, the greater demand for high quality secular and religious garments led to the training of slaves from large households in this work.

12 Owen-Crocker, "Women's Costume," pp. 427–8. See also the section on purple by Owen-Crocker and John Munro, in Owen-Crocker, Coatsworth, and Hayward, eds., *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles*, pp. 436–8.

13 For more on the temple veil in this text, the Vulgate and the Old Saxon *Hêliand* (5664b–70a), see my forthcoming article "Sails, Veils, and Tents."

14 For more on the function of treasure in Old English poetry and its relationship with Christianity, see Tyler, *Old English Poetics*, pp. 24, 36–7.

        nalles win druncon
scir of steape.   Næs þa scealca nan
þe mete oðþe drinc   mængan cuðe,
wæter wið hunige,   ne heora wæda þon ma
sioloce siowian,   ne hi siarocræftum
godweb giredon,   ne hi gimreced
setton searolice,   ac hi simle him
eallum tidum   ute slepon
under beamsceade,   druncon burnan wæter,
calde wyllan.   (20b–29a)

(They did not drink wine, bright from the cup. There was not at all any man
then who knew how to mix food or drink, water with honey, nor, more-
over, sew their garments with silk, nor did they construct fine-woven cloth
with clever skills, nor did they cunningly build bejeweled halls, but they al-
ways slept outside at all times under the shade of trees, drank water from the
stream, the cold spring.)

This metre appears in the tenth-century C-text of the Old English transla-
tion of Book 2, Metre 5 of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*.[15] The
B-text, an entirely prose translation into Old English, was copied later,
probably from the end of the eleventh or early part of the twelfth century,
although it likely represents an older version than the prosimetric C-text.[16]
For ease of comparison, the Latin text is printed below on the left and the
B-text prose on the right:

Non Bacchica munera norant   Nalles scir win hi ne druncan, ne
liquido confundere melle   nanne wætan hi ne cuþon wið hu-
nec lucida uellera Serum   nige mengan, ne seolocenra hrægla
Tyrio miscere ueneno.   mid mistlicum bleowum hi ne gim-
Somnos dabat herba salubres,   don. Ealne weg hi slepon ute on
potum quoque lubricus amnis,   triowa sceadum. Hlutterra wella
umbras altissima pinus. (6–12)[17] wæter hi drincon. (9–12)[18]

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15 Godden and Irvine, eds., *Old English Boethius*, 1:18.
16 Ibid., 1:9, 46. For more on the relationship between the texts, see ibid., 1:44–9.
17 *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. Moreschini, p. 45.

(They did not know the gifts of Bacchus, to combine liquid with honey, nor to imbue bright Chinese silks with Tyrian dye. The grass gave them pleasant sleep, likewise the flowing river drink, the highest pines shade.)

(Not at all did they drink bright wine, nor did they know how to mix liquid with honey, nor did they desire silk clothing with various colours. They always slept outside in the shade of trees. They drank the water of pure springs.)

All three texts – the Latin original, prose, and poetic translations – similarly invoke the simplicity of the lifestyle practiced by the earth-dwellers from the first age. While the Latin poem focuses to some extent on the innocence of these people (they did not know about later technologies), the Old English prose text implies a sense of moral superiority (they neither knew nor desired later technologies). The prose text relates content similar to that found in the Old English poetic version, but there is no mention of hall-building nor is there any emphasis on the construction of cloth. Yet in focusing on the cloth's colour, the prose more faithfully translates the Latin poem's reference to dyes.

The difference between the three versions is particularly noteworthy because it demonstrates the importance of weaving and binding imagery to the poetics of Old English. Indeed, it is the fine construction of cloth that here represents the more complex technologies of later cultures, which are depicted as increasingly dependent upon material objects as sources of riches and status. The description of cloth is also more extended than in the previous and following examples discussed in this section, with direct reference to the skilful sewing that goes into making cloth in the Anglo-Saxon period. This emphasis can also be seen at the level of poetics, especially in light of Thomas A. Bredehoft's recent discussion of ornamental effects (such as rhyme and secondary alliteration) as "linguistic or poetic interlacing."[19] He particularly notes the use of such effects in cases where the poet wishes to emphasize construction motifs,[20] a context that is especially appropriate in this passage given the reference to

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18 Godden and Irvine, eds., *Old English Boethius*, 1:271, ch. 15.

19 *Early English Metre*, p. 65.

20 Ibid., pp. 65, 68, 93, 148–9. In particular, Bredehoft cites *Judith*, *The Ruin* and *The Death of Alfred*. Seth Lerer also discusses binding imagery in relation to poetic construction, although he is less concerned with poetic devices; see *Literacy and Power*, pp. 112–25.

textile-production. Here, the poet-translator includes a variety of effects in order to highlight the construction of and the construction in these lines: in addition to an interlinear assonance of short and long "ea" (*scealca/eallum/-sceade* and *steape/beam-*), "æ" (*Næs/mængan/wæter/-cræft/wæda*[21]) and "io" (*sioloce/siowian*), the passage contains a near-rhyme in one half-line (*druncon burnan*), and plays with both "i" and "m" sounds in two consecutive b-verses (*hi gim-* and *hi simle him*). Perhaps most interesting, however, is the interlacing of "s" alliteration, which occurs in three lines in this passage.[22] Given that "s" is the only letter to alliterate more than once in these lines, its multiple use strongly emphasizes the silken textile (*sioloce*), its sewn construction (*siowian*) and the skill that went into said construction (*siarocræftum*), as well as the skilfully bejeweled hall (*setton searolice*).

This context of skilful craft is elided in the other two references to *godweb* in Old English religious poetry, both of which invoke the rich material for its association with wealth and status. Thus, the poetic retelling of *Exodus* depicts fabric as a treasure and links it specifically with gold in the passage describing the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt:

> Heo on riht sceodon
> gold and godweb,   Iosepes gestreon,
> wera wuldorgesteald.   (587b–9a)

(They equally divided the gold and the fine-woven cloth, Joseph's treasure, the glorious riches of men.)

Similarly invoked in the context of spoils of war, Ælfric refers to *godweb* in his description of Judas Machabeus' victory over Antiochus' army, in the saint's life, *Passio Sanctorum Machabeorum*:

> and iudas þa funde þa ða he fram fyrde gecyrde
> gold . and seolfor . godeweb . and purpuran .
> and fela oðre herereaf on þam fyrdwicum.   (358–60)[23]

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21 Although *wæda* contains a long "æ," paired as it is with *wæter*, the visual similarity makes it notable.

22 Bredehoft notes that late Old English verse allows "sc" and "s" to alliterate with one another; *Authors, Audiences, and Old English Verse*, p. 132.

23 *Lives of Saints*, ed. Skeat, 2:90.

(and then Judas found, when he returned from the undertaking, gold and silver, fine-woven cloth and purple, and many other army-spoils in that military camp.)

The linking of fine fabric and gold in these two passages is not particularly out of place since cloth operates as a form of currency in many cultures.[24] Indeed, cloth could even be woven with threads of gold, a technique that was practiced throughout the Roman Empire, with the archaeological record supporting its use both on the Continent and in England.[25] In most of the finds, the woven thread has disintegrated, leaving only the strips of gold behind, except in one of the brocaded pieces found at Taplow where the warp has survived.[26] A number of bands woven with gold thread have also survived in Anglo-Saxon contexts, and these have been identified as brocaded hair bands and girdles worn by aristocratic women, as well as two examples of women's cuffs or bracelets and two later examples of men's jacket borders and a belt.[27]

Cloth that is ornamented by gold is also referred to in *Beowulf*'s banquet scene, following the fight with Grendel. The hall is described as shining and splendid with what appear to be great tapestries on the walls:

> fela þæra wæs,
> wera ond wifa   þe þæt winreced,
> gestsele gyredon.   Goldfag scinon
> web æfter wagum,   wundorsiona fela
> secga gehwylcum   þara þe on swylc starað.   (992b–6)

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24 Schneider and Weiner, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience*, p. 2; Owen-Crocker, Coatsworth and Hayward, eds., *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles*, p. 3. See also the section on gold and silver thread by Paul Garside, pp. 237–9.

25 Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, p. 96. A similar reference to cloth woven with gold occurs in Ælfric's *Natale Sancte Agnetis, uirginis*, ed. Skeat, 1:172, lines 36–7 (referring to spiritual clothing).

26 Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, p. 96. Indeed, this very process of disintegration is described in homily 10, *Þisses Middangeardes Ende Neah Is*, Morris, ed., *Blickling Homilies*, p. 113: *Nu þu miht her geseon moldan dæl & wyrmes lafe, þær þu ær gesawe godweb mid golde gefagod* (Now you can see here a portion of earth and the leavings of worms, where earlier you saw fine-woven cloth dappled with gold).

27 Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, p. 96; and Wilson, "Craft and Industry," p. 272.