

THE EVENING SINGER OF RIDDLE 8 (K-D)

Although various bird solutions have been offered for Exeter R.8 (K-D), Wyatt's "nightingale" has not been seriously challenged so far.¹ The etymological correspondence between OE *nihtegala* ("the night singer") and textual "æfensceop" (5a), as pointed out by that scholar (71), cannot be haphazard. The riddle however presents some obscure aspects which have hindered the unanimous acceptance of this solution. This paper sets out to demonstrate that these textual peculiarities in fact constitute no obstacle to the maintainance of "nightingale" as the most probable answer to this riddle.

To begin with, the clues of R.8 do not seem to be as obscure as those found in other texts of the collection, since most of them point to a bird whose main characteristic is its singing abilities. The notorious capacity of this bird was already much celebrated in classical literature, and R.8 constitutes a further sample of this poetic tradition. Notably, the first four lines of the riddle as well as 6b and 7a are no doubt devoted to the description of the bird's exceptional warbling.

Ic purh mu p sprece mongum reordum,
wrencum singe, wrixle geneahhe
heafodwope, hlude cirme,
healde mine wisan, hleopre ne mipe,
eald æfensceop, eorlum bringe
blisse in burgum, ponne ic bugendre
stefne styrme; stille on wicum
sittal nigende. Saga hwæt ic hatte,
pe swa scirenige sceawendwisan

¹ Actually, it was Dietrich who first thought of this bird as a probable answer for this riddle although he hesitated between "nightingale" and "pipe" (1859: 462). Later, he changed his mind and put forward "wood-pigeon" instead (1865: 239). Wyatt's edition however favoured Dietrich's "nightingale," which was in turn supported by Trautmann and Williamson. A recent discussion of this text is provided by Hill, who regards "starling" as a probable solution to this riddle.

hlude onhyrge, hælepum bodige
wilcumena fela wope minre.¹

The expressions “mongum reordum” (1b) and “bugendre stefne” (6b-7a) clearly refer to the nightingale’s ample voice register. Similarly, “wrencum singe” (2a) and “wrixle geneahhe / heafodwope”(2b-3a) allude to the bird’s excellent capacity to modulate the tone when singing, a distinctive quality which had already been expounded by Pliny in his *Natural History*:

Modulatus editur sonus, et nunc continuo spiritu trahitur in longum, nunc variatur inflexo, nunc distinguitur conciso, copulatur intorto, promittitur revocato; infuscatur ex inopinato, interdum et secum ipse murmurat, plenus, gravis, acutus, creber, extensus, ubi visum est vibrans--summus, medius, imus... (X.xliii.81-82)²

Tupper pointed out the similarity between the beginning of R.8 and the opening lines of Aldhelm’s R.22 (“Acalantida”) which also describe the vocal abilities of this bird: “Vox mea diversis variatur pulcra figuris, / raucisonis numquam modulabor carmina rostris; / spurca colore tamen, sed non sum spreta canendo” (1-3).³ As in R.8–“healde mine wisan, hleopre ne mipe” (4)–,

¹ The edition of this text is from Krapp and Dobbie. Mackie (1934) translates the riddle as follows: “I speak from my mouth with many voices, sing with modulated notes, often change my speech, call out loudly, keep to my custom, do not refrain from sound. An old evening poet, I bring to men bliss in the cities. When I cry out in a voice of varying pitch, they sit quiet in their dwellings, listening. Say what I am called, who, like a woman jester, loudly mimic the habits of a buffoon, and announce with my voice many welcome things to men” (99).

² Rackham’s translation: «The sound is given out with modulations, and now is drawn out into a long note with one continuous breath, now varied by managing the breath, now made staccato by checking it, or linked together by prolonging it, or carried on by holding it back; or it is suddenly lowered, and at times sinks into a mere murmur, loud, low, bass, treble, with trills, with long notes, modulated when this seems good--soprano, mezzo, baritone ... » (345).

³ The edition of this text is by Pitman. Lapidge’s translation: “My glorious voice warbles with various melodies: I shall never sing my songs with a harsh-sounding beak. For all that I am dusky in colour, yet I am not to be scorned for my singing” (Lapidge and Rosier 74). As pointed out by Erhardt-Siebold (183), these lines in turn parallel those in Alcuin’s poem “De luscinia”: «Spreta colore tamen fueras non spreta canendo, / Lata sub angusto gutture vox sonuit, / Dulce melos iterans vario modulamine Musae / Atque creatorem semper in ore canens.» (7-10) [Spurned though you were / for your colour, for your singing you were not spurned; / your swelling voice sounded in your narrow throat, / repeating its sweet tunes in different

the nightingale is also said to sing uninterruptedly in Alcuin's poem "De luscinia": "Hoc natura dedit, naturae et conditor almus, / Quem tu laudasti vocibus assiduis..." (19-20).¹

Lines 10b and 11 of R.8—"hælepum bodige / wilcumena fela wope minre"—probably allude to the tradition that considers the nightingale as a typical harbinger of spring. As Pfeffer states, "the true nightingale's song is remarkable only during its mating season in the spring... Its song is not at all distinctive during the winter" (93). Thus, it is probably due to the fact that the bird has traditionally been associated to spring that Aldhelm's R.22 also makes a reference to this: "Sic non cesso canens fato terrente futuro; / Nam me bruma fugat, sed mox æstate redibo" (4-5).²

Despite its clear allusion to the etymology of OE *nihtegala*, the term "æfensceop" (5a) has however posed some problems as several scholars seem to be reluctant to accept the notion of the nightingale as a typical night singer. Yet the reputation of this bird as a nocturnal singer is well attested in classical and medieval literature. For example, Pliny's *Natural History* explains that this bird sings incessantly by night at the beginning of spring: "Luscinis diebus ac noctibus continuis xv garrulus sine intermissu cantus densante se frondium germinat..." (X.xliii.81).³ Alcuin's poem on the nightingale similarly refers to this: "Noctibus in furvis nusquam cessavit ab odis / Vox veneranda sacris, o decus atque decor" (11-12).⁴ Although we could conjecture that the owl might also fit the condition established by the *æfensceop* clue, in literary tradition the nightingale's reputation as a night

melodies, / always singing odes to the Creator.] (Godman's edition and translation 145)

¹ "This was the gift of Nature and of Nature's kindly creator / whom you praised with unceasing voice ..." (Godman 145).

² Lapidge's translation: "thus I do not cease singing in the face of a frightening future fate: for winter puts me to flight, but I shall return as soon as summer comes" (Lapidge and Rosier 74). The reputation of the nightingale as a harbinger of spring was also kept throughout the Middle Ages as can be observed in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*: "the nyghtyngale, that clepeth forth the grene leves newe ..." (351-52). In medieval English lyrics, the bird is also frequently associated with spring: "When pe nyhtegale singes pe wodes waxen grene; / lef ant gras ant blosme springes in Aueryl, y wene" (Brook 63).

³ "Nightingales pour out a ceaseless gush of song for fifteen days and nights on end when the buds of the leaves are swelling ..." (Rackham 345).

⁴ Godman's translation: "On gloomy nights your adorable voice never ceased / your sacred songs, my pride and beauty" (145).

singer seems to surpass that of the owl because of the ceaseless character of the former's singing customs in spring. This idea can be for instance observed in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, in which the owl accuses the nightingale of singing endlessly during the whole night: "Ac thu singest alle longe night / from eve forth hit is dai-light..." (331-32).¹

These passages thus confirm the widespread knowledge of the nightingale as a traditional night singer as the expression "eald æfensceop" seems to suggest.² The key term "æfensceop" however clearly implies a comparison to a poet or scop, as Williamson for example has pointed out: "Each nightingale has a repertoire of songs and the singers compete with one another... Nightingales are said to practice often and to imitate verses..." (155). He supports this assumption on a passage from Pliny's *Natural History*:

[Luscinis] plures singulis sunt cantus, nec iidem omnibus, sed sui cuique. certant inter se, palamque animosa contentio est... meditantur aliae iuveniores versusque quos imitentur accipiunt... (X.xliii.82-3).³

In Alcuin's "De luscina," the nightingale is even personified as a devout Christian who continuously sings continuously to praise God: "Felix omnium, dominum nocteque dieque / Qui studio tali semper in ore canit" (11-16).⁴ The identification of the nightingale with the poet is also a well-known cliché in medieval vernacular poetry of Western Europe. As Pfeffer for example explains, "For the Occitan troubadours, the nightingale is perceived as a parallel to the poet inciting the troubadour to sing or reminding the poet

¹ A famous literary reference to the nocturnal singing habits of the bird can be found in Juliet's speech trying to convince Romeo to stay longer: «Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day. / It was the nightingale and not the lark / That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear. / Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree. / Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.» (*Romeo and Juliet* III.v.1-5).

² I thus agree with Williamson (157) that "eald" simply indicates familiarity.

³ Rackham's translation: "The birds [Nightingales] have several songs each, and not all the same but every bird songs of its own. They compete with one another, and there is clearly an animated rivalry between them ... Other younger birds practise their music, and are given verses to imitate ..." (345).

⁴ "How happy is he who both day and night / with such zeal always has songs for the Lord on his lips!" (Godman 145). Furthermore, the comparison of the nightingale with a poet is actually quite frequent in later Latin lyrics like the *Carmina Burana*, as Pfeffer points out (89).

of his unhappiness in love and his inability to compose” (90). Given that the metaphorical association of this bird with the figure of the poet became commonplace in medieval literature, we might assume that the term “æfensceop” constitutes an early example of this literary convention.

So far, the identification of the riddlic creature as the nighingale seems to be unquestionable. Nevertheless, a major problem posed by this text is the presence of what seems to be a runic character between the end of R.7 and the beginning of R.8, above the word “reordum” (1b).¹ As there are occasional cases of runic-like marks which have been regarded as probable extra-textual clues giving up the answer to other riddles, some editors have thought of the possibility that the rune of no.8 might also be pointing to the initial letter of the solution. R.6 (sun) is the clearest example of runic clues of this kind, as two *sigels* are found above the term “Crist” (2a) and at the end of the poem, respectively. Those runes have both been interpreted as the initial letter of OE *sunne* (or Lat. *sol*), the answer to this riddle.²

In the case of R.8, the extra-textual mark has been read by most editors as runic *cen* so that different solutions have been proposed depending on this initial letter, often ignoring the evidence of the term “æfensceop” and the other clues of the riddle. On this basis, scholars have offered Lat. *cicuanus* or *catanus* (jay), OE *cuscote* (wood-pigeon), and OE *ceo* (chough), among other tentative answers.³ Nevertheless, Williamson questions the validity of this argument, as he observes that, if the mark were really a rune, it would rather be “closer to *Ur* than to *Cen*” (154).⁴ He also notes: “The song-birds must be judged as they fit the descriptive language of the riddle, not as the initial letters of their names correspond to the elusive ‘rune’” (154). Following Wyatt’s interpretation of “æfensceop” as an allusion to OE *nihtegala*, Williamson thus sticks to the proposal “nightingale” (156), although he does not offer a conclusive explanation for the relationship between the marginal letter

¹ See Chambers’ facsimile edition (fol. 103a). Williamson provides a discussion on this marginal mark (154-56) and offers comparative plates (53).

² For further possible cases of runic clues of this kind, see Williamson’s comments on R.17 and R.14.

³ See Williamson (153) for a detailed account of the different solutions provided for this riddle.

⁴ See Williamson’s comparative plates (53).

and the riddle solution:¹ “I believe the mark to have been made by a post-medieval peruser of the text who thought himself to be making a ‘rune-like’ letter indicating the solution of the following riddle, ‘nightingale’” (156).

To shed light on the confusion caused by so-called “rune,” it would be interesting to bring Förster’s opinion into consideration. In the facsimile edition of the *Exeter Book*, he points out that “editors have sometimes mistaken modern casual scribbling for runes,” arguing that the mark in R.8 “is really a modern imitation of the old *n* in *ne beom*” as found in the foregoing manuscript line (Chambers 64, note 29). Williamson conversely contends that the mark cannot be that “modern,” “since it appears in the manuscript transcription made by Robert Chambers [in 1831]” (156), concluding that “The mark is long and thin and resembles very little the *n* in this or any other medieval text that I have seen” (156). Indeed, the mark must have been placed as an intentional post-scribal clue pointing to the solution. However, I would rather follow Förster in so far as the mark is closer to an *n* than to a rune, since it clearly lacks the characteristic sharp stroke of runic *ur* or *cen* as found, for example, in Cynewulf’s signature in *Christ* 805 (fol. 19b).² With the exception of its slightly increased length, the extra-textual mark certainly agrees with Förster’s description of letter *n* in the codex: “rather tall and narrow, the first minim beginning with a wedge and the down strokes turning up on the line with a slight tick” (Chambers 85).³ Besides, the unusual length of the letter and the thin stroke are most probably due to post-scribal handwriting. Hence, Trautmann does not only state that this mark is an *n* but also suggests the plausibility that this letter could likewise hint at the solution nightingale: “es ist aber wirklich ein *n*, und ich nehme dies für eine weitere Bestätigung der Lösung ‘nihtegale’” (71). According to this, the mark could be considered as a marginal *n*, written by a later scribe, such as the two *sigels* of R.6.

We may still wonder why the scribe decided to add an *n* in R.8 instead of the corresponding runic *nyd* in accordance with the two *sigels* of R.6. A tentative answer to this question is that *sigel* perfectly functions as a clue pointing directly to the solution, since the runic character by itself embodies the

¹ Muir, the most recent editor of the manuscript, surprisingly does not offer any explanation for the presence of this controversial mark.

² See Williamson’s comparative plates for these letters (53). Also, note by contrast the square-like stroke of the runic *sigels* in R.6 (fols. 102b and 103a).

³ See also Conner (71) for a description of this letter in the Exeter manuscript.

hidden term (sun), adding a cryptic hint for a learned audience who would know the meaning of the rune. In the case of R.8, textual “æfensceop” already plays with the etymology of the solution, whereas *nyd* might actually confuse the reader as that rune could not be substituted by the term of the solution as occurs in R.6.

The definitive acceptance of “nightingale” as the solution of R.8 still presents a further complication to take into account. In line 9, “scirenige” and “sceawendwisan” are two obscure terms which have provoked much controversy. Cosijn (128) interpreted “scirenige” as a variation of *scericge*, meaning “actress,” a reading supported by Trautmann (6). Thus, Cosijn emended textual “scirenige” to *sciernicge*, citing a passage from the life of St. Pelagia at *The Shrine* 140.11: “Sea Pilagia wæs æryst mima in antiochia Íære ceastre. Íæt is scericge on urum gepeode.”¹ The correspondence between OE *scirenige* in R.8, as a variant of *scericge*, and Lat. *mima* led some scholars to infer that this term could be pointing to a mimicking capacity on the part of the riddlic bird. Following this argument, Tupper, for example, discarded “nightingale” in favour of “jay,” on the basis that the latter “is a mime and imitates the speech of buffoons—in other words, that the bird possesses the power of mimicry” (85). This conjecture is shared by Mackie (1933)² as well as by Krapp and Dobbie. In their arguments, there is however no strong basis to assume that the correspondence *mimalscirenige* implies that the bird possesses a mimicking ability. In this sense, it is worth noting that Ælfric’s *Glossary* equates “mimus oífle scurra” to OE “gligmann” (no.9, 302), meaning “gleeman, musician, minstrel, jester, player, buffoon” (Bosworth and Toller 227). Interestingly, this entry occurs right after Lat. “poeta” which is glossed as “sceop oífle leoífwyrhta” (no.8, 302). The juxtaposition of these terms in the list clearly reveals that *mimus* was considered semantically close to *poeta* or *scop*. This idea suggests that, if the connection between *scirenige* and Lat. *mima* is to be accepted, it does not necessarily imply a mimicking capacity but rather musical and poetic activities performed by a scop or minstrel. The equation *scirenige/mima* observed in the passage cited by Cosijn therefore does not invalidate the solution nightingale.

¹ Cited by Bosworth and Toller (830).

² As we can see in Mackie’s inappropriate translation (1934) of the closing lines of the riddle: “Say what I am called, who, like a woman jester, loudly mimic the habits of a buffoon ...” (99).

The etymological complexity of the term still requires further attention as Bosworth and Toller display two meanings for the term *scire*—“of light, clearly, brightly” and “of the voice, clearly” (837)—which seem to have been overlooked. As regards the first meaning, *scire* usually appears in contexts related to light as occurs, for example, in *Christ*:

ponne mid fere foldbuende
se micla dæg meahtan dryhtnes
æt midre niht mægne bihlæmeſ,
scire gesceafte... (867-70).¹

As for the second meaning, the sole example mentioned by Bosworth and Toller is precisely the passage found in R.8.² The *Phoenix* poet uses a similar expression connecting the semantic field of sound with that of light when he refers to the excellent quality of the mythical bird’s warbling with the phrase “beorhtan reorde” (128b):

[he] wrixleſ wolcraefte wundorlicor
beorhtan reorde, ponne æfre byre monnes
hyrde under heofonum, sippan heahcýning,
wuldres wyrhta, woruld stapelode,
heofon ond eorpan.” (127-131a)³

As regards “-nige,” Grein associated the second compound of this controversial term to “nigende” (8a) in R.8 and to the verb *hnigan* (“to bend, bow down, incline, descend, decline, sink,” Bosworth and Toller 547). The term “scirenige” could be read literally as “declining brightly” or “declining light” (?), in other words, it might be the poet’s coinage to provide a further

¹ Bradley’s translation: “Then with sudden swiftmess upon the midnight, round about earth’s inhabitants and this shining universe will mightily blare the great day of the puissant Lord ...” Also in a context related to light, the term occurs in *Andreas*: “oſpæt dryhten forlet dægçandelle / scire scinan”(835-836a).

² They however read “scire cige” (“brightly call, ” 837) instead of manuscript “scirenige.” Wyatt accepted this interpretation.

³ “he modulates his singing more wondrously, with clear voice, than ever a son of man heard below the heavens since the exalted King, Creator of glory, founded the world, the heaven and the earth” (Bradley 288). Tupper (85) also pointed out the similarity between “wrixleſ wolcraefte” (127a) in *The Phoenix* and “wrixle geneahhe / heafodwope” (2b-3a) in R.8.

clue alluding to the bird as a night singer or as a hint at the Latin name of the bird, *luscinia*. A similar wordplay reference to the bird occurs in Isidore's *Etymologiae*, in which *luscinia* is associated to the light of the emerging morning: "Luscinia avis inde nomen sumpsit, quia cantu suo significare solet diei surgentis exortum, quasi lucinia" (XII.vii.37).¹ A parallel etymological correspondence is also suggested in the description of this bird in the medieval *Bestiary*, in which the term *lucinia* is associated with *lucerna* (lamp): "The Nightingale bird, LUCINIA, takes this name because she is accustomed to herald the dawn of a new day with her song, as a lamp does (*lucerna*)" [White 139]. In this sense, we might tentatively conjecture that "scirenige" could have been selected, or even coined, by the riddler in order to suggest the Latin etymology of the term *luscinia*, and thus associate the singing of the nightingale once more with the declining of light, i.e. night.

Bosworth and Toller's second meaning relates "scirenige" to the semantic field of sound. Thus, taking "scirenige" as a compound made of *scire* ("of the voice, clearly") and *hnigan* ("to bend, bow down, incline, descend, decline, sink"), this term could be pointing to the bird's modulating voice, literally meaning "voice bending," in other words, a further reference to the bird's capacity to modulate its voice. In short, given that no other instances of *scirenige* have been recorded in the OE literary corpus, these two readings of the word cannot be fully demonstrated although they however leave out all other speculations of the meaning of the term as "actress" or "mime," thus making Cosijn's emendation to *sciernicge* unnecessary.

The term *sceawendwisan*,² usually identified with *sceawendspræc* (glossed as Lat. *scarilitas*), constitutes a final obstacle to the solving of the riddle as "nightingale," since some editors claim that the adjective "scurrilous" would rather apply to a chattering bird such as the jay.³ This controversy derives from the scholars' assumption that *sceawendwise* is a synonym of *sceawendspræc*. However, the fact that the two terms share the first compound is not at all indicative of a synonym relationship between them. According to

¹ My translation: the nightingale is called so because it announces the coming of the morning (*luscinia*) as if it were called *lucinia*.

² According to Bosworth-Toller, "a jesting song, song of a jester" (827).

³ Williamson avoided this problem arguing that "given the absence, however, of any well-defined dramatic tradition in Anglo-Saxon England, we should be careful of assuming a one-to-one correspondence between the lemma and the gloss" (154).

Bosworth and Toller, *sceawendwise* means “a jesting song, song of a jester” (827) and, regardless of its lexical closeness to *sceawendspræc*, this seems to be the meaning that best suits the other clues of the riddle. Williamson likewise does not agree with the equation *sceawendwise/sceawendspræc* and translates the first as “showing words” or “words that reveal a story” (154) in accordance to the identification of the bird as a poet or minstrel. In this sense, it is worth recalling the description of the nightingale’s warbling in Pliny’s *Natural History* in which the bird is considered as “garrulous” as he sings incessantly during spring time: “Luscinis diebus ac noctibus continuis xv garrulus sine intermissu cantus densante...” (X.xliii.81).

To conclude, the analysis of R.8 has intended to show that the problematic aspects pointed out by editors constitute no impediment for the solution “nightingale.” The manifest insistence on the creature’s exceptional singing skill strongly supports this reading. Furthermore, as the key hint “æfensceop” and parallelisms with Latin texts suggest, the riddlic bird has been traditionally reputed as a nocturnal singer, a distinctive feature that in turn generated the etymology of the bird name. With regard to the conflictive extra-textual mark, this paper has tried to demonstrate that it is not a rune but a post-scribal *n*. Whatever its origin is and whoever wrote it is something we do not know but the fact is that the letter must have been placed with the clear intention of pointing to the solution “nightingale.” Finally, the study of the obscure terms *scirenige* and *sceawendwisan* has shown that they might actually be further references to the nightingale’s warbling compared to a human scop singing or reciting verses. For all these reasons, I am convinced that the evening singer of R.8 must be the nightingale.

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