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MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE:  
CULTURAL COLOR RESONANCES IN OLD ENGLISH TEXTS

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“The separation in space, and often in time, between two individuals . . . is bridged by . . . a certain equivalence between the symbols used by the addresser and those known and interpreted by the addressee. Without such an equivalence the message is fruitless: even when it reaches the receiver it does not affect him.”

– ROMAN JAKOBSON, *Language in Literature*

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## INTRODUCTION

Color is a funny thing. In one sense, it is an objective phenomenon; light enters and is processed by the eye, and this process manifests in the brain as the perception of a color – say, blue. In another, it is impossibly subjective; in contemporary English-speaking society we "feel blue," listen to "jazz blues," and admire Picasso for his "blue period," yet no native speaker would expect these instances of "blueness" to be visually equivalent. The symbolic aspects of color are demonstrably difficult to assess; they are chimeric, often tacit, and tend to differ across linguistic and cultural groups. Yet as a manifestation of both language and cognition – what is seen, and what is named – color represents an important point of access into the human psyche. Color words express more than visual signals; they operate within complex, culturally constructed systems of meaning in most human societies, conveying both denotative and connotative information. As such, they are of particular value in the study of Anglo-Saxon England, where cultural insight must be gleaned from linguistic and literary contexts.

As contemporary readers of Old English, we are tempted to draw cultural and aesthetic parallels between the Anglo-Saxon understanding of color and the perspective we inhabit today. In doing so, however, we limit and obstruct our ability to comprehend the meaning of these concepts in Old English literature. The Anglo-Saxon people lived in a world dramatically different from our own; their dominant social, physical, and cultural aesthetics were so far removed from those of modern English-speaking communities that to travel from one to the other would be to

inhabit an alien realm. As such, we cannot assume that the Anglo-Saxon understanding of color mirrored our own – and we cannot *read* Old English texts as though they operated in accord with a modern cultural and visual aesthetic. Yet because previous studies of Old English color terminology have focused primarily on questions of denotative significance, many of our questions about the Anglo-Saxon conceptualization of color remain unanswered.

In light of this, I offer here a refocusing of the study of Old English color semantics. My research examines the connotative literary associations operating within three Old English color terms, each the subject of some denotative debate in recent years: *sweart* (black), *read* (red) and *fealo* (fallow).<sup>1</sup> Through a conscientious application of both quantitative and qualitative analysis, I will show that the *connotative* resonances of these terms can account for at least some of their denotative ambiguity; that they “look like,” in fact, more than what we can objectively see. In orienting my study towards what the Anglo-Saxons thought about color, rather than what they saw, saw, I hope to re-establish a nexus of color-referent relationships and resonances that will allow for fuller engagement with the aesthetic discourses operating in Anglo-Saxon texts.

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<sup>1</sup> See Nigel F Barley, “Old English colour: where do matters stand?” *Anglo-Saxon England* 3, (1974), Earl R. Anderson, “The Semantic Puzzle of ‘Red Gold’,” *English Studies* 81.1 (2000), and L. D. Lerner, “Colour Words in Anglo-Saxon,” *The Modern Language Review* 46 (1951).

## I. COLOR IN CONTEXT: A SEMANTIC HISTORY

Although color in Anglo-Saxon England is not a neglected area of study, the field has grown somewhat lopsidedly since its inception in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The bulk of contemporary work on Old English color terms utilizes an anthropological and linguistic framework to achieve denotative aims; C.P. Biggam, W. J. Jones, C. Hough, and others all have sought to ascertain the precise visual range of hue, brightness, and texture represented by Old English color words, and to track the development of such representation over time.<sup>2</sup> Many of these studies are rigorously interdisciplinary, pursuing the question of denotative meaning into the realms of horticulture, textile arts, scribal practice, and beyond; most also utilize concordances or digitized corpus technologies to quantify and organize specific findings.

Yet the desire to establish lexicographical categories has led to a “flattening” of Old English color terms in past research. For many scholars, the goal in ascertaining the precise hue of a *blæhæwen tunecan* [?blue-grey tunic], or the root of place-names like Blackwater and Redcliff, has been to *isolate* the denotative aspects of the color component, so that the lexeme in question may be translated clearly and uniformly across the Old English corpus. The question “what color is *sweart*?” requires a response which necessarily excludes extraneous contextual information:

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<sup>2</sup> C.P. Biggam, *Blue in Old English: An Interdisciplinary Semantic Study* (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Editions Rodolphi BV, 1997); William Jervis Jones, *German Colour Terms* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2013); and Carole Hough, “Colours of the Landscape: Old English Colour Terms in Place-names,” in *Progress in Colour Studies: Language and culture*, ed. Biggam et al. (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2006), 181-198.



“*sweart* is black because it describes ravens,” or “*sweart* is slate-colored because it describes rain-clouds,” but not “*sweart* is commonly associated with the darkness of devils and hell, and can describe a variety of negative moral states.” The latter response, after all, does not really answer the question.

Yet that information remains significant. The fact that non-visual patterns of association and meaning are evident in the textual record of Old English color terms, yet remain extraneous to current lexicographical aims, illustrates that our investigation of color *meaning* in Old English literature must extend beyond the realm of the denotative. This paper, then, seeks to counterbalance the dominant denotative emphasis in extant scholarship, and to consider color as a literary device. For my purposes, the medium of delivery – the literal and figurative literary contexts that frame lexemic use – is crucial to, rather than separate from, the semantic content embedded in Old English color terms. While my current study, like much of the research discussed below, utilizes corpus data and employs an interdisciplinary approach, it pursues a fundamentally different line of inquiry from previous work. I hypothesize that the connotative semantic content of color words, produced by longstanding cultural and literary associations, may resolve areas of denotative ambiguity in Old English texts; I further assert that these cultural resonances can be reconstructed via the study of color-referent relationships and collocational patterns within the surviving Old English literary corpus; and, finally, I set out to do so.

To depart from previous scholarship, however, first requires that we situate ourselves within it. As such, it is necessary to articulate the theoretical framework that supports most of the current work on Old English color terms. We will thus turn, first, to the field of color semantics, in order to understand the unique position that color occupies in the study of language and culture – and to consider how contemporary theories of anthropological linguistics have shaped our treatment of color in Old English literature, for both good and ill.

At the heart of color semantic studies lies an ongoing theoretical divide between the linguistic paradigms of relativism and universalism.<sup>3</sup> The relativist perspective holds that language shapes patterns of thought (to greater or lesser extents), resulting in unique cognitive “worlds” experienced by individual language communities. In a relativist model of color, color vocabulary determines color cognition, allowing perceptual experience to vary arbitrarily across linguistic groups; thus one language community may divide the visual spectrum between two color lexemes, A and B, while another is able to utilize two hundred terms, or two thousand, without ever encountering A *or* B because the latter has no lexical “container” for these visual experiences. The universalist position, by contrast, asserts that all languages share a set of conceptual categories rooted in human biology. Physical and neurological processes generate consistent stimuli across cultural and linguistic groups; thus, while language may influence the human experience, it cannot alter it beyond recognition. In a universalist model of color, the

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<sup>3</sup> An extensive account of the relativist-universalist discussion to date can be found in Jones’ *German Colour Terms*, 1-26.

development of color terminology is limited by the scope of human perception, resulting in a relatively consistent system of color identification and description across languages. Though neither theoretical approach is restricted to the study of color, both treat color semantics as uniquely suited to the testing of hypotheses regarding language and cognition. Objective external stimuli (things seen as colored) provide a measurable variable against which to compare the linguistic outcome of individual perception (color naming), thus creating a baseline for study of the intermediary cognitive processes by which the first becomes the second.

For researchers in the '50s and early '60s, color semantics seemed an ideal arena for testing the popular relativist Sapir-Whorf hypothesis; an initial series of studies conducted on color lexemes and memory appeared to strengthen the link between language and cognition.<sup>4</sup> In 1969, however, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay used color to turn relativism upside down with the publication of *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*.<sup>5</sup> Claiming that “color words translate[d] too easily among various pairs of unrelated languages for the extreme linguistic relativity thesis to be valid,” Berlin and Kay instead asserted that all languages had a maximum of eleven basic color categories and terms (BCCs and BCTs), and that these categories and terms coevolved in a consistent and predictable order.<sup>6</sup> A study testing this hypothesis was carried out across 97 languages from multiple linguistic

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<sup>4</sup> Don Dedrick discusses a number of these early studies in *Naming the rainbow: Colour language, colour science, and culture* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Berlin and Kay, *Basic Color Terms*, 3-6.

families, and appeared, at least initially, to produce highly persuasive results.<sup>7</sup>

Relativist scholars had turned to color to explore the formative effect of language on cognition, only to have their test subject open (as it were) a whole new can of worms: the physiological and cognitive experience of *seeing* color appeared to stimulate the naming of color, not the other way around.

The work of Berlin and Kay thus initiated a drastic shift in the anthropological and linguistic study of color semantics, ushering in an age of neoevolutionary thought.<sup>8</sup> It has not, however, gone unchallenged.<sup>9</sup> The key to these challenges lies in Berlin and Kay's own use of the word "extreme." *Basic Color Terms* demonstrated that the extreme linguistic relativity hypothesis was improbable. It was itself, however, an extreme assertion of universality; studies conducted since have required that the initial Berlin and Kay "evolutionary" sequence be revised and rephrased, resulting in a much more modest set of claims.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the study of color as a neurobiological phenomenon has revealed that the "universal" experience of color perception varies significantly between

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<sup>7</sup> The methodology of Berlin and Kay's initial study has since met with considerable criticism; see Nancy P. Hickerson, "Review of Berlin & Kay 1969," *International Journal of American Linguistics* 37 (1971): 257-270, and John A. Lucy, "The linguistics of 'color'," *Color categories in thought and language*, eds. Harding & Maffi. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> The term "neoevolutionary" distinguishes the universalist theory of color semantics (which discusses linguistic evolution) from 19<sup>th</sup> century attempts to attribute linguistic color disparity to a biological origin.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Wierzbicka, "The semantics of colour: A new paradigm," in *Progress in Colour Studies: Language and culture*, ed. Biggam et al. (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2006), 1-24, and Lucy, in "The linguistics of 'color'," 320-345, while differing in their opinions on the subject, both highlight shortcomings in the neoevolutionary approach to color linguistics.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Kay and Luisa Maffi, "Color Appearance and the Emergence and Evolution of Basic Color Lexicons," *American Anthropologist* 101 (2000): 743-760.

individuals, even within a single language group.<sup>11</sup> It would appear that the act of color naming, insofar as it represents the communal application of a semi-arbitrary taxonomic category, remains somewhat culturally regulated. Much of the evidence now available suggests that both relativism and universalism have something to contribute to the study of color in human society:

A general cognitive strategy for the construction of [abstract color categories] is . . . a means to achieve ends that are linguistic and cultural through the exploitation of features of human perceptual experience that are, quite properly, non-linguistic and non-cultural.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, color semantics has come to demonstrate the complexity and elegance of the interplay between concrete, biological features of perception and cultural constructions of meaning, rather than ultimately managing to privilege one over the other. Universalist theory is not explicitly wrong; in spite of ongoing debate, it is still thought to fall generally within the realm of “rightness.” It is simply, like relativist theory, not the whole story.

It is within this dialectic frame, then, that the subfield of Old English color semantics must be considered. Old English color studies, even prior to engagement with current neoevolutionist hypotheses, have been primarily interested in questions of denotative significance. Mead exemplifies this tendency in his inceptive work on Old English color terms (albeit only in a poetic context), despairing that “a great number of the Old English words . . . are so indefinite in their application as

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<sup>11</sup> See Michael Webster, et al., “Variations in Normal Color Vision. II. Unique Hues,” *Journal of the Optical Society of America* 17 (2000): 1545-1555, and David Bimler, et al. “Quantifying variations in personal color spaces,” *Color Research & Application* 29 (2004), 128-134.

<sup>12</sup> Dedrick, *Naming the rainbow*, 159.

scarcely to permit us to decide whether a color-effect is intended or not.”<sup>13</sup> His conclusion, however, that the Anglo-Saxons lacked a fully developed “color sense,” is vaguely Gladstonian<sup>14</sup> in nature, and is firmly set aside by Lerner, who instead suggests that the solution to the hue ambiguity of lexemes like *fealo* lies in recognizing that the Anglo-Saxons “did not have separate hue-words and brightness-words.”<sup>15</sup> Like Mead, Lerner’s concern is with establishing the precise visual denotation of Old English color lexemes, rather than considering a cultural or non-visual context for ambiguous use.

Barley is notable for his attempt to combine aspects of both relativist and universalist paradigms shortly after the publication of Berlin and Kay’s initial model.<sup>16</sup> He considers the phrase “read gold” relativistically, asserting that “Old English ‘red’ is not our red . . . and we cannot blandly equate the two categories,” on a visual level, but goes on to insist that “the new universalist approach to colour systems” is not incompatible with this explanation.<sup>17</sup> In this, Barley is correct, albeit ahead of his time; implicit in Berlin and Kay’s original 1969 model, and made explicit in subsequent modifications, is the tendency for ‘red’ color lexemes to

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<sup>13</sup> William E. Mead, “Color in Old English Poetry,” *PMLA* 14 (1899): 169-206.

<sup>14</sup> William Gladstone was so disconcerted by Homer’s “smutty thunderbolts [and] violet-coloured sheep” that he concluded the Greeks must have been partially color-blind. See *Studies on Homer and the Homeric age* (University Press, 1858).

<sup>15</sup> L. D. Lerner, “Colour Words in Anglo-Saxon,” *The Modern Language Review* 46 (1951): 246-249.

<sup>16</sup> Barley, “Old English colour,” 15-28.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that Earl Anderson’s repeated description of Lerner and Barley as Gladstonian revivalists in *Early English Taxonomies* is inaccurate and somewhat unfair; though both respectively assert that Anglo-Saxon color vocabulary privileges contrasts of lightness/darkness and dullness/shininess over hue, neither attributes this preference to physiological primitivism (Anderson pp. 135, 160).

encompass orange and yellow, along with other “warm” colors, before these hues are assigned their own lexemic categories.

More recently, several studies have considered Old English color within the context of place-names and landmark descriptions.<sup>18</sup> Hough and Kitson explore geographical color via corpus-based methodology; neither, however, extrapolates their findings to a larger literary or cultural context. Earl Anderson also utilizes corpus data in his analysis of the Old English “puzzle” of red or *read* gold.<sup>19</sup> In the case of *read* and *fealo*, both Kitson and Anderson seem to be working with numbers that diverge significantly from my own; I have not been able to access their data sets, however, and thus am not able to speculate further upon the origin of these differences.<sup>20</sup> Several studies treat *sweart*, in particular, within the context of terms for light and darkness (as opposed to color, or hue) in Anglo-Saxon literature; Jean Ritzke-Rutherford’s work explores themes of solar imagery, which Filip Missuno draws upon in a more recent consideration of “shadow” in Old English poetry.<sup>21</sup>

The most thorough consideration of the Old English color lexicon in recent years has come from the work of C.P Biggam. Drawing heavily upon the universalist model presented by Berlin and Kay, Biggam’s large-scale word-studies on the Old English terms for blue and grey are unique within the realm of Old

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<sup>18</sup> Carole Hough, “Colours of the Landscape,” 181-198, and Peter Kitson, “Quantifying Qualifiers in Anglo-Saxon Charter Boundaries,” *Folia Linguistica Historica* XIV (2003): 29-82.

<sup>19</sup> Earl R. Anderson, “The Semantic Puzzle of ‘Red Gold,’” *English Studies*, no. 81.1 (2000): 1-13.

<sup>20</sup> Kitson attests the following lexemic totals in extant Old English literature: *read* (395) and *fealu* [sic] (34); see “Quantifying Qualifiers in Anglo-Saxon Charter Boundaries,” 37, table 8. Anderson’s tally stands as *read* (491) and *fealo* (55); see *Early English Taxonomies*, 163.

<sup>21</sup> Filip Missuno, *‘Shadow’ and Paradoxes of Darkness in Old English and Old Norse Poetic Language* (PhD diss., University of York, 2012), and Jean Ritzke-Rutherford, *Light and Darkness in Anglo-Saxon Thought and Writing* (Frankfurt: Verlag Peter D. Lang, 1979).

English color semantics; she has also published a methodological model for historical color semantic research, and considered Anglo-Saxon color terminology within a variety of specialized contexts.<sup>22</sup> Though Biggam discusses color-referent relationships throughout much of her work, her aim in doing so remains primarily denotative; by identifying the visual appearance of individual referents as precisely as possible, she seeks to establish the spectral and focal range of the color terms in question. Her admirable semantic goals necessarily prioritize visual experience (what colors looked like) over cultural experience (what colors symbolized or connoted) in the early English world, and as such are demonstrably removed from the aspects of color that this paper seeks to discuss.

The current body of scholarship on Old English color shows a marked preference for denotative semantic content. Color-referent relationships, where they are discussed, are considered as visual clues rather than as self-productive units of literary and cultural meaning. Although recent work within the field has been both rigorous and interdisciplinary, it has yet to treat Old English color terminology as a complex, culturally encoded system of meaning, conveying both denotative and connotative information. It also has yet fully disambiguate the denotative range of words such as *read* and *fealo*, which are often applied to seemingly visually incompatible referents.

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<sup>22</sup> See C.P. Biggam, *Blue in Old English, Grey in Old English: An Interdisciplinary Semantic Study* (London: Runetree Press, 1998), "Knowledge of whelk dyes and pigments in Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon England*. 35 (2006): 23-55, and *The Semantics of Colour: A Historical Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).



My research consequently seeks to address these issues, expanding the semantic framework used to explore Old English color terms and investigating moments of seeming contradiction through a contextual and connotative lens. I intend to show that connotative color resonances, produced by consistent color-referent literary pairings, are not only at work within Old English texts, but in fact often resolve denotative ambiguities that have been resistant to other avenues of research. In doing so, I hope to provide a counterbalance to the substantial but one-sided accomplishments of the field as a whole, building off previous scholarship while, perhaps, offering a new perspective on how color is operating in Old English texts.

## II. FROM SEEING TO SAYING: A METHODOLOGICAL FRAME

In this paper I will investigate the connotative, cultural, and non-visual valences of three color terms, in particular, as a test-model for considering the role of color resonance and connotation in Old English literature: *read* (red), *fealo* (fallow), and *sweart* (black). I begin by considering collocational patterns accessed through the Online Dictionary of Old English, which I have recorded and analyzed in database form, and present here tabulated according to my results. In this section, I frame those collocational patterns within the context of register and discourse analysis, using *sweart* as an exemplar of the need to account for (sometimes unexpected) patterns of color collocation operating within and across accepted genres of text. In sections III, IV, and V, I examine the specific collocational phenomena operating in *sweart*, *read*, and *fealo*, and look to other forms of data to confirm or deny the potential associative resonances; I consider etymological cognates, literary context, formulaic systems, kennings, metaphorical precedent, and material and archaeological evidence. My methodology aims to utilize the benefits of a large-scale word study, tracking patterns throughout the Old English corpus, without neglecting the secondary evidence and literary applications necessary to validate the resultant hypotheses, and while situating my findings within a meaningful linguistic and literary framework.

This methodology, while certainly related to color as a visual phenomenon, necessarily privileges collocational lexemic patterns above the question of perceptual denotation. As such, I will not attempt to establish equivalencies

between *read*, *fealo*, *sweart*, and modern English color terms. In my own translations, I will refer to *read* as red, *sweart* as black, and *fealo* as fallow; these substitutions should be understood as a grammatical device, however (it is difficult to use *readiað* in a modern sentence), and not as an attempt to establish denotative color values. Similarly, I have chosen to include compound terms such as *felleread* and *æppelfealuwne*, even in instances where these may seem to denote alternate hues, based upon the assumption that the root color lexeme of a compound term indicates a cultural connection between the two, however limited.

The data sets used in this study have been drawn from the online Dictionary of Old English Corpus (DOEC), and catalogued in spreadsheet format according to the lexemic group in question (e.g. *read*, *fealo*, or *sweart*). Each entry records the color term attested, the passage in which it occurs, a modern English translation of that passage, and the DOEC catalog number for the passage; the entries are then assigned to referent categories, which themselves reflect major patterns of use within the corpus. I have allowed my search hits to shape the categorization process; thus, for example, there is a large “devils” category in the *sweart* database, but no “devils” category for *read*, which is not used to describe the denizens of Hell. Conversely, *read* has a sizeable “gold” category, which would be useless in the case of *sweart*. Often these categories track nicely with denotational expectation, in that *sweart* or *read* referents are things we might expect to be black or red. In other instances, however, they follow less intuitive paths for the modern reader, as in the case of the *sweart* “internal states” category; while there is no clear perceptual

reason as to why negative thoughts, feelings, and beliefs should be black in color, or why their depiction should be visual rather than olfactory or tactile, this is nonetheless the pattern of use that appears within the DOEC, and thus is the category I have assigned to these attestations.

Collocational patterns of color association do not appear uniformly across the corpus; instead, they are divided – sometimes quite strikingly – within and between the categories of verse, prose, charters, and glosses assigned by the DOEC. In the case of *sweart*, for example, which I will return to in Section III, 61% of attestations (shown in Table 1.1) display a syntactic or narrative association with sin; an additional 8% (included as part of Table 1.2) reflect a more generalized negative valence. This 69%, however, appears primarily in verse, homiletic prose, and glosses of Christian Latin texts, while the remaining 31% occurs most frequently in the leechbooks, charters, and law codes. Similarly, as I will show in Chapter V, 76% of the man-made items described by *read* show a strong collocational association with material wealth in verse and religious prose; the same term, however, seems to serve a classificatory purpose in charters and medical texts, where it is applied primarily to landmarks and herbs. In both cases, the formal and contextual environment of the text appears to affect the collocational grouping of color terms.

While cultural color associations are thus demonstrably present within the corpus, they do not result in the uniform treatment of color lexemes across genres of text. These divergent patterns of collocational grouping have influenced this study in two ways. First, they have led me to split the DOEC “prose” category into two

distinct sections during the process of analysis: religious and homiletic prose, labeled R-prose, and secular prose, including charters and medical texts, labeled S-prose. Second, they have proven amenable to contextualization within the theoretical framework of discourse analysis.

In *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, M.A.K. Halliday describes variation in collocational distribution as a feature of register:

[C]ollocations are often fairly specifically associated with one or another particular register, or functional variety of [a] language. This is true, of course, of individual lexical items, many of which we regard as ‘technical’ because they appear exclusively, or almost exclusively, in one kind of text. But it is also noteworthy that perfectly ordinary lexical items often appear in different collocations according to the text variety. For example, *hunting*, in a story of the English aristocracy, will call up *quarry* and *hounds*; . . . in an anthropological text, words like *gathering*, *agricultural*, and *pastoral*; as well as, in other contexts, *bargain*, *souvenir*, *fortune* and *suchlike*.<sup>23</sup>

In Halliday’s grammatical model, collocation is part of a group of discursive tools, inherent to spoken and written language, which produce and maintain lexical cohesion. Register, in turn, exists on what Halliday calls a “cline of instantiation,” which refers to the process by which a system of grammar is used to produce concrete examples of spoken and written language, or “text.”<sup>24</sup> The system is the “ideal” or abstract concept of the language; the text is the concrete manifestation.

Register falls somewhere in-between the abstract and the concrete. It conveys semantic meaning through text, but also adheres to and is identified by a set of abstract semiotic signifiers that produce a kind of “text type.” These signifiers may

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<sup>23</sup> M.A.K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, ed. Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen (London: Arnold, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Halliday, *Functional Grammar*, 525.

include specialized vocabulary, preferred syntactic sequences or conventions, and situational cues such as body language or publication format. In a grammatical Allegory of the Cave, the system would be the objects casting shadows on the wall; the text would be the shadows themselves, laid out for interpretation; and register would be the fire, flickering and shifting, rising and falling with the addition of fuel – *if* the shadow-readers interpreted the resultant changes in the quality of the shadows as semantically meaningful.

The semantic “sub-systems” marked by different registers often serve to streamline communication within specialized language communities. Britt Mize, writing on formal traditions in Old English poetry, illustrates this function of register using the example of modern legal texts:

For uninitiated audiences, this register’s conventional forms of expression may defeat diligent attempts at full comprehension, but for those with appropriate experience - including the development of not just linguistic but situational (i.e., legal) knowledge - those same structures amount to highly efficient packages of communication, a significant part of which takes place above and around denotative meaning and can only work by assuming a shared frame of reference.<sup>25</sup>

Register thus narrows the semantic potential of language, alerting readers and speakers to access the specialized “lexical storehouse which [the addresser] and the addressee possess in common” during a particular communicative act.<sup>26</sup>

Anglo-Saxonist readers will recognize in this model the concept of the “word-hoard,” the store of formulaic and stylized language associated with the production of Old English poetry. Here, too, the poet draws upon a shared pool of linguistic

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<sup>25</sup> Britt Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities: The Old English Poetics of Mentality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987), 97.

possibilities with the expectation that his audience, recognizing lexical and supralexical common codes, will interpret aspects of the communicative act in a particular way, and thus properly receive his intended message. For Mize, poetic formulae function as one indicator of register; they signal to the audience the type of interpretative process that must be adopted for “right reading,” and thus the larger literary mode in which they are meant to operate.<sup>27</sup>

Because formulaic language is not unique to the Old English poetic corpus, the interpretative cues provided by register are crucial to successful communication between the addresser and addressee. While the Chomskian theory of grammar holds that an “ideal” speaker, in the moment of language production, selects invariably from the full range of grammatical possibility, this has not been supported by recent research. Instead, as Alison Wray points out, “[c]orpus linguistics has [revealed] formulaicity, in its widest sense, to be all-pervasive in language data. . . words belong with other words not as an afterthought, but at the most fundamental level.”<sup>28</sup> Language users rely upon formulaicity for the efficient production and reception of complex communicative processes; formulaic sequences, even when they can be dissected, signify more than the sum of their individual parts. As such, we require cues that indicate when these formulae are meaningful, and when they are incidental; if formulae are embedded in every level of language,

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<sup>27</sup> Mize notes that other indicators of the OE poetic register include “the constraints of classical metre with its clear alliterative groupings, particular recurrent subject matter, and the presence of dedicated vocabulary” (Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*, 103).

<sup>28</sup> Alison Wray, *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13.

then their semantic function will vary across, and require contextualization within, larger sub-systems of lexical organization.

The communicative capacity of a poetic formula, then, is intimately tied to its presentation within the poetic register, as Mize elegantly articulates in his exploration of Old English verse:

“The structures of association [that formulas] establish are cognitive and cultural categories according to which the poem’s meaning is organized through the connection of the given episode, motif, phrase, or poetically marked word to larger bodies of implication, which a reader or hearer who is also proficient in the special idiom perceives quasi-instinctively.”<sup>29</sup>

In other words, poetic formulae, like legal jargon, function by connecting their audience to a wider nexus of associative cultural meaning; they are designed to demand a common code of poet and reader, addresser and addressee. The contextual cues required to infer connotative meaning are crucial to the production of Old English poetry: “It turns out that the ‘value-added,’ greater-than-literal signifying power that . . . endows traditional poetic units with communicative nuance and efficiency is not only plausible, but certain, indeed normal.”<sup>30</sup> In essence, “þæt” can be no “god cyning” unless we understand the contextual significance of such a judgment.

Mize’s definition of a poetic formula as “structures of association” that organize meaning through “the connection of the given episode, motif, phrase, or

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<sup>29</sup> Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*, 94.

<sup>30</sup> Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*, 100. Jakobson, too, acknowledges this phenomenon, referring to formulaic clusters as “phrase words” that “cannot be derived by adding together the meaning of [their] lexical constituents; the whole is not equal to the sum of its parts” (*Language in Literature*, 87).



poetically marked word to larger bodies of implication,” can also be applied to color terms. The connotative content of color terminology also requires a common code of both addresser and addressee; it draws upon a wider nexus of associative cultural contexts; and it is both flexible in that, like a poetic formula, a color term can be applied to referents in unique and unexpected ways, and traditional, in that this innovation is evident only within the context of typical use. In this way, Mize’s definition allows for Old English color terms to be understood as a kind of formulaic system of meaning.

Anita Riedinger’s examination of the formulaic sequence “x under (the heavens)” demonstrates the significance of reclassifying color words as formulae.<sup>31</sup> Here linguistic variability is such that any number of combinations may arise within the formulaic *system* “x under x,” yet Riedinger observes that “x under (the heavens)” occurs with such frequency that it comes to resemble a set formula in spite of an inherent lexical variability. That is, “x under (the heavens)” is recognizable as a separate, coherent pattern within the larger system of “x under x,” just as *swear* + (damned/damning referent) is recognizable within the larger system of color + (referent). For Riedinger, “the repetition of one general concept + one system + one function = one formula.” If Riedinger singles out “x under (the heavens)” as a significant formulaic pattern for appearing “more than 100 times,” within the Old English corpus, then surely *swear*’s negative valence in nearly 70% of that corpus should be equally noteworthy.

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<sup>31</sup> Anita Riedinger, “The Old English Formula in Context,” *Speculum* 60 (1985): 294-317.

Riedinger goes on to demonstrate that the contexts in which poetic formulae occur often reveal the underlying connotative structures of meaning described by Mize; in the case of *niht-langne fyrst*, for example, this “space of a whole night” is shown more specifically to denote “a terrifying period of time prior to a battle.”<sup>32</sup> It seems reasonable, if this is the case, to extend such contextual signification to lexically variable formulaic structures as well. Thus if *sweart* + (damned/damning referent) is treated as a formulaic pattern – though, as with “x under (the heavens),” not a strict poetic *formula* – then a cumulative association with perdition can be understood as integral to the “common codes” that shaped the color term’s literary use and (presumably) reception in Anglo-Saxon England. Color-referent collocations thus act as formulaic linguistic cues, invoking a wider set of cultural and literary associations when they appear in genre- or register-specific groupings. Just as poetic formulae both indicate the Old English poetic register and rely on it for context-specific meaning, so color-referent collocations, too, may tell us something about the semantic contexts in which they appear.

The theoretical framing of discourse analysis thus allows us to investigate and refine genre categories within the Old English corpus. That is, it allows us to consider the possibility that homilies have a semantic agenda shared more closely with verse than with leechbooks, or law codes, and that this agenda may be expressed via register and other semiotic sub-systems of grammar rather than by form – “prose” or “poetry” – alone. It also allows for the recognition of multiple,

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<sup>32</sup> Riedinger, “Old English Formula,” 296.

sometimes mutually exclusive, cultural color valences operating within the corpus, rather than dismissing or devaluing ambiguous patterns of color-referent collocation and connotation as devoid of semantic content. My hope is that this framing will allow my study to avoid falling into the (false, I believe) assumption that contradictory or ambiguous patterns of use are, in fact, meaningless.

### III. BLACK AS THE RAVEN: COLOR AND MORALITY

The DOEC records for *sweart* immediately demonstrate the significance of non-visual literary color valences. Although this term is applied to a wide variety of referents across the Old English corpus, these referents consistently appear in the context of sin. Thus, in the table below (representing 61% of the total lexemic count for *sweart* in the DOEC), the characteristic uniting devils, fire, mist, trees, souls, and water is not necessarily a literal, visual blackness; rather, it is the blackness of moral turpitude, and the product of estrangement from God.

#### 1.1: *SWEART*: NEGATIVE MORAL VALENCE

	Poetry	Prose (R) <sup>33</sup>	Prose (S)	Glosses	Charters	Totals
Devils	2	29		2		33
Hell	7	16		1		24
Fire	13	6				19
Atmospheric	9	7		3		19
Night	6	10				16
Internal State	5	9		1		15
Spirits	5	8				13
Water	5	5				10
Death	1	4		1		6
Sin	2	3		1		6
Prison/Chains	1	4				5
Animal	2	1		1		4
Soul	1	3				4
Raven	2	2				4
Tortures	2	2				4
Crowd		1		2		3
Books/Letters		3				3
Men		3				3
Earth	1	1				2
Journey	2					2
Trees		1		1		2
Eclipse	1	1				2
“Place”		1				1
Cloth		1				1
Heathens				1		1
Vision				1		1
Feathers		1				1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>122</b>		<b>15</b>		<b>207/338</b>

<sup>33</sup> (R) and (S) respectively denote religious and secular prose.

In some instances the *sweart* + (damned/damning referent) collocation is evident at a syntactic level; *deoflas*, *hellegrundas*, *gæstas*, and *lig* are among the most common referents attested in the DOEC, and consistently describe the landscape of hell. In other cases, the collocational association is more diffuse, requiring a larger narrative context. The phrase “black as a raven,” for example, connotes little beyond hue to the modern reader – and ravens are, at a denotative level, black. Yet when this phrase appears in the DOEC, a closer examination of context reveals a devil in disguise: “[H]im cumað togeanes his sawle twegen englas, oðer bið Godes encgel, se bið swa hwit swa snaw, oðer bið deofles encgel, se bið swa sweart swa hræfen oððe silharewa” [Two angels shall come to him together with his soul; the one shall be God's angel, and is as white as snow, while the other is the Devil's angel, and is as black as a raven or an African].<sup>34</sup> When a wider net of collocational associations is taken into account, a clear cultural association between *sweart* and damnation begins to emerge from the corpus.

At a quantitative level, *sweart* displays a demonstrably negative valence in 69% of lexemic occurrences within the Old English corpus, with the 61% illustrated in Table 2.1 being linked to moral or religious negativity, and an additional 8% reflecting a more generalized sense of doom or foreboding.<sup>35</sup> The *sweart* + (damned/damning referent) collocational pattern occurs at a significantly higher

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<sup>34</sup> R. Willard, “Two Apocrypha in Old English Homilies,” *Beiträge zur englischen Philologie* 30 (1935, repr. 1967): 38-54.

<sup>35</sup> I have labeled this 8% (somewhat colloquially) as the “maybe” category, and included them in Table 1.2, so as to avoid obscuring the specifically Christian, specifically moral collocational patterns displayed in Table 1.1. See Appendix A for the complete tabulation of *sweart* referents in the DOEC.

rate in poetry and religious prose, however; here, an explicit association with sin can be found in 83.6% of *sweart*'s DOEC attestations. The “default” valence for *sweart* referents is thus effectively both moral and negative in these registers.<sup>36</sup>

Negative descriptive convention seems to imbue *sweart* with the capacity to “stain” seemingly neutral objects. In Genesis A, for example, the fallen angels are described as being on a “black” journey:

Heo on wrace syððan  
 seomodon swearte, siðe ne þorfton  
 hlude hlihhan, ac heo helltregum  
 werige wunodon and wean cuðon,  
 sar and sorge, susl þrowedon  
 þystrum beþeahte, þearl æfterlean  
 þæs þe heo ongunnon wið gode winnan.<sup>37</sup>  
 (Lines 71-76)

[They sank afterwards in misery, a black journey; they had no need to laugh loudly, but dwelt weary in the tortures of hell and knew affliction, soreness and sorrow, suffered torment covered by darkness, harsh retribution because they had struggled against God.]

Although *sið* is sometimes associated with sin in the DOEC, it is not restricted to this context; instead, the journey of the angels from heaven to hell has become *sweart* in order to contextualize it as the unambiguous product of damnation.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, elsewhere in the corpus, rainclouds and pigs, both fairly common features of early English daily life, reveal their “true colors” when tagged as *sweart*: the pigs

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<sup>36</sup> Secular prose, by contrast, consistently neutralizes or avoids the negative moral collocations associated with *sweart*. This disparity seems to suggest that religious and homiletic prose is invoking a “lexical storehouse” much closer to the Old English poetic register than to that employed by secular prose.

<sup>37</sup> G. P. Krapp, *The Junius Manuscript*, ASPR vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931).

<sup>38</sup> A quick search of the DOEC suggests that *sið* represents a variety of journey types, from the *sweart sið* discussed here to that described in the *Phoenix*, where one may “þære sunnan sið behealdan” [behold the journey of the sun].

are devils in disguise, and the rainclouds are a metaphor for the way in which sin and sorrow block the light of the soul.<sup>39</sup> In this way, *swear* functions as a poetic formula would, invoking a larger system of connotative meaning, and guiding the audience of the text to infer a negative moral and religious context where one might not normally exist.

This function of “staining” is often used to interesting and ambiguous effect in the Exeter Book Riddles:

### 1.2 *SWEART*: NEUTRAL MORAL VALENCE

	Poetry	Prose (R)	Prose (S)	Glosses	Charters	Totals
<b>Gloss</b>		1		25		<b>26</b>
<b>Flesh/Rot</b>		1	12	2		<b>15</b>
<b>Herb/remedy</b>			12	1		<b>13</b>
<b>Human</b>	3 (riddle)	3	6		1	<b>13</b>
<b>Raven</b>	3	6				<b>9</b>
<b>Night</b>	1	1	1	4		<b>7</b>
<b>Animal</b>	1 (riddle)	1	3	1		<b>6</b>
<b>Bile</b>			2	4		<b>6</b>
<b>Weather</b>	2 (riddle)	1	3			<b>4</b>
<b>Spot</b>				4		<b>4</b>
<b>Eclipse</b>		1	2			<b>3</b>
<b>Tracks</b>	3 (riddle)					<b>3</b>
<b>Fire</b>	2					<b>2</b>
<b>Vision</b>	1	1		2		<b>2</b>
<b>Name</b>			1		1	<b>2</b>
<b>Prison</b>				2		<b>2</b>
<b>Riddle (?)</b>	2 (riddle)					<b>2</b>
<b>Signal</b>		2				<b>2</b>
<b>Weapons</b>	2					<b>2</b>
<b>Wool</b>			1			<b>1</b>
<b>Earth</b>		1				<b>1</b>
<b>Internal State</b>		1				<b>1</b>
<b>Tree</b>				1		<b>1</b>
<b>Disease</b>			1			<b>1</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>20 (+/-4)</b>	<b>20 (+/-8)</b>	<b>43 (+/-9)</b>	<b>46 (+/-6)</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>131/338</b>

<sup>39</sup> The pigs can be found in *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series*, Third Sunday After Pentecost; the rainclouds appear in *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius' De consolatione philosophiae*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899).

Accounting for only 13 instances of *sweart* within the Old English corpus, the riddles comprise a minute 3.8% of my total data set, and a slightly larger 15% of the DOEC verse category. They represent, however, a much more significant 65% of the poetic instances in which *sweart* exhibits a neutral or non-religiously negative context.

The riddles delight in coopting *sweart*'s negative moral connotations for their own peculiar purposes. The *ic* of Riddle 21, for example, who “*sweartum swelgan onginne/ brunum beadowæpnum, bitrum ordum,/ eglum attorsperum*” [begin[s] to swallow black, dusky battle-weapons, bitter points, horrid poisoned spears] guards a secret sweetness; if we accept Marijane Osborn's solution, as John Niles does, this creature's *dryhtgestreona* [treasures of the people] are honey, and he himself a beehive (Lines 7-9).<sup>40</sup> His *sweart* spit is thus a productive poison; the bees, safe within *eodorwirum* [wire enclosures], only deploy their *bitrum ordum* [bitter spears] to protect the delights within. Color becomes part of the game, disguising domesticated bees as wild, deadly, and potentially supernatural weapons.

Elsewhere, the charade is more serious. In Riddle 3, the poet draws upon images of Judgment Day to create a terrifying scene:

Se bið swega mæst,  
 breahntma ofer burgum,      ond gebreca hludast,  
 þonne scearp cymed      sceo wiþ oþrum,  
 ecg wið ecge;      earpan gesceafte  
 fus ofer folcum      fyre swætað,

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<sup>40</sup> See John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishing, 2006), 145, and Marijane Osborn, " 'Skep' (Beinenkorb,\* beoleap) as a Culture-Specific Solution to Exeter Book Riddle 17," *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 18, no. 1 (2005): 8-18.



blacan lige,        ond gebrecu ferað  
 deorc ofer dryhtum        gedyne micle,  
 farað feohtende,        feallan lætað  
 sweart sumpsendu        seaw of bosme,  
 wætan of wombe.        Winnende fareð  
 atol eoredþreat,        egsa astigeð,  
 micel modþrea        monna cynne,  
 brogan on burgum,        þonne blace scotiað  
 scriþende scin        scearpum wæpnum.  
 Dol him ne ondrædeð        ða deaðsperu,  
 swylteð hwæþre,        gif him soð meotud  
 on geryhtu        þurh regn ufan  
 of gestune læteð        stræle fleogan,  
 farende flan.        Fea þæt gedygað,  
 þara þe geræceð        rynegiestes wæpen.  
 (Lines 39-58)

[The din shall be great, tumult over the towns, and the loudest clamor, when a cloud comes sharp against others, edge against edge; dark creatures shall rush over the people, sweat fire, black flame, and noises will travel darkly over the multitudes, a great crash; they will move forth, fighting, let black dripping liquid fall from their bosom, water from their womb. The loathsome troop will travel, warring; dread shall arise, great torment of mind among mankind, terror in cities, when the black spreading phantoms shall shoot with sharp weapons. Folly to he who does not dread that death-spear; he shall die regardless, if the true God in right, down through the rain, lets an arrow fly from the tempest, a moving dart. Few escape it, those who the weapon of the running-guest reaches.]<sup>41</sup>

Much of this language is echoed in Old English poems and prose about the Christian Day of Judgment, and I have translated the passage above in a way that reflects these echoes. As a full investigation of thematic and formulaic overlap is beyond the scope of this paper, however, I hope that a selection of examples may temporarily suffice as evidence for Riddle 3's *domesdæg* borrowings. In Christ III, the "gestun ond se storm ond seo stronge lyft brecað brade gesceaft" [tempest and the storm and the strong wind shall break broad Creation; lines 990a-991b], while

<sup>41</sup> *The Exeter Book, Part II: Poems IX-XXXII*, ed. W.S. Mackie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 89.

the righteous have no need to “ondrædan deofla strælas” [dread the arrows of devils, line 779a-b]. Both lines evoke the *straele* that flies from the *gestune*, and the fool who “ne ondrædeð” that *straele* in Riddle 3; in fact, the *only* two verse attestations for *gestun* in the DOEC are those mentioned above. *Blæc* or *sweart* fire is also a common signifier of hellish punishment, appearing in *Judgment Day*, *Andreas*, and elsewhere. While these are not the only example of Christian imagery within the passage, they do demonstrate, I think, that readers with knowledge of religious poetry and homiletic texts would have found the language of Riddle 3 to be extremely familiar.

In fact, if we take Riddles 1-3 to be part of a single sequence, as Niles and Williamson do, the associations between the Riddle and *domesdæg* become even more prominent.<sup>42</sup> In Riddle 1, the speaker is modeled after fire; he burns the *folcsalo* [folk-buildings, line 5] as “recas stigað haswe ofer hrofum” [smoke rises greyly over the roofs, lines 6-7], raging fiercely over the countryside:

heahum meahtum  
wrecan on waðe      wide sended  
hæbbe me on hrycge      þæt ær hada wreat  
foldbuendra      flæsc ond gæstas  
somod on sunde.

(Lines 10-14)

[I am sent far and wide by the high powers to punish in wandering; I have on my back that which once covered the flesh and spirits of earth-dwellers together in water.]<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 141, and Craig Williamson, *A feast of creatures: Anglo-Saxon riddle-songs* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> *The Exeter Book, Part II*, 88.

This first riddle disguises itself as a sign of the second coming: fire, and the *wæcwehm wera* [violent death of men, line 8]. The water, while ultimately part of the riddle, recalls Noah's flood; that which once covered the *foldbuend* in water is not, technically, water itself, but the fury and judgment of God. Riddle 2, continuing in this vein, calls upon a more explicitly aqueous sign of Judgment: the rising of the waters. Here the creature departs "secan garsecges grund" [to seek the ocean's floor; lines 2-3] so that the "gifen biþ grewregeð, fam gewealcen" [sea is stirred up, foam rolled about; lines 3-4], disturbing mankind with flood as Riddle 1 did with fire.

Fire and flood are the first two signs of the second coming in another Exeter Book poem, *Judgment Day*; after these, *gromhydige guman* [fierce-minded men; line 17] are ensnared by devils, taken to the darkest pit of Hell, where "næfre dæg scineð" [day never shines; line 19]. Riddle 3 likely evokes this third event: dark creatures "rush over the people," sweat black flame, and stir up "terror in cities." The *atol eoredþreat*, loathsome troop, causes "great torment of mind among mankind." We have seen fire, and water; now we see condemnation. *Sweart*, in this context, is simply one small part of the larger "hell topos" invoked in Riddle 3; it draws upon moral and religious convention to drive home the image of damnation.

The joke, of course, is that Riddles 1-3 are jointly solved as "storm" – fearsome and dark, indeed, but hardly the end of the world. Yet if Niles' assessment of Salvador's solution – that "each part has the initial solution 'wind' (or 'wind as the cause of storm')" and "the solver must then identify God as the master who sends the wind" – is accurate, then the poetic feint of storm-as-judgment may be

intended to guide readers beyond a superficial answer. The imagery of Hell points us beyond weather, just as the Riddles' references to *sweart seaw* [black liquid], rather than the typical *lig* [fire] an Anglo-Saxon audience might expect, tells us that we are not facing *domesdæg* quite yet; each undermines the other, pointing to a more sophisticated solution. The storm is *not* Judgment Day – but the Christian *dryhten* controls both.

The association between *sweart* and negative morality thus has a strong impact on this lexeme's use in Old English texts. *Sweart* is a traditional, even conventional, descriptor of hell, devils, and sin; it also, as a result of this convention, is used to “stain” morally neutral referents in contexts of condemnation.

Furthermore, the formulaic *sweart* + (damned/damning referent) is cunningly employed in the Exeter Book riddles, alluding to familiar Christian contexts where few, in fact, exist. A broader survey of literary contexts ultimately confirms and expands upon the patterns illustrated by my data sets: it's clear as day that *sweart* is black as sin.

IV. *FEALLAD ON FOLDAN*: COLOR AND TEMPORALITY

Of the three color terms examined in this study, *fealo* quickly emerges as the most limited in both frequency and salience:<sup>44</sup>

2.1: *FEALO*

	Poetry	Prose(R) <sup>45</sup>	Prose(S)	Glosses	Charters	Totals
<b>Vegetation</b>	2	1	2	1	4	10
<b>Sand/gravel</b>	1	1				2
<b>Fire</b>	1					1
<b>Ocean</b>	8					8
<b>Weapons/battle</b>	4					4
<b>Animal</b>	3		2	3		8
<b>Gloss</b>				21		21
<b>Plant name</b>	1		1			2
<b>Totals:</b>	21	2	5	25	4	<b>56</b>

As illustrated in Table 2.1, *fealo* is widely applied across referents in Old English verse; outside of a poetic context, however, it describes vegetation (leaves, grass, foliage) almost exclusively (18%), with animals being the second most frequent prose referent (14%). This is worth noting particularly because *fealo*'s later evolution into the English "fallow" retains and further codifies this specificity of reference, applying primarily to deer and untilled farmland.

*Fealo*'s primary confinement to a poetic context may suggest that it was already considered archaic or unusual in Anglo-Saxon England; additionally, its narrow application outside this context indicates that a shift towards referent

<sup>44</sup> Poetry comprises 36% of the referent totals for *fealo*; the ocean and animals both represent 14% of the referent totals, and vegetation accounts for 18% across genre categories. Weapons account for 7% of referent totals; all other categories account for <5% of the lexemic total. For the purposes of this study, I will focus primarily on lexemic totals >5%, considering other categories as they relate to the most common uses of *fealo* rather than attempting to draw independent conclusions from very minimal data.

<sup>45</sup> (R) and (S) respectively denote religious and secular prose.

specialization (evident in the primary use of Middle English *falwe* or *falow* and exclusive use of the Modern English *fallow* to describe untilled farmland and certain animals) was likely already underway. The nature of this evolution toward a limited applicability, however, sheds light on the more widespread use of *fealo* as a poetic color term.

In Table 2.1, we see that *fealo*'s most frequent and only cross-genre referent is vegetation. When examined more closely, it becomes evident that (in nine out of ten instances) *fealo* specifically describes plant matter that has faded from a highly saturated, vibrant color to a dull yellow or brown: “Lytle hwile leaf beoð grene; ðonne hie eft fealewiað, feallað on eorðan” [Leaves are green for only a short while; then they fade again, and fall to earth], Salomon tells Saturn, while the paradise of *The Phoenix* is celebrated as a place where “ne feallað þær on foldan fealwe blostman, wudubeama wlite, ac þær wrætlice on þam treowum symle telgan gehladene” [Nor there upon the earth fall fallow blossoms, glory of the forest, but wondrously ever burden the boughs of the trees].<sup>46</sup> This sense of *fealo* as faded is consistent with Mastrelli's interpretation of the PIE root *\*pel-* as “a change of state” (1955); a similar sense appears in the Middle High German color term *val*, which according to W. J. Jones was applied “especially [to] the winter landscape (plants, trees), where *val* (in senses such as 'pale, colourless, discoloured, withered') was . . . sometimes contrasted with *gruene*.”<sup>47</sup> In Early New High German we see the

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<sup>46</sup> See James E. Cross and Thomas D. Hill, *The Prose Saturn and Solomon and Andrian and Ritheus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), and *The Exeter Book*, eds. G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, *ASPR* vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 94-113.

<sup>47</sup> Jones, *German Colour Terms*, 324.

cognate *fahl* replaced by *falb* primarily because, while both convey a similar sense of hue, the latter lacks *fahl*'s “negative connotations [of] ('pale, robbed of colour, discoloured') [applied] to the human face, gold, stars, withered grass, and the death-bringing pale horse of the Apocalypse.”<sup>48</sup> This negative sense is also seen in the Middle English *falwe* or *falow*, where the term is applied in a similar manner.<sup>49</sup>

Given the primacy of faded vegetative referents for *fealo* in Old English literature, the continued sense of a “faded” or “drained” color in ME *falwe* or *falow*, and the connotation of “faded, pale, discoloured” in other Germanic cognates, it seems reasonable to conclude that the inference of decay or decline seen in MHG *val* and ENHG *fahl* was also, to some extent, present in the Anglo-Saxon understanding of *fealo*. This primary sense of faded or dying vegetation allows us to examine *fealo*'s seemingly disparate array of poetic referents through a newly focused lens; though rarely united by hue, many of these referents *are* linked by a sense of decline or decay.

One notable instance is the case of the *fealohilte* sword in *The Battle of Maldon*: “Feoll þa to foldan/ fealohilte swurd; ne mihte he gehealdan/ heardne mece, wæpnes wealdan” [Fell then to earth the fallow-hilted sword; he could not hold the hardened blade, nor wield weapons; lines 166-168.].<sup>50</sup> In translation *fealohilte* is often interpreted as “golden-hilted” or “yellow-hilted.” Such a choice is not

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<sup>48</sup> Jones, *German Colour Terms*, 332.

<sup>49</sup> “Mi ler þat wes so bri3t . . . falew hit is and won,” and “Pare groued neuer gryss ne neuer sall,/ Bot euer-more be ded and dry,/ And falow and fade for our foly,” are both representative examples in the Middle English Dictionary's definition for *falow*.

<sup>50</sup> Elaine M. Treharne, ed., *Old and Middle English c. 890-c. 1400: an anthology* (Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2004), 157.

unreasonable; the sword belongs to Byrhtnoht, a noble earl, and thus might easily incorporate gilded or golden elements.

This interpretation does not, however, fully convey the poignant impact of *fealo* in this context. Byrhtnoht is dying, “too deeply . . . pierced” by the enemy’s spear; he draws his sword in these lines as a last-ditch defense, but the weapon cannot save him (Line 150b).<sup>51</sup> Just as yellowed blossoms and leaves fall from a dying tree, so too does Byrhtnoht’s sword fall to earth. It is an ephemeral image, designed to intensify the final moments of an ill-fated warrior’s last stand. Though both *gold* and *geolo* might denote a hue similar to *fealo*, neither would evoke the same sense of loss in this context; thus the poet has selected *fealo* to convey an emotional as well as a visual effect.

This same sense of temporality haunts Wiglaf’s exhumation of the dragon hoard in *Beowulf*. The young man, descending at the behest of a(nother) dying lord, gazes for the first time upon a treasure dearly won:

Geseah ða sigehreðig,      þa he bi sesse geong,  
 magoþegn modig      maððumsigla fealo,  
 gold glitnian      grunde getenge,  
 wundur on wealle,      ond þæs wyrmes denn,  
 ealdes uhtflogan,      orcas stondan,  
 fyrnmanna fatu,      feormendlease,  
 hyrstum behrorene      þær wæs helm monig  
 eald ond omig,      earmbeaga fela  
 searwum gesæled.      Sinc eaðe mæg,  
 gold on grund(e),      gumcynnes gehwone  
 oferhigian,      hyde se ðe wylle.  
(Lines 2756-2767)

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<sup>51</sup> Treharne, *Old and Middle English*, 155.



[The triumphant one saw then, when he passed by the seat, the earnest thane, many costly jewels, glittering gold heavy on the ground, wonder on the walls; and in the worm's den, the old dawn-flier, cups stood, vessels of long-ago men, lacking a polisher, deprived of ornaments. There was many a helm old and rusty, arm-rings bound by treacheries. Treasure may easily, gold in the ground, overreach any man who would hide it.]<sup>52</sup>

Translations of this passage often emphasize the grandeur of the *maððumsigla fealo*; Seamus Heaney paints “a treasure-trove of astonishing richness,” while Hall’s 1892 translation wonders at “many treasure-gems.” Yet the scribal insertion of *fealo* for *feola*, or *fela* [many], to which it must be emended for grammatical sense, suggests that magnificence is not the intended valence of the lines that follow. The treasure Wiglaf has unearthed reeks of death and decay; the armor is useless, while the gold “oppresses” the earth beneath it, and the cups – symbols of community – stand unused and uncared for. The hoard could not sustain its original owners, and it will not protect Beowulf’s people when he is gone; though the reader may not fully comprehend the impact of these lines until the end of the poem, Wiglaf’s find is a tragic one. It seems plausible that the scribe, linking *fealo* forward to *gold* without noting the grammatical problematization, assumed an extension of the elegiac tone found elsewhere in the passage.

Another example of *fealo*’s temporal weight in Old English poetry lies hidden in plain sight. *Fealo* + (wave/flood) is a frequent formula in Old English verse, appearing eight times within the DOEC. Yet because all eight lines alliterate on the “f” consonant, it is often difficult to ascertain whether the term has been selected for its metrical, visual, or cultural salience. That said, the Anglo-Saxon tendency to

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<sup>52</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 184-186.

describe ships as *sæhengest* and the ocean as a road (for swans, whales, and so forth) may shed some light on the use of *fealo* + (wave/flood) in a poetic context. The metaphor of a ship as a plough, driving its long furrow through the plain of the sea, appears occasionally in Anglo-Saxon texts such as the Old English *Life of Machutus*, where “þæt scip þa sæ fæstlice fyrgide” [the ship then firmly ploughed the sea]. It is more common, however, in the Latin tradition from which *Machutus* was drawn.<sup>53</sup>

Instead, the sea in Old English poetry is typically depicted as a road – and roads on land, traversed by equine bodies, are sometimes depicted as the sea. The *Beowulf* poet uses the phrases *fealwe stræte* and *foldwegas* to describe the land beneath the horses raced by the Danes, both reminiscent of the *fealwe wegas* found in *Andreas* and *The Wanderer*. A similar sense of equivalence is echoed in *Gifts of Men*, where “sum on londe snel, feþespedig” [one man is swift on land, foot-speedy], while another “fealone [on] wæg stefnan steoreð, streamrade con” [steers the prow upon the tawny wave, knows the watery roads] in appositive succession.

While Latin and Old English poetic traditions both model the sea after untilled land, the “ship-as-plough” metaphor and the “ship-as-traveler/steed” kenning thus *treat* that land in different ways. It may be that in Anglo-Saxon society, where pastured animals were a major agricultural product, untilled land functioned as a space of utility, of travel and food production, rather than as an untapped resource.<sup>54</sup> As such, perhaps the Anglo-Saxon poets noted aesthetic

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<sup>53</sup> For more information on the Latin tradition, see E. J. Christie, “Writing in water,” *Postmedieval* 3:1 (2012), 27-45.

<sup>54</sup> P. J. Fowler, “Farming in the Anglo-Saxon landscape: an archaeologist’s review,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 9 (1980), 263-280

similarities between the rolling hills of England and the rolling waves of the sea, traversed respectively by steeds of flesh and wood; perhaps the *fealuwes lea* in Charter 495 and the *holm* that approaches “fealwe on feorran” [fallow from afar] in *Maxims I* did not seem so very different from one another to the early English eye. If this is the case, *fealo* may not describe the *color* of ocean waves so much as evoke their earthen counterparts. However, without a more precise sense of how the Anglo-Saxons interacted with fallow land, it is nearly impossible to say how they understood the fallow sea, except to suggest that a metaphoric association perhaps existed between the two.

*The Wanderer*, however, offers an example of the ways in which cultural and formulaic collocation may work together:

Warað hine wræclast,    nales wunden gold,  
 ferðloca freorig,    nalæs foldan blæd.  
 Gemon he selescegas    ond sincþege,  
 hu hine on geoguðe    his goldwine  
 wenede to wiste.    Wyn eal gedreas!  
 . . . Ðonne onwæcneð eft    wineleas guma,  
 gesið him biforan    fealwe wegas,  
 baþian brimfuglas,    brædan feþra,  
 hreosan hrim ond snaw,    hagle gemenged.  
 (Lines 32-48)

[The path of exile binds him, not twisted gold; frigid spirit-lock, not fruit of the earth. He remembers hall-warriors and the giving of gifts, how in youth his gold-friend drew him to the feast. All joy has fallen away! . . . Then the friendless man wakes again, sees before him the fallow waves, brine-birds bathing, preening their feathers; falling frost and snow, mingled with hail.]<sup>55</sup>

Here, the *fealwe wegas* endured by the speaker are standard poetic fare; they invoke the *fealewe wægas* found in *Andreas*, and the *fealone wæg* in *Gifts of Men*, both of

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<sup>55</sup> *The Exeter Book, Part I: Poems I-VIII*, ed. Israel Gollancz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1895), 286.

which pit the merciless onslaught of the ocean against frail human adversaries.<sup>56</sup> Yet *The Wanderer* draws upon the sense of *fealo* as “faded” in a unique and creative way. The passage above contrasts the world once inhabited by the speaker against his current situation. He is bound by exile, rather than the bonds of gift-exchange symbolized by *wunden gold*; his heart is a frozen waste, no fruit of the earth. *Blæd*, evoking both a general prosperity and the presence of plant life, adds a green/withered binary to this appositive mixture; the world of the hall and the lord is warm, alive, growing, while the speaker's present reality is frozen, trapped, dead.<sup>57</sup> In this context, the *fealwne wegas* can be understood as the antithesis of the *foldan blæd*. They serve as a faded foil to the vibrancy of a world now lost, the reality that replaces the speaker's dream; they are barren in every sense, offering neither the joys of community nor the fruits of cultivated land. The poet thus utilizes a traditional formula to creative effect, essentially doubling the weight of the metaphor.

In Old English poetry, then, *fealo* demonstrates an increased semantic cohesion when placed within a larger cultural context. In many cases the term evokes the not merely the color of dying plant matter, but also the *process* by which a vibrant, living entity transitions into death. This valence unifies seemingly

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<sup>56</sup> See also Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 30-31. According to Neville, only “the organised, tamed and artificial (in the sense of ‘artful,’ not the modern pejorative sense) have value [for the Anglo-Saxons], while the natural has at best an unrealised potential for value, at worst a hostile uselessness.”

<sup>57</sup> We see additional evidence for summer's desirability in *Daniel*, where rain that “on sumeres tid sended weorðeð dropena drearung on dægges hwile, wearmlíc wolcna scur” [sometimes in the summertime sends the falling of drops during the day] is the “wedera cyst” [choicest of storms] (348b-350b).

disparate objects such as swords, blossoms, and the sea under a single semantic “roof”; in each case, *fealo* signals the reader to inject the poetic referent with a sense of elegy, neglect, or decay. The process of fading thus becomes integral to, rather than separate from, *fealo* referents in these texts.

## V. THE REDDEST GOLD: COLOR AND MATERIAL CULTURE

*Read* demonstrates a far more complicated and diverse pattern of use than either of the other color terms in my study. It is a high-frequency lexeme, with nearly 600 occurrences in total; it also, in an inversion of the pattern displayed by *fealo*, appears commonly in all genre categories *except* poetry. It is a common element of place-names and landmark descriptors in charters, and appears frequently in herbals and leechbooks, where color distinguishes between different varieties of *hofs* and *docce*. Perhaps most notably, it often describes high-value or high-status man-made goods.

## 3.1: READ

	Poetry	Prose (R) <sup>58</sup>	Prose (S)	Glosses	Charters	Totals
<b>Herb</b>	1		53	3		56
<b>Flower</b>	1	5	2	1		9
<b>Food/Drink</b>		3	3	6		12
<b>Blood/wound</b>	1	7	11	5		24
<b>Phys. descrip.</b>	1	4	10	4		19
<b>Disease</b>	1		4			5
<b>Fire</b>	6	7				13
<b>Water</b>	1			4		5
<b>Gold</b>	5	10	1	3	5	24
<b>Treasure/gem</b>	4	1	1	1		7
<b>Weapons/battle</b>	1	2				3
<b>Animal</b>		4	4			8
<b>Gloss</b>			3	73		76
<b>Landmark</b>	1				107	108
<b>Sun/sky/heaven</b>	1	6	6	7		20
<b>Earth/soil</b>			2	2		4
<b>Textile</b>	1	23	5	15		44
<b>Dye</b>	1	1		1		3
<b>Place name</b>					21	21
<b>Red Sea</b>	5	62	4	59		130
<b>Totals:</b>	30	135	109	181	133	591

<sup>58</sup> (R) and (S) respectively denote religious and secular prose.

While a full assessment of these contexts is currently beyond the scope of this paper, the popular topic of *read gold* allows for a microcosmic demonstration of how the data I have collected may be used to inform further interpretation of this lexemic group. The seemingly paradoxical use of *read* to describe gold has puzzled scholars of Old English for more than a century; in “The Semantic Puzzle of *Read Gold*,” Earl Anderson lists seven theories that have, over the years, attempted to explain the logic behind this phrase.<sup>59</sup> These suggest, in brief, that *read gold* was alloyed with copper,<sup>60</sup> that the construction was simply a poetic formula,<sup>61</sup> that it represents alternative Anglo-Saxon color perception<sup>62</sup> or underdeveloped physiological color vision (the “19<sup>th</sup> century evolutionist position,” as Anderson says), that *read* describes the “brightness” or tone/surface reflectivity rather than the hue of gold,<sup>63</sup> that *read* has a close association with supernatural or magical qualities which make it applicable to the “best of all metals”,<sup>64</sup> or, finally, that *read* denotes gold as a mineral rather than a vegetative substance.<sup>65</sup>

All of the theories mentioned by Anderson, however, share the assumption that *read* is a typical feature of gold. This is not supported by the DOEC evidence; *read* describes gold in only 24 of approximately 1049 cases, thus proving to be the exception rather than the rule. Given this infrequency of use, our inquiry into what

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<sup>59</sup> Anderson, “Read Gold,” 6-10.

<sup>60</sup> Anderson cites Mead, “Color in Old English Poetry,” 206.

<sup>61</sup> Mead again.

<sup>62</sup> Anderson cites Barley, “Old English colour,” 17.

<sup>63</sup> Anderson cites Lerner, “Colour Words in Anglo-Saxon,” 249.

<sup>64</sup> Anderson cites Karlene Jones-Bley, “Red for Dead,” in *Studies in Honor of Jaan Puhvel, Part I. Ancient Languages and Philology*, eds. Dorothy Disterheft et al. (Washington, DC, 1997), 217.

<sup>65</sup> Anderson’s own theory.

Anderson calls “the puzzle of red gold” must begin with a different question: we must ask, not, *why* is gold *read*, but rather, *when* is gold *read*, and to what purpose?

Fortunately, the numerical data that (to some extent) renders past theories untenable also supplies new avenues of explanation. Within the DOEC, 76% of man-made items described by *read* and its compounds are high-value or high-status luxury goods: gems, gold, “ornaments,” and dye or dyed cloth.<sup>66</sup> Of these entries, 23 refer to Christ’s purple or red robe when he is mocked before death as King of the Jews; while not luxurious in context, these passages explicitly identify *read*, *weolocread*, and *felleread* robes as kingly or royal, and thus do not contradict a cultural association with high status. Archaeological studies of Anglo-Saxon material culture reinforce the literary association between *read* and wealth:

Dyes . . . signify value. It has been shown that dyes had a limited use in the Migration period, and that reds and purples were reserved for small items, edgings, and embroidery yarns. . . . [A]nd throughout the early medieval world red and purple were associated with royalty. Analysis of dyes in Scandinavian material has [also] shown that reds are more common in chieftains' burials than in other graves (Rogers 236).<sup>67</sup>

In keeping with this trend, Anglo-Saxon homiletic denunciations of excess use the modifier “reddest” to describe objects being sinfully coveted by men on earth: “And þeah we us gegyrwan mid þi readestan golde and gefrætewian mid þy beorhtestan godwebbe and mid deorwurpum gimmun utan ymbehon, þeah hwæðere sceal se

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<sup>66</sup> This number is conservative; other man-made items described as *read* include weapons (4%; 1 sword, 2 shields), items being paid or bequeathed (8%; 5 mancuses of gold, 1 pavilion) and utilitarian or medical textiles (10%; 2 bandages, 4 threads, 1 ritual cloth, 1 patch).

<sup>67</sup> Penelope Walton Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England, AD 450-700* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2007), 236-237. See also Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004).



man on eorðan ende gebidan.”<sup>68</sup> Gold, gems, and clothing are consistently enumerated together in these homilies, strengthening their ties to one another as a group of luxury goods. It would seem that the “reddest” incarnation of an object, like the “brightest,” or “most precious,” is considered the most valuable in this context, and thus used to represent the greatest temptation.

If red gems and red cloth describe the *best* gems and cloth, red gold may similarly describe the best or highest quality gold. Several gloss entries support this inference. The Latin term *aurum obrizum*, or “fine gold,” is consistently glossed by two terms in the DOEC: *smæte gold*, and *read gold* or *goldlæfer*. Though *smæte* or “fine, refined” is the primary modifier, glossing 8 of 11 entries, the presence of *read* as the sole alternative modifier for Old English *gold* suggests that *read gold* conveyed a meaning similar to that of *smæte gold*. In this event *read* likely indicates quality rather than hue, as neither *smæte* nor *obrizum* appear to connote a color sense beyond the innate visual properties of gold metal.

This correlation between red gold and luxury is not confined to Old English or Anglo-Saxon texts; Leif Einarson, discussing the *raut gall* [red gold] *lindbaugr* [twisted/serpentine rings] produced by the titular smith of the *Völundarkviða*, concludes that these “are likely prestige items of jewelry adorned with precious stones.”<sup>69</sup> Einarson speculates, like Mead, that the *raut gall* of the Old Norse saga is

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<sup>68</sup> “And though we adorn ourselves with the reddest gold, and clothe ourselves in the brightest cloth, and hang ourselves about with precious gems, they will, regardless, remain with the one in earth [e.g. the body] in the end” (British Library MS. Cotton Faustina A.IX., ff. 27v-31v).

<sup>69</sup> Leif Einarson, “Artisanal Revenge in *Völundarkviða*: *Völundr*'s Creations in the Spatial Relations of the Poem,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114, no. 1 (2015): 1-31.

the product of a gold/copper alloy. Yet for an alloy to produce the “red” or “rose” color familiar to modern readers, it would have to be composed of close to 50% copper.<sup>70</sup> At this point the metal would become “intractable” and difficult to manipulate; if Völundr (Weland) is indeed crafting “delicate ring[s]” with methods that “require great skill,” why favor a brittle and uncooperative raw material?<sup>71</sup>

While the practices of medieval Scandinavian smiths remain enigmatic, archaeological evidence suggests that Anglo-Saxon metalworkers preferred a purer alloy:<sup>72</sup>

Gold and silver seem always to have been in an alloyed form [in early England], although as we have seen efforts were made to refine them. These two metals in very pure form are, however, too soft for practical use, so there are therefore good reasons to alloy them to some degree to improve working qualities and durability. [An analysis of a] series of gold alloys in various objects roughly contemporary with the Sutton Hoo regalia . . . gives [an average] figure of about 75% [gold content], with twenty-three of the objects showing values of 70% or more. The alloy for gold work preferred by a modern goldsmith . . . is 18 carat (which has a 75% gold content) . . . [and] the parallel with the Anglo-Saxon alloys is likely to be more than coincidence.<sup>73</sup>

Coatsworth and Pinder point out that, since most of the gold and silver in early England arrived as coinage, “it is difficult to know . . . how deliberate were the

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<sup>70</sup> Cristian Cretu and Elma Van Der Lingen, “Coloured gold alloys,” *Gold Bulletin* 32, no. 4 (1999), 115-126. See pp. 117 for a helpful diagram of gold alloys; red gold is composed of 50% copper, while blue gold contains approximately 24% iron and 0.6% nickel, and white gold may incorporate a variety of “bleaching” metals.

<sup>71</sup> Elizabeth Coatsworth and Michael Pinder, *The Art of the Anglo-Saxon Goldsmith. Fine Metalwork in Anglo-Saxon England: its Practice and Practitioners* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002), 36.

<sup>72</sup> “The products of Scandinavian goldsmiths are well represented in museum collections around the world but their precise place of origin is elusive. It is possible to work out the techniques used in the production of certain pieces, and hence establish which tools, alloys and temperatures were used, but no fully equipped goldsmith’s workshop has yet been identified despite all attempts.” Ny Björn Gustafsson, “Beyond Wayland—thoughts on early medieval metal workshops in Scandinavia,” *Historical Metallurgy* 45, no. 2 (2011), 29.

<sup>73</sup> Coatsworth and Pinder, *Art of the Anglo-Saxon Goldsmith*, 37.

alloys we find in Anglo-Saxon jewellery.”<sup>74</sup> Yet while many early English smiths worked with high-copper alloys, these were regularly gilded or plated, and “considerable skill was exercised in making a little precious metal look like more.”<sup>75</sup> This suggests that purer alloys were the more highly valued; if undesirable materials were “disguised,” that disguise would necessarily mimic the preferred look and feel of a prestige item. It thus seems very unlikely that the red produced by a 50% copper alloy would have been favored over 18+ carat gold as a luxury product in Anglo-Saxon England.

For the author of the twelfth century *Diversis Artibus*, however, “redness” and “pureness” do not appear to have been mutually exclusive.<sup>76</sup> According to C.R. Dodwell, Roger of Helmarshausen (writing as “Theophilus”) describes “a very precious Arabian gold which is of an exceptionally red colour,” cautioning against counterfeits:

Modern workmen counterfeit [the appearance of this gold] by adding a fifth part of red copper to pale gold, and they deceive many unwary people. This can be guarded against in this way. The gold is put in the fire and, if it is pure, it does not lose its brightness. If, however, it is adulterated, it completely changes colour.<sup>77</sup>

Though the North-West German monk, likely writing between 1110 and 1140, cannot be said to speak for the Anglo-Saxons of a century or more prior, he nonetheless represents the perspective of a highly educated, skilled artisan. If

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<sup>74</sup> Coatsworth and Pinder, *Art of the Anglo-Saxon Goldsmith*, 36.

<sup>75</sup> Coatsworth and Pinder, *The Anglo-Saxon Goldsmith*, 242. Red garnets, in combination with gold, were also highly sought after, and gold objects were often embellished with red glass in the absence of gemstones; see 158.

<sup>76</sup> C. R. Dodwell, “Gold metallurgy in the twelfth century.” *Gold Bulletin* 4, no. 3 (1971): 51-55.

<sup>77</sup> Dodwell, “Gold metallurgy,” 52.

Theophilus perceived “redness” as a quality of fine, pure gold, perhaps other, earlier medieval goldsmiths shared such a belief. If so, a *literary* association with “redness” may have been intended to legitimate, rather than problematize, the reported purity of gold objects in Anglo-Saxon texts.

Taken as a whole, the body of textual and archaeological evidence I have collected suggests that *read*, in the context of man-made goods, functions as an indicator of luxury as well as, or instead of, color, with *read gold* manifesting as a particularly fine incarnation of an already valuable material. The infrequency of collocational use is likely related to this phenomenon; as in life, *read gold* is reserved textually for an elite set of descriptive contexts.

Unlike the patterns observed for *sweart* as a moral signifier and *fealo* as a temporal signifier, however, *read* as a material value intensifier is *not* limited to poetic and religious prose. Gold, textiles, gems, and “treasures” consistently appear in *read* forms across all categories of Old English text. This suggests that such a classification served utilitarian as well as aesthetic purposes; “redness,” whatever its manifestation, likely did incorporate a strong denotative component, as it was recognized in legal documents and wills, where it would have been necessary to distinguish the precise identity of *read gold* inherited objects in order to distribute them. Yet the functional classification of “red” gold, gems, and cloth in daily Anglo-Saxon life would have made their value easily discernible in a literary setting; thus the *read gold* of Old English prose and poetry draws upon the literal expense and prestige of *read* man-made objects to evoke a very specific cultural valence.

One interesting effect of this superlative function is that *read gold* comes to signify an excess of pride in many homiletic prose and Biblical poetic texts. In the *Exaltation of the Cross*, for example, the impious and somewhat stupid King Cosdrue builds himself a throne of the stuff:

He wæs swa up ahafen and swa arleas brega, þæt he wolde beon god,  
and worhte þa of seolfre ænne heahne stypel, on stanweorces  
gelicnysse, and mid scinendum gymmum besette eall þæt hus, and on  
þære upflora eall mid readum golde his cynestol geworhte, and  
wundorlice mid þeotum wæter ut ateah wolde renas wyrcan, swylce he  
sylf god wære.

[He was so haughty and so wicked a ruler that he wished to be God, and wrought then of silver a high steeple, in the likeness of stonework, and set the entire house with shining gems, and on the upper floor he wrought his king-seat entirely of red gold, and wondrously drew water out with pipes to make rain, as if he were God Himself.<sup>78</sup>

In spite of these ingenious architectural triumphs, Cosdrue is “ful dysig,” very foolish; he guards the stolen Cross in his glorious throne room until he is ultimately beheaded by a proper Christian king.<sup>79</sup> The silver steeple is distributed among Eraclius’ righteous army, but the gold and gems are delivered to the Church and repurposed in the worship of God. These most valuable incarnations of wealth are, it seems, too precious to glorify men; only the Mightiest of Lords may be raised up without risking an eventual fall.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Walter William Skeat, ed. *Aelfric's Lives of saints: being a set of sermons on saints' days formerly observed by the English church*. Vol. 4. (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1900).

<sup>79</sup> *Dysig* [dizzy] here suggests that Cosdrue quite literally has his head screwed on wrong; the term often describes the foolishness of drunkards in particular. See B-T Online: *dysig*, [bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/008253](http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/008253).

<sup>80</sup> Ælfric in particular appears to have enjoyed this comparison between luxury and pride; in another homily, he describes Pope Gregorius prior to conversion as “mid pællenum gyrlum. and scinendum gymmum. and readum golde gefrætewod. ac æfter his gecyrrednysse he ðenode godes ðearfum. he sylf ðearfa. mid wacum wæfelse befangen” [adorned with costly attire, and shining gems, and red gold ornaments. But after his conversion he ministered to God’s needy, himself poor, having taken

While the connotative import of *read* surely varies according to context, referent, and register, and is unlikely to signify luxury outside of the context of man-made goods, the constellation of color-referent relationships discussed above offers evidence for the benefits of further research. *Read* is, for example, quite uncommon in Old English poetry, but appears with relatively equal frequency in all forms of prose, as well as in Old English glosses of Latin texts. How might this relate to the association between *read* and worldly excess? How might it intersect with the fact that *The Dream of the Rood*, a Christian poem explicitly describing both blood and gold, never once employs the term? Such a large and widely applied lexemic group provides more possibilities for research than a single study can pursue, but I hope the questions raised and left unanswered may act as seeds for future fruitful investigation.

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the veil with vigilance.] Yet similar associations appear in British Library MS. Cotton Faustina A.IX., as discussed earlier, as well as in CCC MS. 198, and at least one homily by Wulfstan. This suggests that the link between *read gold* and self-indulgence was at least partly cultural, rather than specific to Ælfric's individual perception of luxury goods.

## CONCLUSION

Our current understanding of color in Old English literature is far from complete – and this, of course, is what makes it exciting. As demonstrated by Byrhtnoth’s *fealohilte* sword, color may be employed in Old English texts as a way of enhancing or clarifying the emotional import of a narrative; *sweart* further illustrates the impact of cultural and contextual cues on the “right reading” or interpretation of color as a literary device. Finally, *read*, in identifying man-made objects of particularly high value, illustrates that color may signal not only the *narrative* function of an object or subject, but also its wider significance in Anglo-Saxon society.

Color lexemes thus have the potential to tell us a great deal about the tacit values and cultural currencies operating in Anglo-Saxon literature; furthermore, the resonances explored here represent only a small fraction of what may yet be uncovered. It is my hope that understanding Old English cultural color associations will allow for new forms of intellectual and academic engagement with these texts. In recognizing color as a culturally encoded system of meaning, we will be better equipped to understand the larger sphere of the Anglo-Saxon aesthetic discourse in which it operates – and thus better equipped to draw connections between the words on the page and the worldview of the people who produced them.

Computerized data analysis and corpus linguistics now offer a precise means of tracking widespread lexemic patterns across bodies of literature; as such, we have the opportunity to investigate the larger functions of color in Old English

literature without being limited by incomplete data. Reconstructing an early English visual and cultural aesthetic, including but not limited to notions of color, need no longer be considered an unwieldy or Sisyphean task. On the contrary, in probing the seeming ambiguities of Old English color with a precise, well-designed methodological “stick,” we may yet uncover hidden facets of a world that once seemed lost beyond recall.



APPENDIX A: *SWEART* (ALL)

	Poetry	Prose (R) <sup>81</sup>	Prose (S)	Glosses	Charters	Totals
<b>Devils</b>	2	29		2		<b>33</b>
<b>Gloss/abstract</b>		1		26		<b>27</b>
<b>Atmospheric</b>	12	9	2	3		<b>26</b>
<b>Hell</b>	7	16		1		<b>24</b>
<b>Night</b>	7	10	2	4		<b>23</b>
<b>Fire</b>	11	9		1		<b>21</b>
<b>Human</b>	3	6	6		1	<b>16</b>
<b>Internal state</b>	5	10		1		<b>16</b>
<b>Flesh/Rot</b>		1	12	2		<b>15</b>
<b>Raven</b>	5	8				<b>13</b>
<b>Spirits</b>	5	8				<b>13</b>
<b>Herb/remedy</b>			11	1		<b>12</b>
<b>Animal</b>	3	4	3	2		<b>12</b>
<b>Water</b>	5	5				<b>10</b>
<b>Prison/chains</b>	1	4		2		<b>7</b>
<b>Sin</b>	2	3		1		<b>6</b>
<b>Death</b>	1	4		1		<b>6</b>
<b>Black bile</b>			1	4		<b>5</b>
<b>Vision</b>	1	1		3		<b>5</b>
<b>Eclipse</b>	1	2	2			<b>5</b>
<b>Souls</b>	1	3				<b>4</b>
<b>Tortures</b>	2	2				<b>4</b>
<b>Spot/speck</b>				4		<b>4</b>
<b>Earth</b>	1	2				<b>3</b>
<b>Tracks</b>	3					<b>3</b>
<b>Books/letters</b>		3				<b>3</b>
<b>Tree</b>	1	1		1		<b>3</b>
<b>Crowd</b>		1		2		<b>3</b>
<b>Personal name</b>			1		1	<b>2</b>
<b>Journey</b>	2					<b>2</b>
<b>Riddle (?)</b>	2					<b>2</b>
<b>Signal</b>		2				<b>2</b>
<b>Weapons</b>	2					<b>2</b>
<b>Animal product</b>		1	1			<b>2</b>
<b>Breath</b>	1					<b>1</b>
<b>Clothes</b>		1				<b>1</b>
<b>“Place”</b>		1				<b>1</b>
<b>Disease</b>			1			<b>1</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>338</b>

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<sup>81</sup> (R) and (S) respectively denote religious and secular prose.

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