**Emily Johnson**

Hello. We're back for another episode of ASE Digs Deeper. Our guest today is Lorna Webb, hi Lorna [hello] and she's going to be talking to us about medieval representations of women in old English texts in honour of Women's History Month. Lorna is a post excavation archaeologist working with ASE in the Witham office. You may know her from Lorna’s Medieval Corner, a series of blogs on all things medieval, or even perhaps from her YouTube series called ASE’s Medieval Garden, which was a vlog of Lorna’s mock up medieval allotment.

Just a note for this episode, we will be discussing some medieval representations of women that are not suitable for children. So you have been warned. And apologies for any giggling that may occur in the course of this episode. But first off, before we get onto that, we generally ask our guests sort of about their archaeological background and mainly, you know, what made you want to be an archaeologist.

So Lorna, tell us all about your archaeological journey.

**Lorna Webb**

So I started as a field archaeologist, about ten years ago now, but now I work as a post excavation archaeologist with a focus on environmental sampling. I finished my Masters in Medieval Studies in 2020 from UCL, where I explored my love of plants, the medieval period, hence medieval allotment. And I love old English literature and looking at the culture through the writings of the time.

**Emily Johnson**

So I guess that brings us on to what is old English literature and can we be using. I always wonder this. Can I use medieval to mean old English? Can I use old English to mean medieval?

**Lorna Webb**

Right. So we'll be using early medieval to explain the period that it comes from so about 600 to about 1200 A.D. Old English is a Germanic based language, which kind of it's like a weird mix of German, Norse and a little bit of Latin. You wouldn't really recognize it as English. Some words we would, but not all of it. And there's there's a limited amount of it as well.

**Lorna Webb**

So you get certain words only appear once. They only show up once in the whole thing. And that's it sort of thing. But old English literature comes in lots different guises as well. So we get prose, we get riddles, we get stories and we get poetry, which is quite a large chunk of it. So right.

There's two main types of Old English poetry, which is heroic German and Germanic tales and Christian literature. So that's kind of putting us right at the beginning of the medieval period where we've gone from being pagan to being Christian. We're not Roman any more, the Normans. So in the past we would have referred it to the Dark Ages because there is not much of this literature around right?

**Emily Johnson**

Are we ever discovering like any more like, do we find more old English literature or do you think it's all been found?

**Lorna Webb**

Occasionally find them, scraps of them. So manuscripts are a weird thing because of how they're made and then through the centuries, how they get dispersed and like.

**Emily Johnson**

Right.

**Lorna Webb**

Some of the codexes are bits that have been stuck together. So they’ve been sewed together from different things. The antiquarians of the 16th and 17th century love doing that. My favourite codex, the Nowell Codex, which we will talk about later, which has got Beowulf in it, has a whole bunch of stuff that originally wasn't sewed together.

And they can tell that by what the binding looks like.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, it’s like forensic book forensics.

**Lorna Webb**

Is there's other things as well like the Exeter book where it's they think it was lying open when something like burning fell on top of it. But the pages where it matches up aren’t where- there's like an extra bit been put in the middle.

**Emily Johnson**

So they're taking this burnt book and stuck some more stuff in it.

**Lorna Webb**

They occasionally find random pages and of course random pages are missing sometimes as well, but that could be how it was done, how they were written.

**Emily Johnson**

Right.

**Lorna Webb**

Early medieval manuscripts are written in a way that, ah, so somebody writes it and then someone else illuminates it and somebody else draws on it.

**Emily Johnson**

What do you mean by illuminates it?

**Lorna Webb**

You know those really fancy letters.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay. Yes, so like illustrates, but like medieval.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay. Yeah. So we talked a bit about people adding stuff to these, but I guess one of my questions is who’s writing these in the first place. Like we're talking about Women's History Month today. But my understanding of what women were allowed to do in the past, would suggest that it's not women writing these. Is that true?

**Lorna Webb**

Well, it's uncertain who's writing them and who's composing them as well, because most when we talk about like especially the poetry bit, most of it’s oral, it would have been performed, sort of, you know, early medieval holes. So who's making this stuff up, making stuff up, composing this stuff.

**Lorna Webb**

And then performing the stuff and then eventually writing it down. They'd be three different people. And sometimes because of how the texts are then written down and then copied in different versions, sometimes there's different versions of them. Somebody else might be copying them. So what you end up with, the version we end up of things, might not be what the original looked like at all.

So it's possible that ladies could have been writing them or composing them or telling them. And then through time they've moved on. We're going to find that lots of the things I'm going to talk about are very subjected to translation as well.

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**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, I guess that's the other thing as well, isn't it? It's not just what they say, it's what we say that they say. And so it's just like the whole archaeological like you have. So obviously I'm going to relate this to bones, so you've got a bone in the ground, but the chance of that bone getting into the ground is one chance.

And then the chance of us even excavating the part of the site that has that bone is another chance. And then the chance of it, you know, surviving all the way to it getting to me is another chance. And all of those choices, I guess all of those chances like have an impact on on the product that we get at the end.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. And of course with literature it's exactly the same. You get clues in the language, especially with old English, old English is an inflective language, so it's like French and German that we have feminine nouns, we have masculine nouns, that sort of thing. So you can sometimes guess what's going on from that, but you have to look at who's translating it, why the piece of work has been saved in the first place.

**Emily Johnson**

Right?

**Lorna Webb**

Lots of this stuff was translated in the Victorian period, so anything that was outside of their societal norms has been completely blown away or not translated at all. Lots of the Latin pieces stay in Latin if they're to do with, well, female stuff. Usually they stay where they are. So we're looking very much, and especially when we're looking for women in texts as well,

If they’re being erased in whatever the modern period that this is being looked at is, they’re being erased from the past as well.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, it's such is such a chance that they even get to us at all. It's amazing. So where do women appear in these texts? What kind of roles do they take? You know, I'm imagining the sort of demure she's sewing. She's maybe wearing some sort of cone hat with some sort of like, I don't know, you know when you dress up like a medieval lady with a with a big paper cone on your head and you've got a big veil coming out of it.

I don’t know that's probably as bad as saying that the Vikings wore those horn hats.

**Lorna Webb**

It's very Disney Robin Hood.

**Emily Johnson**

Yes, actually, that's what it is. Yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

They're all foxes as well.

**Emily Johnson**

All foxes. Yes. Yes.

**Lorna Webb**

Oh well, it's true that most famous characters, main characters that are generally men, which you could probably say for the majority of English literature, to be honest. But the Yeah, yeah. So famous examples of literature characters that are men are of course Beowulf, or Wayland the Smith who are very male. They have certain things that we would attribute to being male, you know, swords and chest hair, that sort of thing, you know, and I don't know, but yeah, but female characters do appear usually as background characters, annoyingly, but they have important roles in their background characters.

Usually what they represent themes, motifs, that sort of thing. Sometimes they are the subject of passages but they’re usually there to aid the male hero in their quest.

Sometimes they are just representations that women are actually there in society.

**Emily Johnson**

Right? It’s sort of like, what’s it called, worldbuilding like. Yeah, there are also women here, so it's more believable.

**Lorna Webb**

Of course, you’ve got to remember who the poetry is or the prose is being written for. People in society, people who are hearing this stuff and they have wives, they have daughters, they have other women they come across. So they, you know, they still need to be represented as there. We can break down the most common types into basically three categories.

We have saints and Old Testament women, mothers and mourners, and examples of women expressing themselves as well usually as background characters.

**Emily Johnson**

That sounds exciting.

**Lorna Webb**

We'll start with saints. Everyone likes a good saint. Um, what does a female saint do apart from sitting in their nunneries being holy? And the answer isn't much to be honest.

**Emily Johnson**

All right. Fair enough.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. And most of them have some- like the early Christian martyrs for who show up in old English writings are from the Lives of Saints. They're all things like St Osyth, who gets her head cut off and then picks it up and walks out with it. You know, things like.

**Emily Johnson**

Power move!

**Lorna Webb**

Yes. Apart from the dying.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, yeah, right. Okay. I see. She picks it up as a saint.

**Lorna Webb**

Yes. Because she's so holy she can walk out without a head.

**Emily Johnson**

I see. I see. Yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

And there was, there was another one about, I can’t remember the Saint’s name, but she was in a group of ladies who were being attacked by the Vikings and to stop them, they mutilated their faces and things so the Vikings would leave them alone. And it's all a bit kind of.

**Emily Johnson**

A little bit Game of Thrones.

**Lorna Webb**

Yes, it's a bit gory and like, really? So to show how virtuous you are, you have to, like, do these horrible things to yourselves. I'm not into that at all, let’s not go there. I went looking for other slightly, ways that femininity is a good thing or ways it doesn't involve having to cut off your face.

**Lorna Webb**

And so one of the big important aspects of being a early Medieval Saint is the idea of chastity. But though you may notice chastity not virginity, right?

**Emily Johnson**

Interesting.

**Lorna Webb**

The word for Virgin in old English doesn't exist.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, I thought they would be like totally all about this.

**Lorna Webb**

No. So Virgin comes in later. It's middle English word from the French. And so that's where we get know Virgin Mary as in Jesus's mother. Right. But it can translate to young girl.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. So it might not be about that but yeah just it’s this big deal because it's one of the seven virtues that one of the one of these popes from the sixth century set out that makes you holy. It also means that women can observe chastity even if they're married, even if they've been married and widowed, and even if they've had children as well as you can take a vow of chastity afterwards.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay. So it's not like the binary you are a virgin or you aren't. It's like and now I am chaste and it's my decision. That's kind of cool, actually. Yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah, it was. It was more I found it more empowering to show that actually early medieval women can pick this if they want to.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, yeah, totally. That's kind of cool.

**Lorna Webb**

So all the cult of the Virgin Mary stuff that's later medieval stuff.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. It becomes a bigger deal later on. But yeah, when I was looking for all this stuff I found a Old English saint who is written in one of these old English Lives of Saints called Saint Eugenia. Her story is really simple. She wishes to join the Christians who she hears singing, but no women are allowed in where they live, so she tells her servants to cut her hair.

**Emily Johnson**

I’m sensing a Mulan moment.

**Lorna Webb**

And then she's like, She wants to keep her chastity. And she describes the joys and virtues of this. Okay, so in standard traditional virginity literature, she disguises herself as a man and goes and lives as a man. Okay.

**Emily Johnson**

And this is pretty much so she can join a choir or be a Christian or both.

**Lorna Webb**

And that she can yeah, she can live the way she wants to live. She wants to live as a Christian. She wants to live it with her chastity. We've heard the joys of being super holy or whatever. Yeah. So we got a bit of problematic views on this one because of course it is a translation from a Latin into old English.

So the original was being so we have a little bit of problematic views on is this the inferiority of women? Is she being is she denying her femininity? But she's allowed to stay there. The male writers at the time seem to support the idea that by suppressing her femininity and gaining spiritual manliness, it makes the more holy?

**Emily Johnson**

I can totally see that kind of that kind of trope playing out there that like if you want to be involved in Christianity, you have to be somehow male.

**Lorna Webb**

I mean. Male Yeah.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay.

**Lorna Webb**

So it's a it's a weird one because at one point she's living how she wants. But the other thing is that she has to be a man to do it.

**Emily Johnson**

How does like the story end? Is there a kind of an ending to this story? Like, does she get found out or something, or is it okay?

**Lorna Webb**

She gets found out, but she's allowed to stay and she ends up running the place, at least that’s how the story or some of the one of the stories goes. But as a man. And she gets a man's name as well, because the the Latin changes.

**Emily Johnson**

So is this sort of a representation really, of a trans man in medieval literature?

**Lorna Webb**

Possibly. It always refers to her as her, even though she's acting like a man. So it's a way that she can express herself. I mean, for something's obviously written in the seventh centuries

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, it's quite progressive even today yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

The writer sees that by disguising herself that she's acting courageously, she's doing man things. But as a woman, it's more because she's acting like a man. It's, it's very positive. And it's this is also attributed to Judith from the Book of Judith, and she's described as a courageous woman who's been strengthened because she prioritizes chastity, as you should do, as a man, apparently.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay. Apparently.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. Another place women are portrayed in literature, there is, of course, the Old Testament. Early medieval writers love a good bit of the Old Testament and one of the really interesting characters who shows up time and time again is the Old Testament character, Judith. The book of Judith is written sometime between 150 to 100 100 B.C. and is found in the Apocrypha.

So the book of Judith tells a story of a Jewish woman. So she's a Jewish widow who uses her beauty and charm to destroy an Assyrian general and save Israel from oppression. So she charms her way into there, and decapitates him.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, wow.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. There's more to it than that, because, of course, this book is in the Bible, so she's very sort of she's got this super belief in God and she's upset that her other countrymen don't trust her while they're being oppressed by Assyrians.

**Emily Johnson**

Right yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

So she gains his trust. And as he lies in a drunken stupor, she decapitates him, and then takes his head back and shows them all.

**Emily Johnson**

And this is something that, like a man couldn't do, do you think, is this why she's doing this, this sort of role?

**Lorna Webb**

It's the getting close to him bit. She uses the fact that she's this beautiful woman.

**Emily Johnson**

Feminine wiles

**Lorna Webb**

And she's not a virgin. Because she is a widow. But she but she's taken a vow of chastity. So that puts her in with the saints and the other Old Testament characters. She is seen as an example of strength in weakness,

**Emily Johnson**

Strength in weakness?

**Lorna Webb**

Yes. Because she is female, she's automatically weak, but she shows this fantastic strength.

**Lorna Webb**

She uses that to her advantage.

**Emily Johnson**

I see. Okay.

**Lorna Webb**

She's actually found in one of the other texts. You know I was talking about the Nowell Codex where Beowulf is found. She's actually one of the the Book of Judith is a version of it sewed into that behind Beowulf. Speaking of Beowulf, there's more ladies in Beowulf, but weirdly, none of them are main characters. They're all background characters, right?

**Emily Johnson**

Not even Angelina Jolie. As Grendel's mother.

**Lorna Webb**

No never seen that film.

**Emily Johnson**

I don't know if I've even seen it, really. But when we were doing... everyone should go and read Lorna’s blog, you did the Beowulf one, didn't you? Grendel, the monster. That's it. And I think I just ended up in a massive Angelina Jolie image search looking for images of Grendel. Everyone was like, No, you should look at Angelina Jolie as Grendel’s mother instead, because it's like she's all like golden and beautiful. But anyway.

**Lorna Webb**

I've missed that completely. We should look that up. The women in Beowulf are a little few and far between. And actually, there's a theory that nearly every woman in Beowulf who is presented is a victim.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, okay.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. Their political and moral power is useless against brute force. And all the females, including Grendel's mother, depend on survival from male characters? There is one woman who gets a she gets a speech in it. Of course she has a fantastic Anglo-Saxon sounding name, which I can't say so I’ve got a cheat sheet. And so she's Wealhtheow (walf fay owh). That's how you say it anyway.

And she is king Hrothgar’s queen, right? She's the queen of the king who Beowulf comes to his aid.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, because I feel like my knowledge of Beowulf is is fairly poor, which is which is saying a lot because like we have done blog posts on Beowulf together before and so I should probably know a bit better.

**Lorna Webb**

Do you want a run down?

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah. Do you want. I just like two sentences. Elevator pitch, Beowulf.

**Lorna Webb**

Okay. But spoiler alert people have you haven't read Beowulf!

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah! If you haven’t read Beowulf yet that’s your fault.

**Lorna Webb**

Okay, so Beowulf comes to the aid of King Hrothgar, whose hall is being attacked by Grendel, the monster. He defeats Grendel and then Grendel's mother shows up to avenge Grendel and Beowulf defeats her as well. Then there's a time gap of about 50 years. And then Beowulf defeats a dragon before his ultimate demise and funeral.

Beowulf in four sentences.

**Emily Johnson**

I love how there’s a “a few minutes later” in the middle.

**Lorna Webb**

There totally is, he gets old and then, it's very, not Lord of the Rings, it’s very Hobbit, The end, the Dragon who lives under a mountain with all his gold.

**Emily Johnson**

Right, cool. Thank you. Thank you, That was great..

**Lorna Webb**

Hrothgar’s Queen, Wealhtheow, she gets a speech. She's one of the only women in it who actually gets a speech. And she actually provides the role of Mother and Peace weaver.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay, Peace weaver. That sounds cool.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah, nice term isn’t it. She gets to use this, she uses her position as a queen to maintain peace between warring tribes and to signify status in the court. She yeah, she's there for, so, for like, social harmony, through, like active diplomacy. So when she's speaking, she reminds Hrothgar of, because he's the king, of course, and in early medieval society, you have generosity and protection from the king.

But also he gives gifts and protection back to his warriors and things. So she's there to remind him that he may be giving all of these things to Beowulf and that sort of thing, but also he has other commitments that he has to do. So she's there to remind him about where they are in the world. Who they owe things to, how society functions and that sort of thing. About their obligations.

That's what she's there to say. She's there to remind them of, so she speaks to all the men in the hall as well. She reminds them of their obligations, obligations to their country, their family, and of course, their king as well. So she's yeah, she's, these are the qualities you want in a mother and a queen.

**Emily Johnson**

I see. Yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

And she expresses that through the peace weaving and also it places her in really good place to contrast to Grendel's mother, who in the poem shows up for the first time while she is speaking.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, no. Girl! Like a woman is speaking. Yeah. Don't interrupt. Oh, okay. I see. So it's like a I am woman and all the qualities that you like in woman and remember that you are, you know, diplomacy and peace weaving and stuff and then you've got this big monster lady smashing in like “rawr”! Is that what happens? She she doesn't talk. She just “blarrgghs”.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah Grendel's mother doesn't talk, as far as I remember. Though Beowulf’s not my favourite. So. Right. Probably not. Angelina Jolie probably talks.

**Emily Johnson**

I think she probably does. I suspect there's been some some creative license.

**Lorna Webb**

Does she have a name is well in there?

**Emily Johnson**

I don't know that she does, actually. I'm not sure. I feel like I need to watch this again. But she's all golden, that's kind of all I can remember.

**Lorna Webb**

Grendel's mother, she's viewed as a monster woman. But is that because she's doing things women shouldn't do? She’s not peace weaving, even though she's a mother, she's, you know, she's out for revenge. She's showing emotion left, right and centre, but the wrong emotions.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, okay. So, like, how, you know, are there people, are there people who die in Beowulf and are they mourned by women in Beowulf? Like how how does women's mourning happen?

**Lorna Webb**

So that's the last like prominent woman who shows up in Beowulf and she's seen as the female mourner in the last page or last few pages of Beowulf. What's interesting about the female mourner is that the passage where she actually shows up so lines 3155 doesn't actually exist. So the Beowulf manuscript is very damaged.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay. Right.

**Lorna Webb**

Which is my favourite story when it comes to medieval manuscripts, the Ashburnham House thing where they threw them out the window and stuff, oh it’s excellent. Yeah, so antiquarian… ah I’ve forgotten his name. Anyway, the Cotton collection is housed in the 18th century, is housed in a big house called Ashburnham House, which, of course it is, what a fantastic name and it catches fire one night and yeah, all of the priceless and one-of-a-kind manuscripts just go up in smoke and to save them, they threw them out of the window. So the reason why the Beowulf manuscript, you can't go and touch the Beowulf manuscript. Beowulf appears in one place and there was only one copy of it and it burned to a crisp round the sides.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, my God.

**Lorna Webb**

So the British Library keep it in a very, very safe place.

**Emily Johnson**

I was going to say, they no longer keep it in a house that’s called like burn ‘em down house, like flameo house.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. Everything you ever need to know about archiving and why we do certain things.

**Emily Johnson**

But to be fair, like Beowulf, flying through the air is quite, is quite, quite an image, right? Yeah. Thank you person that threw Beowulf out of a window for us.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. Anyway, so yeah, that bit is so damaged that there's bits of it that appear, it's one of those bits that translators love to have a go at because there's certain words that you can read, you can read individual words and you can't read the rest of it. And those individual words are sad song, a woman, sorrows, slaughter and terror.

**Emily Johnson**

Wow.

**Lorna Webb**

So it's an interesting one because they translators of it, and of course, Beowulf has been translated many times by many different people, do have a tendency to stick their ideologies on to it. Is the female mourner a strong character? Is she active? Is she a passive character? Is she a powerful presence? So it really depends on which translation that you're reading.

**Lorna Webb**

Actually have the Seamus Heaney translation and he translates it as this

A Geat woman too sang out in grief:

With hair bound up, she unburdened herself

Of her worst fears, a wild litany

Of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,

Enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,

Slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

**Emily Johnson**

It’s powerful.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. And it’s right at the end of the poem.

**Emily Johnson**

Right. It's funny, isn't it? Because from what you're saying about Grendel's mother coming in, it's just this made monstrous, right? Like she's unburdening herself. A wild litany. Like, is it not just the same? Discuss!

**Lorna Webb**

The idea of the every woman in Beowulf is presented as victim is interesting. Wealhtheow is the queen at the moment, but she has to remind the stupid men around her that they owe it to each other. They can't go to war with each other once the person who's in charge is dead. So she has to keep the peace that way.

Grendel's mother is a victim because she outrightly shows that she's angry, that she you know, he's just killed her son. She's got to do something about it. And the female mourner at the end of the poem is mourning everything she mourns Beowulf, she is mourning the end of civilization itself, it almost seems.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

But as we said, like female saints, because as being female, you deemed as weak, you’re allowed to show these feelings. Is that seen as strength?

**Emily Johnson**

It's like you're inhabiting a space that men aren't allowed to inhabit. So you're kind of like the vessel by which the narrator can tell you that everyone’s sad.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah, exactly that, you can inhabit a space that men are not allowed to. They're all stoic and warrior and but you're allowed to, as a woman, to express how express these feelings. A bit sober!

**Emily Johnson**

Is anyone having fun in medieval literature at all?

**Lorna Webb**

Oh, let's just talk about sex. Right, so Bede writes about nuns who dress like brides who use precious metal in their materials, in their outfits, and one of the other writers, Oldham, describes nuns who curl their hair and wear long coloured veils down to the ground instead of grey white ones. He talks about women who wear jewellery and curl hair, use blush and line their lips.

**Emily Johnson**

It sounds like an amazing nun place to be.

**Lorna Webb**

So it's not all sober in where it comes to... I mean, Bede and Oldham are actually writing about real people. That’s the literature bit of it.

**Emily Johnson**

So it’s like historical, but it's all a bit like, Oh, it's historical, but also it's what Bede thinks.

**Lorna Webb**

And remember they’re both monks as well.

**Emily Johnson**

Ah yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

Little bit sexist there, methinks.

**Emily Johnson**

They probably want to be in on the whole coloured robe thing. They are just super jealous.

**Lorna Webb**

Oh yeah. So it seems like some of, so actually some of the literature where women show up, some of the stuff that is meant to be fun and is what is supposed to be like enjoyed by people. I'm not sure Beowulf is supposed to be enjoyed by any one it’s like a historical sort of tale, an epic. And the Saint stuff is supposed to be like moral and how you're supposed to live and that sort of thing.

**Lorna Webb**

But there are bits of things of English literature that are there for enjoyment and, and one of those is, the early medieval people love a good riddle.

**Emily Johnson**

Right?

**Lorna Webb**

Kind of like, you know, the things in The Hobbit where Gollum and Bilbo are talking about, it’s exactly that.

**Emily Johnson**

Absolutely.

**Lorna Webb**

And that sort of game and that sort of thing is what they would play. So the Exeter book, which is a large collection of old English writings, has some has some epic poems in there, which I'm sure I've written about somewhere. So The Wanderer, The Seafarer. It also has a large collection of riddles in it, it has 95 riddles, and 14 of them deal with sex or are deemed as double entendres, somehow.

**Emily Johnson**

That’s a good 10%, you know, I mean, there are a lot of sexy riddles.

**Lorna Webb**

It's where they're performed. That's the. That's the bit that we're interested in. But. Right. So I've got three.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay. Are you going to make me try and solve the riddles? I'm not sure I'm going to be very good at this.

**Lorna Webb**

If you want. I can't remember where we were on the set up document. No, I didn't. I didn't send you the answers. This is brilliant. Right. Okay, so we'll start with Riddle 42.

I saw two amazing creatures — they were playing openly outside in the sport of sex. The woman, proud and bright-haired, received her fill under her garments, if the work was successful. Through rune-letters I can say the names of both creatures together to those men in the hall who know books. There must be two needs and the bright ash — one on the line — two oaks and as many hails. Who can unlock the bar of the hoard-gate with the power of the key? The heart of the riddle was hidden by cunning bonds, proof against the ingenuity of men who know secrets. But now for men at wine it is obvious how those two low-minded creatures are named among us.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, my goodness.

**Lorna Webb**

No double entendre here, it’s straight out there.

**Emily Johnson**

I mean, I have absolutely no idea.

**Lorna Webb**

The given answer to this one is cock and hen. As in chickens.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh! Yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

Which is given in the last line “two low minded creatures” which is chickens, which are deemed frisky and low minded.

**Emily Johnson**

Right. Okay.

**Lorna Webb**

But if you may notice through it, it's not regarding their activity of a lady and the man having sex being sinful.

**Emily Johnson**

No! It’s just like it’s what’s happening

**Lorna Webb**

And I mean, we're so familiar with this idea that the peoples of medieval period just had sex to reproduce. But there's no reference to offspring here. They’re just having sex to have fun. I found this fantastic blog post online which talks about this particular riddle, and it said that actually the metaphor that's used for this one is the word work.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay?

**Lorna Webb**

It shows up in the fifth line if the work was successful. The comment from the blog post is, this is so good, it was, is this how early medieval people really felt about sex? Was it simply work? If so, they share the idea with us from the 21st century as the 2015 song by Fifth Harmony “Work from Home” explains! (laughter) So yeah, but we have to get back to where these are being performed as well.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah. And who's hearing them? Is it shocking to hear or not?

**Lorna Webb**

Well, we're told who’s hearing them. So after the work comment, the riddle says, I can say the names of both creatures together to these men in the hall. So the centre of the social world is the hall, is the place where the king gives gifts to his followers, where the social drinking happens and where they're drinking wine in a hall and the speaker of the text is offering to reveal the names of the two people he's just caught having sex round the back. That’s cock and hen!

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, okay, so it's kind of like a big drinking game. Is it then? Cool.

**Lorna Webb**

But the lady in the in the riddle is long for it, she’d be in the hall too. She'd be having a drink with them.

**Emily Johnson**

And it’s all good laughs. Yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. It's not being judged. It's no shame here.

**Emily Johnson**

It's definitely a different understanding from what I had of. I mean, what's the one? The Canterbury Tales. I did that in A-level drama.

**Lorna Webb**

Middle English text, bit of Chaucer.

**Emily Johnson**

So yeah, so all of you people are thinking about all the bums on show in the Canterbury Tales that;s a middle English thing. Fair enough.

**Lorna Webb**

It's the same sort of humour.

**Emily Johnson**

Let's do another riddle.

**Lorna Webb**

Okay, so this is Riddle 25. This one's really famous, so you might get this.

I am a wondrous creature, a joy to women, a help to neighbours; I harm none of the city-dwellers, except for my killer. My base is steep and high, I stand in a bed, shaggy somewhere beneath. Sometimes ventures the very beautiful daughter of a churl, a maid proud in mind, so that she grabs hold of me, rubs me to redness, ravages my head, forces me into a fastness. Immediately she feels my meeting, the one who confines me, the curly-locked woman. Wet will be that eye.

**Emily Johnson**

I feel like this is like a cat or a dog. I don't know. Am I right? Oh, no. Oh, okay.

**Lorna Webb**

So the riddle solutions, this one have been interpreted as a leek, an onion, mustard or a phallus. This is the famous onion riddle.

**Emily Johnson**

I see. Now, if you read it again, like the whole I stand in the beds shaggy somewhere beneath. Like I can imagine all the roots of the leek as well. Like it says how I harm none of the city dwellers except for my killer. Is that like because when you cut an onion, your eyes leak. And wet will be the eye!!

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah, yeah.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh my god, it's an onion riddle.

**Lorna Webb**

It's the clean version that it's an onion.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay. Got you. Gotcha. Right. Because yeah, there are other…

**Lorna Webb**

Yes, it gives us a pretty interesting image of a sexually assertive lady as well.

**Emily Johnson**

Oh, right. Yeah. A maid proud in mind.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. Yeah, she knows what she wants and she isn’t afraid to grab it.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah. And it doesn't say like like it doesn't seem derogatory. It actually feels quite like it is a positive representation. It's not like some some slattern does this.

**Lorna Webb**

I mean it's got a little bit of maybe derogatory in it because it does give her class.

**Emily Johnson**

Right. Is that what a churl is, what's a churl.

**Lorna Webb**

So it's like a free man. So, you're a peasant but you're not like the lowest, you’re like the middle one

**Emily Johnson**

Okay.

**Lorna Webb**

It's showing assertiveness and how grabby her hands are. Not too much of an issue on that one. What I find the most interesting about this is the last line, not the wetness bit the other bit. The one that says about the curly-locked woman.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, are we not talking about head hair… from your from your expression we are not.

**Lorna Webb**

Hair’s quite culturally significant really.

**Emily Johnson**

Good point.

**Lorna Webb**

There's actually a parallel between Riddle 25 and Judith, in the Book of Judith on this one. This is how she wears her hair. How you know, she's…

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah. And I guess in the Beowulf one as well. The morning woman. She has her hair bound up. Yes, yes. They spend time saying that, like it said.

**Lorna Webb**

The translation of Riddle 25 curly locked could also translate to braided.

**Emily Johnson**

Okay.

**Lorna Webb**

That sometimes that shows religious identity and all that. So it's actually really interesting. But yeah, it could a little bit refer to how you wear your pubic hair as an Anglo-Saxon lady. Braided. Again, it's a really good way that the ladies in literature appear they are described exactly how they are. The riddle doesn't really judge.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. That brings us to Riddle 12, my last one.

**Emily Johnson**

The state of this riddle everyone. Avert yon ears.

**Lorna Webb**

I travel by foot, trample the ground, the green fields, as long as I carry a spirit. If I lose my life, I bind fast dark Welshmen; sometimes better men. On occasion, I give a brave warrior drink from within me, sometimes a very stately bride treads her foot on me; sometimes a dark-haired slave-girl brought far from Wales shakes and presses me, some stupid, drunken maidservant, on dark nights she moistens with water, she warms for a while by the pleasant fire; on my breast she thrusts a wanton hand and moves about frequently, then sweeps me within the blackness. Say what I am called who, living ravages the land, and after death, serves the multitudes.

This one’s interesting because it's actually five little riddles. All sort of which cover the same answer. But it gives a very interesting description of a woman who we don't really see very often in any literature, the dark haired slave girl, which actually is even more interesting because she's, in this translation she's called she's from Wales, but it actually could mean that she's just native of Britain.

**Emily Johnson**

Right? Okay. Right.

**Lorna Webb**

The answer to this riddle is an ox.

**Emily Johnson**

I was thinking like a spring or something. I was like, No, there's definitely some sort of animal situation here. Yeah, an ox. Okay.

**Lorna Webb**

So most of the things that are described are things that you get from an ox. Leather.

**Emily Johnson**

Ahh, it's primary and secondary products!

**Lorna Webb**

It is! Yes. On this one. Apart from right at the beginning where it's alive.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I'm just reading it again and seeing the, all the ways that it relates to an ox. Like, obviously I gave a give a brave warrior drink from within me like, well.

**Lorna Webb**

Cup.

**Emily Johnson**

Cup, so, but would that be blood's been rather than milk if it's kind of like a like that's…

**Lorna Webb**

Like a horn. Like a drinking cup.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah. Okay. I'm with you. I'm with you.

**Lorna Webb**

But the only thing that's a little odd in this one is the description of, again, the the lady. Because that's the only thing that's quite a lot of scholars can't decide on what the hell she's doing with a piece of leather. Yeah. Shall we have a guess. What do we think the lady is doing with her moisturizing water by the pleasant fire with her wanton hand. What do you reckon she's doing.

**Emily Johnson**

Hmm. I mean, I would suggest something risqué.

**Lorna Webb**

We talked about, you know, having sex with another bloke.

**Emily Johnson**

Mm hmm.

**Lorna Webb**

So this one seems to be that she's doing it herself. She seems to have fashioned herself a leather dildo! It's an odd one. Um, and this is being pointed out by an old English scholar who says that the last verb that is used typically means to sweep or resolve. The middle English word means to have sex.

**Lorna Webb**

So if we're following the word through.

**Emily Johnson**

Just so multi use these oxes.

**Lorna Webb**

But also it's like, who's the audience who's reading this? Or hearing it even. Um, and another lewd riddles, all the ones in the book. Like do they laugh at it? I mean we definitely have.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah. Is it a bit like wahay, you know, is it a bit like, whoa, you know, I can kind of imagine the bawdy hall in which this is being sort of orated.

**Lorna Webb**

Or is, you know, are there questions about the identity of the girl?.

**Emily Johnson**

That's that's the one bit that I'm like, Oh, what's going on here? The like, I didn't know that there really were slaves in the medieval period, which just shows my lack of knowledge there.

**Lorna Webb**

Oh yeah, that's a whole other podcast that is.

**Emily Johnson**

But from within Britain as well. Is it British people with British people as their slaves?

**Lorna Webb**

Looks like it. Yeah. But yeah, it's quite interesting because she gets quite a lot of words to describe her.

**Emily Johnson**

Way more than the brave warrior. Yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. He gets nothing, he’s just there for the ride. And also, yeah, if, like, she's lower class, she's not tied up like her male companions. And she's given quite an active role through it as well. Yeah. You know, it shows that ladies of there that they are allowed to

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah! Self-pleasure.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. So it's, they're, they're interesting looks.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah. Totally. Yeah. They seem much more kind of like, you know, it's like wink, wink, nudge nudge. But it's sort of a bit more than that, which, I mean, which is so useful, right? This is a riddle because that works, because people know what you're talking about. Like almost more so than Beowulf. I feel like, yeah, these give you the actual society.

**Lorna Webb**

But yeah, that's why I went looking for this sort of stuff. We used to depictions of women using these weak, quiet characters who we just like, like the Beowulf characters who were just victims.. And you know, these sobering tales of, you know, rape and mutilation. It is good to know that there is actually quite a big chunk of the literature that talks about women having well, apparently quite fulfilling sex lives.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, yeah. And able to kind of sit within their own powers like choose things for themselves. And, you know, in those earlier ones, like the chastity stuff that we were talking about earlier.

**Lorna Webb**

St Eugenia. Yeah. She has to be a man. She chooses it.

**Emily Johnson**

She chooses it, yeah.

**Lorna Webb**

Or Judith gets to show her power by, you know, using being female to defeat her oppressors.

**Emily Johnson**

Both use kind of different means to enact their feminine power, I guess. And live the life that they want.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah. Think it's just different views on femininity. It's different ways to show it and that. Unfortunately, some of this has been sort of erased over time. We talked at the beginning about how you have to go through translation to do that. And of course we have quite a lot of history between now and when they were written, how like you said, about the animal bones.

That's how we get to it. But of course on top of that, we have societal, cultural things that have been chucked on top of it that the animal bone doesn't have, we don’t have the religious rubbish on top of it. We don't have the Reformation or the the stuff before the Reformation, on top of it. The Victorians have a lot to answer on this one, unfortunately, their ideas of what a woman should do, what she shouldn't do and that and some of that is actually still is affecting how we as people now view stuff.

Because of course we have to look through that translation to see it. But also like why do we feel uncomfortable talking about certain stuff. Like we talked about pubic hair and it's still hilarious.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah, I'm giggling away but it's, it's cultural is culturally defined, all part of the rich tapestry.

**Lorna Webb**

The rich tapestry of it. So that Yeah. It's how it's and also it's about how female sexuality is taught and internalized and then of course how we then put it back on things from the past. We all do it. We, and it's how history is looked at. Your ladies are there.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah. You need to let them speak.

**Lorna Webb**

Yeah.

**Emily Johnson**

Yeah. That's really cool. Lorna, thank you so much for coming to speak to us. Just letting you speak as as a historical lady. You can find Lorna and all of her medieval corners on our on our blog, which I'll put a link to in the podcast description. And thanks so much, Lorna. That's been really educational and also really fun. Lots of giggling was happening today. Thanks very much, bye!

**End credits**

We hope you enjoyed that episode of Archaeology South-East Digs Deeper. You can find more information about the episode in the show notes or on our website at [www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/podcast](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/podcast). For more archaeology content, follow us on Twitter @ArchSouthEast and Facebook and Instagram @ArchaeologySouthEast. Thanks for listening.