

Brittany Pladek

*Gewritu secgað*: "the sensible inscription" in Old English Riddle poetry

ABSTRACT: In this essay, I will examine the relationship between textuality and meaning in a number of Exeter Book riddles, using Derrida's critique of phonocentrism as my lens. These brief but intricate lyrics---because riddlic, strongly and sometimes self-consciously logocentric---betray a distrust of oral communication and concurrent privileging of the written word in guiding their audience towards the solution. The bulk of my essay examines the various methods, often involving runes, employed by the Exeter poets in building this hierarchy; the last third proposes that its origin lies in the logocentric, literary Christian tradition.

The Old English riddles of the Exeter Book---a manuscript transcribed in the tenth century and donated to Exeter cathedral by its first bishop, Leofric---are a snapshot of English poetry *in utero*, whose significance stretches beyond their obvious position as some of the earliest work in the canon.<sup>1</sup> Long considered an intimate window into their Anglo-Saxon authors' thoughts, the riddles have more recently been recognized for their contribution to English writing. They remain to be thoroughly examined as a window into their authors' thoughts *about* writing, though they are an ideal site for such an investigation. At the time of their compilation, England (which wasn't strictly England yet) was undergoing the last stages of a truly epic transformation. Christianity had arrived roughly four hundred years earlier, and Latin had leapt ashore with it. Prior to this time, the island's culture had been functionally illiterate. "Writing" was epigraphic and runic, primarily restricted to short carvings denoting creation or ownership, and "literature" was learned orally and consumed aurally. From the seventh century onward, however, Latin literacy crept north across the island, nurturing a nascent corpus of Anglo-Latin writings (Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* for one); by the ninth and tenth centuries, this literacy had

invaded the vernacular. For the first time, poems once sung from memory were being bound in vellum; in the 800s King Alfred mounted a campaign to transcribe the books "most needful for men to know" into English (Horspool 135). Though the extent of vernacular literacy during this time remains unclear, records of document usage in government/business affairs in the tenth and eleventh centuries suggest that the upper classes were at least partially literate (Magennis 90).

The extent to which this budding literacy altered the traditionally-oral composition of lyric poetry remains a spirited scholarly debate. Proponents of the poetry's oral origin have argued that its formulaic nature derives from the necessity of aids in aural memorization; the opposing camp has countered that this quality was perpetuated for stylistic reasons by "literate" poets.<sup>2</sup> Though resolution of this issue may ultimately be impossible, many avenues of inquiry have yet to be explored. The Exeter Book riddles are one such network. Set down during the last half of the tenth century, they lie at the crossroads of two foreign traditions: Germanic oral poetry on one hand, Christian literacy on the other. Citing riddle 36, Andy Orchard concludes, "the Exeter Book riddles... in their highly formulaic phrasing... and indebtedness to Latin models... send out a number of conflicting signals about their debt to an oral or written tradition" (Orchard 114-117).

In this paper, I hope to employ another characteristic feature of the riddles---the texts'

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<sup>1</sup> John Niles calls the riddles "microcosms of the art of Old English poetry in general" (Niles 4), while Daniel Tiffany praises "the formal sophistication and delicacy of the riddle-poem," concluding, "the genealogy of lyric poetry therefore begins late in the life of an archaic form, the riddle" (Tiffany 78).

<sup>2</sup> Both sides have had to confront a canon which sends mixed messages: the very survival of the corpus attests to its eventual adoption into literary culture, but particulars of the manuscripts call into question literacy's role in their creation (O'Keefe 7-8). Take punctuation, for example. In *Visible Song*, O'Keefe examines the gradual accretion of "reader-friendly marks" in Old English manuscripts. The more visual signposts given by a work's copyist, the more likely it was that manuscript was meant for silent consumption. Latin literacy arrived in England fully furnished with such marks. Its abundance of visual cues marked it as an already exclusively-written canon; many Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the same age lack such cues, pointing towards their original oral transmission (O'Keefe, "Introduction").

self-acknowledged logocentrism---in examining a little-explored niche of the debate: the theoretical opinion of the poems themselves on which form of discourse (writing or speech) best conveys meaning. While this study may not directly alter (and will certainly not answer) the question of the riddles' composition, it will shed light on the relative value the poems' authors ascribed to their fledgling literacy, and how this technology ranked beside more traditional oral forms of discourse.

In contrast with the Anglo-Saxonist orality/literacy armistice, modern literary theory has already endorsed a winner in the struggle between speech and writing. In his controversial philosophical work *Of Grammatology*, French philosopher Jacques Derrida identifies a number of prejudices in the Western philosophical system while simultaneously illustrating (because it's inexplicable) his opposing strategy of deconstruction. One of Derrida's minor targets is phonocentrism, or the tendency of Western thinkers from Aristotle on down to privilege speech over writing. He writes that this prejudice arises from the faulty conviction that speech is a more direct conveyer of "the feelings of the mind... [that] constitute a sort of universal language" (Derrida 11). Plato famously postulated that every thought-act has an ideal form in which meaning is unmistakable and absolute; all forms of language lie outside this logos<sup>3</sup> and can never fully express it. Of writing and speech, however, the latter gets much closer. Jasper Neel lists the (apparently) good reasons for this ranking:

"In the chain of replacements between thinking and writing, speaking, which stands closer to thinking and precedes writing, always enjoys privileged status... One's own speech appears to link signifier and signified in a necessary and

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida also discusses the Logos (distinction in capitalization mine), that great, amorphous, inexplicable Presence which underlies religion and language. Derrida can erase this as he pleases. This essay deals with the littler logos, which I use here as a synonym for Saussure's signified; and more crucially, examines not whether or not the logos/signified actually exists, but whether or not certain Anglo-Saxon poets thought it did, and how they went about expressing it.

absolute way.... Through speech, in fact, meaning seems to emerge from nowhere." (Neel 111)

Derrida elaborates, "Writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos" (Derrida 35). Within this hierarchy, speech is the obviously superior means of communication, its temporal immediacy and physical emanation from the body implying a more intimate connection with human thought. This perceived "absolute proximity of voice and being... of voice and the ideality of meaning has doomed writing to a historically disprivileged status " (Derrida 11-12). Derrida reaches out *Of Grammatology* to overturn this prejudice, arguing that thought itself is a form of writing, a mental inscription that "precedes and enables speaking" and therefore deserves pride of place in the hierarchy of communication (Neel 112).

My dialogue with Derrida's theory of Western phonocentricism offers a way into a poetic corpus that itself expresses a deep concern with speech and writing. While the Exeter riddles do not treat language at the level of Derrida's mental inscription,<sup>4</sup> they challenge the more basic assumption that physical writing, "the sensible inscription," is in fact a poorer conductor of meaning than speech. The riddles offer an ideal environment for studying phonocentricism because they already exhibit self-acknowledged logoi---their solutions. While a seemingly-insoluble riddle might baffle modern readers, the fact remains that the Exeter riddles were written with answers already in mind.<sup>5</sup> Resolution---logos---is their *raison d'être*. Craig Williamson puts it most elegantly:

"What they [the riddles] mean is that man's measure of the world is in words, that perceptual categories are built on verbal foundations, and that by withholding the

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<sup>4</sup> Not explicitly, anyway---see my discussion of "The Husband's Message".

<sup>5</sup> They adopted this tendency from the Latin riddles, which actually prefaced the riddle-text with the solution. Anglo-Saxon authors, thankfully, had a higher opinion of their readership.

key to the categorical house (the entitling solution), the riddlers may force the riddle-solver to restructure his own perceptual blocks in order to gain entry to a metaphorical truth. In short the solver must imagine himself a door and open in [sic]" (Williamson 25)

Evidence suggests that the Anglo-Saxons themselves understood the riddling genre's logocentric nature.<sup>6</sup> James Earl has identified in the Old English poetic corpus an attempt to "redeem [the] fallenness of language... by calling attention to the Word which underlies the text" and "simulate... the voice of the Logos itself" (Earl 55-56). For example, riddle 42 ("cock and hen") illustrates its own solution in language remarkably similar to Williamson's. The answer is constructed as a treasure,<sup>6</sup> locked tight behind "þa clamme... þæs hordgates" (the lock of the treasure-gates, 11-12) and accessible only through "cægan cræfte" (key's craft, 12). These gates form the interior shell of a doubled metaphor: the treasure-hoard itself lies "hygefæste heold, heortan orþoncbendum" (held mind-strong, with clever bands of the heart, 14), occupying the vital center of both mind and body and shielded by the "clever bands" of human rhetoric---the body of the riddle. The solution's place at the heart of this body illustrates its centrality and necessity; its simultaneous location in the mind, preexisting its verbalization, ties it directly to the primacy of thought. Riddle 42's "clamme" clasps Saussure's signified, what Derrida dubs "the feelings of the mind... [that] constitute a sort of universal language" (Derrida 11).

In the Exeter riddles, moreover, the alphabet of this language is often runic. Writes John Niles: "when a set of runes is embedded in a passage...most readers will conclude that what they are being confronted with is...a locked door to which only select persons have the key" (Niles 197). The appearance of runes, by presenting a puzzle, also points towards a solution; runes invite audiences to seek their riddle's logos. The scarcity

of runes in Old English poetry---there are only a few occurrences outside the riddles--- only testifies to their significance as logocentric signposts. As the runes are a major crux of this paper, they bear further discussion here. By the tenth century and the Exeter book's creation, the *fuðarc* alphabet<sup>7</sup> was already an anachronism. Though little is certain about runic usage in pre-Christian England, all evidence points to early runes being strictly epigraphic. When they were finally adopted by later manuscript culture, written runes had a very limited function.<sup>8</sup> Most *fuðarc* letters represented a concept as well as a sound, and "readers could not only read runes as individual characters, but also when they stood for their names" (Derolez 100). The famous poet-bishop Cynewulf actually composed with this in mind, signing his poetry by "inserting his name, rune by rune [into his poems]... as well as fitting meaningful words into the narrative" (Elliot 238). John Niles has additionally and convincingly argued that the runes could function suggestively, guiding their readers towards a felicitous fit: "if one wants to incorporate into a piece of writing a rune that does not have a well known conventional name [some did], then that rune can be used to signify any apt word beginning with that sound" (Niles 261). The riddles' audience would certainly have been on the lookout for this kind of sophisticated Scrabbling. As Louis Bragg points out: "the public of the Exeter Book would have seen the runic passage as bookish alphabet play and would have attempted to decipher it by the usual methods: reordering the letters.. [etc]" (Bragg 39).

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<sup>6</sup> The Anglo-Saxons enjoyed embodying non-corporeal concepts in poetry, possibly in a bid to make them more accessible; "creation," subject of Riddle 40, is a commonly-cited example (Tiffany 92-93).

<sup>7</sup> The name given to the Old English version of the runic alphabet; Norse and Icelandic versions also exist.

<sup>8</sup> R.I. Page notes that "all our early inscriptions are on portable objects" (Page 20), such as coins, copper cases, stones, bone-sticks, swords, etc; they express, generally, "brief statements of commemoration and ownership" (Magennis 92). Meanwhile Rene Derolez's landmark *Runica Manuscripta* groups all manuscript runes into four categories: runic alphabets, isrune (cryptographic/numerographic codes), alphabet-poems, and other. This final category encompasses scribal notes, reference marks, runes used for letters, named runes, and everything found in the riddles (Derolez 100).

Moreover, at least some of these runes serve to highlight their poems' textuality (see Endnote 1). In all cases, the runes either fully spell out or provide the essential key to the riddle's solution; in most cases, the poet's encouragement of their use pervades the rest of the poem. Though not every riddle with textual concerns uses runes, their prominent visibility and gesture towards a hidden secret ensures that, where they do appear, they reflect their author's interest in writing as a tool to express logos. And in one case, this valorization of text as a vehicle for meaning occurs, emphatically, in a riddle with no runes at all.

Where some poems frankly announce this advocacy, others do just the opposite, advising their readers where *not* to seek the solution, and planting warning signs across some treacherously attractive paths. My analysis begins with two members of the latter category, riddles 24 and 38. From there I return to 42 and its "riddle-solving tutorial"; after completing the lesson I apply it first to the notorious riddle 19, then to the still-more-notorious riddlic elegy "The Husband's Message". This final analysis will encompass a tentative explanation for my findings, as well as return to the basic question of the essay: Is the Anglo-Saxon logos a phonocentric one?

Let's see what the *gewritu secgað*.

### ***How not to solve a riddle***

Riddle 24, commonly solved as "jay" or "magpie" (Hacikyan 66), is a bird that doesn't beat about the bush. "Ic eom wunderlicu wiht wræsne mine stefne" (I am a wondrous creature, I change my voice, 1), she proclaims in line one. Like many Exeter riddles, 24 speaks in first person. This directness of discourse seems to automatically link the jay's speech with her logos: first-person is the most intimate of narrative voices, while the

initial "ic eom... wiht" announces the bird's intention to discuss her identity in detail. Yet while the jay's intentions are clear, her method of expressing them is not. The poem's very opening complicates her self-evident "ic eom" by appending, "wrasne mine stefne." Within next three lines, a string of parallel constructions all beginning with the temporally-shaky "hwilum" (sometimes), the jay mimics a number of different creatures. "Beorce swa hund... blæte swa gat... græde swa gos" (I bark like a hound... bleat like a goat... honk like a goose, 2-3), she recounts. The riddle's repeated similes emphasize her refusal to speak in her own voice; she opts instead to "beorce *swa* hund" and "gielle *swa* hafoc." Similarly, she prefers to "onhyrge" (imitate) the grey eagle and "muþe gemæne"<sup>9</sup> (utter with mouth) the kite's speech. Though she can point readers towards her words' unreliability ("wrasne mine stefne"), they contain no positive information about her identity. She says what she is not---never what she *is*.<sup>10</sup> Her voice is no conduit, but a dissembler in both function and form.

Indeed, without the runes, we'd never know she was a jay (or even a bird!) at all. Like several other Exeter riddles, 24 contains a number of letters from the Old English *fuðarc*, textually embedded in alliterative patterns<sup>11</sup>. With each false voice the jay inches a little closer to these runes: from the foreign goat to the avian gull, each animal is a marker, indicating the reader's increasing proximity to her real identity, revealed in the runes immediately succeeding the "mæwes song" (gull's song). The jay, having playfully

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<sup>9</sup> It also carries connotations of sharing. Though the conjugated verb "gemænan" means "to utter/speak," the noun "gemæne," especially when used with "habban" (to have), means "to have or hold in common" (OED).

<sup>10</sup> This trope, "definition by negation," is a common one in riddle poetry, and potentially theoretically significant when read alongside Derrida's notion of *differance*. I lack the space to give this issue the treatment it deserves, but look for it in the dissertation!

<sup>11</sup> In most cases of such runic usage, the poet arranged the runes so that their pronunciation---either their conventional name or a common word beginning with that rune (Niles' theory)---fit the alliterative rhythm demanded by the poem's meter.



refused to articulate her logos, directs her audience to something that can. "Mec nemnað," she introduces the runes: these name me (8). For the riddle-solvers to succeed, she must bequeath control of her own puzzle to a third party whose textual authority grants them nominative power. From there, readers must pick up the pieces and complete the puzzle themselves. Perhaps alluding to this necessity, the jay ends her riddle with a reaffirmation of the runes' importance: "Nu ic haten eom swa þa siex stafas sweotule becnap" (now I am called as these six letters clearly show, 9-10). Not only do the runes provide the answer she refuses, they do so "sweotule"---an adverb which means "clearly/manifestly" but also carries heavy connotations of visibility (OEOD).

Though the riddle's answer may be animal, its message is to man. As the jay scrolls through her ventriloquisms, the words by which she names their voices move from onomonopoeitic pet sounds---"beorce," "blæte," "græde," and "gielle"---to distinctly human forms of communication---"reorde" (speech) "gemæne" (utter/share) "song." Of these, "reorde" rings with greatest significance. A common poetic kenning for human is "reordberend," speech-bearer. Additionally, the placement of the jay's "song, þær ic glado sitte" (song, where I sit happily, 6-7) faintly echoes the poetic vision of the scop sitting in the mead-hall, strumming his harp.<sup>12</sup> Speech is mankind's distinguishing feature; its appearance in the poem demands that the audience identify their own oral communication with the jay's deceptive "wræsne stefne." Combined with 24's insistence on a written, runic answer, this parallel reveals not only an ornithologist's frustrations, but a serious questioning of human speech's supposedly self-evident veracity.

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<sup>12</sup> Riddle 6, "nightingale," provides an expanded version of this metaphor: the bird is anthropomorphized as an "eald aefenscop" (old bard), a poet who speaks with "mongum reordum... þruh muðe" (speech with men, through mouth, 1) while he "sittað nigende" (sits nightly, 8) in the mead-hall.

Such questioning, however, does not always require runes. In fact, the riddle which contains the most emphatic distrust of speech and concurrent privileging of writing contains none at all. Riddle 39 has eluded riddle-solvers since the 1800's; its gamut of suggested solutions includes day, the moon, death (Hacikyan 67), and, most recently, true or revelatory dream (Harbus 143). Antonina Harbus, proponent of the last, perceives in riddle 39 a deep concern with textuality: "the subject matter as well as the form refers to the interpretation of encoded matter, of writing, and of visual signs... the poet of our riddle is concerned with writing, words, and speaking" (Harbus 143). Riddle 39 itself trumpets these interests unmistakably when it opens with the words "Gewritu secgað" (writings say, 1), a curt poetic abstract that foreshadows the poem's subsequent concerns. The phrase is also itself a clear citation: notes Harbus, "this collocation is fairly common in the corpus (19x) and is disproportionately frequent in poetry (10x). It is generally used to invoke the authority of the Scriptures for a particular premise or to afford other writings the same degree of authority" (Harbus 141). This Christian connection is unsurprising; ever since its inception, God's word has been utilized as a holy seizure warrant. Here, the phrase itself is a theft: God's sacred "gewritu" usurp the act of speech whose authority once belonged to the *wisan* of an elder culture---pagan kings, druids, and scop. The remainder of riddle 39 expands this appropriation, hijacking speech as an overall vehicle of communication.

One among a handful of riddles that tout their own difficulty, 39 concludes with a taunt at its frustrated audience: answer, "gif þu mæge" (if you can!, 28). One wouldn't know it from the poem's first half, which is governed by "gewritu secgað," a phrase that underlines the accessibility of the writings' knowledge: the *gewritu secgað*, present-tense;

information about the creature is being conveyed successfully. Indeed, in the riddle's opening twenty lines, the audience learns the creature's physical structure, method of transportation, house, hometown, day job, and blood type (O negative, literally--"ne hafaþ hio blod" [nor has it blood, 18]). At the same time, however, the riddle denies mankind the ability to obtain any information directly from the creature: "ne wip monnum spræc, ne gewit hafað" (it neither spoke with men, nor has understanding 12-13). The creature's inability to communicate is emphatically contrasted with writing's success: "ac gewritu secgað" (but writings say, 13). Whatever information the *gewritu* (or their authors) have, they didn't unearth in an interview. Confirmation of the creature's existence depends wholly on sight: "seo wiht sy mid moncynne miclum tidum sweotol ond gesyne" (this creature is many times among men apparent and seen, 1-2). The *gewritu* collected their material the same way they distribute it, visually. Furthermore, the exhaustive detail provided in the riddle implicitly affirms that they already possess the solution; *the logos is there*. The omission of the answer from the riddle itself (either encoded in runes or slapped Symphoniously across the top) is not an admission of ignorance but a stylistic choice. Besides, if the creature "sy mid moncynne... sweotol ond gesyne," the audience should have no trouble cracking the code.

Unfortunately for its readers, in the poem's last third, the font of positive information abruptly evaporates, as does any possibility of reaching a definitive answer. Though there's two times as much "secgan"-ing going than in the riddle's previous 22 lines, all of it is hypothetical. Of the word's four appearances, three are infinitive (either "gesecgan" or "to secganne"), one is imperative ("saga"), and none is effective. After line 22, the audience receives no new details concerning the creature's identity; a single line

notes redundantly that "ne hafað heo ænig lim, leofaþ efne seþeah" (nor has it limbs, but nevertheless it lives 26), two facts which were already explored in detail above.<sup>13</sup> This sudden drought of detail coincides with another disappearance: that of *gewritu* from the speaking position. With the half-line "long is to secganne" (long is to say, 21), the riddler abandons writing as the poem's ordering paradigm, returning to her audience and second-person address. This move concurrently lifts "secgan" out of the book and replaces it in the mouth. Challenging her audience "reselan recene gesecgan" (to answer quickly, to say 28)---to answer quickly---is something the riddler can only do if she expects a spoken reply. With *gewritu* no longer behind the wheel, the vehicle of communication grinds to a halt. The riddler's final imperative "saga" ("say!" 29) is a challenge, issued to readers to finish what the *gewritu* started: name the creature, solve the riddle.

The task, unfortunately, proves impossible. "Bruce Mitchell has recognized an expectation of the reader's failure to resolve the enigma in the final challenging lines of the poem," notes Harbus (Harbus 139). Within these lines, the riddler sets two prerequisites for solving the puzzle, both of which are frustrated by information supplied elsewhere in the poem. The first asks the solver to give the answer "soþum wordum" (in true words, 29), a not unreasonable request considering the opening emphasis on truth. However, a mere four lines above, it also establishes that "soð is æghwylc þara þe ymb þas wiht wordum becneð" (anything alleged<sup>14</sup> in words about this creature is true, 25-25).

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<sup>13</sup> Where the audience received a list of exactly what limbs the creature lacks. They also got a blow-by-blow account of a typical day-in-the-leof (the unhappy creature spends his time wandering homelessly "geond þisne middangeard" (through this world).

<sup>14</sup> "Becneð" comes from "becnan/biecnan," to "make a sign, beckon, wink, nod; signify; summon." As a word describing a communicative act, it's as neutral as possible: a "sign" could be either written or spoken, depending on context. Considering the place of the word in the poem---sandwiched at the exact center of the four "gesecgan"s in the poem's last seven lines, and occurring in a section that undoubtedly references the solver's ability to "reselan recene... soþum wordum" (answer quickly in true words)---I feel that "becneð" must necessarily refer to a spoken, not written, action.

This restriction severely handicaps the reader's ability to make any positive (ergo correct) statement about the thing's identity. If everything is equally true, than no answer is more "correct" than another---and all are just as equally wrong. Importantly, however, the caveat doesn't apply to the *gewritu*, which spend the first half of the riddle illustrating the creature in lavish detail. The second requirement, already cited, instructs the solver to "gif þu mæge reselan recene geseccan" (28). Unfortunately, the riddler has already mentioned how "long is to secganne hu hyre ealdorgesceaft æfter gongeð" (long it is to say how its fate afterwards will go, 22-23). Full disclosure of the solution isn't just an impossibly lengthy mouthful, it's an impossibly complicated one. "Þæt is wrætlic þing to geseccanne" (that is a complex thing to say, 24-25), the riddler notes. This presentation of the answer as labyrinthine opens directly into the further impossibility of speaking any "soðum wordum" about the creature---as if, after prohibiting access to the solution itself, the riddler closes all avenues by which the solvers might proceed.

Again, these are purely verbal pathways. If the audience abandons speech for the cul-de-sac it is, they might return to the path offered by the riddle's beginning: *gewritu*. The poem's first lines even conceal a signpost to this effect. "Sundorcraeft hafað maran micle þonne hit men witen" (it has much more special power when men understand it, 4-5), the riddler advises. Though many editors read "sundorcraeft" as the accusative possession of "wiht" in line one---a hazily-defined kenning reinforcing the creature's mysterious power---it could just as easily be a nominative. "Sundorcraeft," kenninged out of "sundor" (specialized, apart, separated) and "craeft" (might, power, skill) (OEOD), denotes some unidentified, specialized ability. Since riddle 42 employed plain "craefte" to describe the skill (there, runic writing) required to pick its lock, it would not be farfetched

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to take "sundorcraeft" as the ability to write itself, set loosely appositive to the actual "gewritu" in line one. This hint would certainly be welcome to solvers, and might even prevent them from following speech to its inevitable dead end. As the answer can only be found in "gewritu," the only way to crack the code is to crack a manuscript. Can't read? Learn---because obviously, "sundorcraeft hafað maran micle þonne hit men witen."

Riddle 39 endorses literacy with an exclusivity that would make Alfred proud. In a genre where runes or other verbal play signal a concern with textuality, this poem opts for theoretical praxis, showcasing what writing can do and speech cannot, then proving it by refusing its audience the answer. 39's solution is a literary logos; it must be looked up.<sup>15</sup>

### *How to solve a riddle*

Where riddle 58 merely performs this strategy, riddle 42 teaches it, spelling out the names of the runic characters which comprise its solution and leaving it up to the reader to extract and unscramble them into "hana" (cock) and "hæn" (hen). As already seen, riddle 42's self-conscious logocentricism materializes the solution as the jewel of a locked treasure-hoard, hidden metaphorically in the human heart. It has as little faith in its audience as some of the Latin riddles, but where the latter just dump their solutions in

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<sup>15</sup> The effort required by this poem's potential solvers is uncommonly demanding, however. Other riddlers achieve much the same effect without the trip to the scriptorium. For example, riddle 58, while technically empty of inscribed runes, hints that "þry sind in naman ryhte runstafas, þara is rad forma" (three in name are the right runes, of these Rad is first, 14-15). Instead of demanding a trek to the library to comb the Bible for solutions, riddle 58 merely asks its audience to draw upon their runic knowledge. "Rad" names the "R" rune, the first of three runic characters which presumably combine to spell out the answer. John Niles and others have argued for the solution "radrod," "well-sweep." As a simple phonetic exercise, this answer fails: "radrod" contains four different phonetic values, one more than the riddle prescribes. However, Niles steals a leaf from Cynewulf's book by suggesting that "radrod" employ both phonetic and symbolic runic values. This way, the "rad" rune itself would stand in for the first half of the word, then recur phonetically to aid in spelling the second half. The resulting combination, "rad-rad-os-dæg" (R-ROD), fulfills the riddler's requirements while providing an appropriate solution (Niles 92-93). The most significant aspect of this theory is the absence of any runes within the body of 58 itself; "rad" appears spelled-out, no different from the Anglo-Saxon word for "road" which names it. But the solver's success "in naman" depends upon her ability to import and assemble an entirely separate alphabetic system. Even if read orally, 58's solution is

readers' laps, riddle 42 sits its audience down for a tutorial. The riddler places himself in the hall, "ic on flette" (I in the hall, 4): a traditional setting for oral poetry, suggesting that what follows is a familiar and habitual practice. Nor does he let his audience forget it, reminding them at the riddle's conclusion that they are among "werum æt wine" (men at drinking, 16).<sup>16</sup> By locating the riddle in the meadhall, its author helps legitimize and normalize the riddic tutorial to which he turns next. "Ic on flette mæg þurh runstafas rincum secgan" (I can, while in the hall, say to men through runes, 5-6) he announces; as in riddle 39, here "runstafas" boldly monopolize transmission of the answer. The runes don't just lend a helping hand. The riddler must "secgan" his solution "*þurh* runstafas," as if he were literally shoving his voice through a transcription machine. And here as well, the poem's textual elements are the only factors that provide any concrete, positive information about the real answer (even if, as in 42, the answer is a necessary half of a bawdry double-entendre). The riddler knows this and instructs his audience accordingly. "Ic... mæge... secgan þam þe bec witan... naman þara wihta" (I can say to those who understand books... the name of these creatures, 5-8), he notes. As he can only communicate "þurh runstafas," likewise he can only communicate with those who share his language: book-readers, rune-writers, "rynemenn" (rune-men, 13). By demanding literacy of his audience, the riddler stages a cultural invasion of the "flette" (hall)---traditional setting for oral poetry---by the learned practitioners of the newer and more articulate art of writing. At the same time, he signals to the illiterate portions of his audience that speech is no longer sufficient---because without the runes, there's no riddle.

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textual. The literary gimmick behind "R-ROD" would either have to tediously explained or---more likely---actually written down.

Literally. 42's initial sex-scene is so straightforward that the riddler has to clue his audience in that anything deeper is going on at all. The two "wyhte" are introduced as "undearnunga ute plegan"---*openly* playing outside. It is only when the speaker asserts his ability to find the "naman þara wihta" (8) that his friends *on flette* realize he isn't talking about humans. The poem's traditional oral introduction is a ruse of the same stamp as the jay's "wræsne stefne." What looked "undearnunga" is only artificially apparent; in reality the truth lies hidden, accessible only þurh runstafas. By "truth," I mean of course the puzzle's underlying double-entendre. 42's solution depends upon its two-sided quality; this play requires the audience to recognize the innocent explanation for the explicit situation, which, in turn, hinges upon their facility with its runic characters.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the riddler seems less concerned with leading his audience to the answer than coaching them on how to get there. He issues no formal challenges to riddle-solvers, and the riddle's narrative progression gives more information about how he solved his own puzzle than about the actual solution. At the poem's conclusion, he announces: "nu is undyrne werum æt wine hu þa wihte mid us... hatne sindon" (now it is apparent to feasting men how these creatures are called among us, 15-17). The assertion that "nu is undyrne" speaks back to "undearnunga" in line 1. The riddle was only falsely "undyrne" at that point; "nu," with the help of runes, the truth has been revealed.

So what happens between these symbolic brackets? A lot of writing, apparently. From lines 8 through 11, the riddler lays out exactly which runes spell the answer, as well as the frequency with which each occurs: "nyd twega oþer... æsc... acas twegen, hægelas

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<sup>16</sup> This construction may or may not reflect reality. As Andy Orchard points out, "formulaic poetry... need not be oral, although the technique of composition... may derive from an originally oral source" (Orchard 108).



swa some" (N, one of two... AE... two As, likewise Hs together, 8-11). Like riddle 58, 42 requires readers to supply the runes themselves based on the names given in the poem, then rearrange them into a sensible answer: N N Æ A A H H: hana and hæn. Unlike 58, however, 42 does not expect its readers to come up with these names; in a physical reenactment of the poem's metaphoric logos, buried "heortan bewrigene orþoncbendum," the rune-names are embedded in the riddle's precise center, its textual heart, for readers to unearth. Apart from their phonetic value, the runic names add another layer of meaning to the central double-entendre. "Se torhta Æsc, an an linan" (the bright AE, one alone on a line, 9-10) accurately isolates itself as the single letter used only once. But the word "æsc," "ash-spear" (OED) also recalls the shape of a phallus (of which, between the "wrætlice twa," there is of course only one); its position "an an linan," while presumably referring to the sequentiality of written letters, conjures singleness, straightness---erection.<sup>18</sup> More platonically, the letter "nyd" functions both as direct object and auxiliary verb: "þær sceal nyd wesan twega oþer" (there must N be, one of two, 8). Read phonetically, this simply means, "there needs to be N, one of two." But if "nyd" retains its definition, "need/necessity," the line additionally reads, "there shall need to be." As nyd is the first rune listed and the phrase's syntax continues unbroken until all the runes have been named, this second reading broadly applies to the rest of the runstafas. There shall nyd to be nyd, but also æsc, two acas, and two hægelas; in short, there nyd to be runes.

The poet acknowledges as much in his complicated illustration of how he employed the runes to crack the code. Though the manuscript scans "hwylc" (which), at

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<sup>17</sup> Niles investigates a tamer example of the same phenomenon in riddle 76/77, which he solves as "hund/hind"; the second letter of the single runic word appears fudged, allowing it to be read as either "u" or "i." Again, this sort of play only works on a textual, visual level (Niles 99)

the beginning of the relevant half-line, Craig Williamson argues that this is a scribal corruption of "swa ic" (so I, Williamson 277), a phrase which introduces the riddle-solving metaphor to follow. As this section (from lines 11 to 14) is narrated in first-person perfect and governed by the verb "onleac" (I unlocked), the emendation makes sense.<sup>19</sup> The riddler goes on to detail how he breached "þa clamme" which, "hygefæste heold" in the heart of the puzzle, guards the expository logos. "þæs hordgates cægan cræfte þa clamme onleac" (I unlocked the lock of the treasure-gates with the key's craft, 11-12), he explains. The key words here are just that: "cægan cræfte," "the craft of the key." These two small words have huge implications; they also, incidentally, demonstrate the enormous possibility for condensed nuance English lost when it relinquished inflection. "Cægan" is genitive here, "cræfte" dative. The arrangement displaces the credit for solving the riddle from the *cæge*, its specific resolution ("hana" and "hæn"), to the *cræfte*, the method used in obtaining it---runic writing itself. Thus the poet's riddle-tutorial endorses not only a praxis particular to a single riddle, but a methodology which transcends the bounds of 42 to encompass an entire corpus. His constant awareness of the world immediately outside the riddle---in allusions like "flette," "werum æt wine," and "þam þe bec witan"---has already granted it shades of wider application, and his word-choice here emphasizes that larger frame of reference, since the word *cræft* was used for every stage of the writing process, from preparing the vellum to perfecting the

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<sup>18</sup> The shape of runes also appears to be of some significance in other poems. For example, in Solomon and Saturn, the T-rune, "tyr," is employed not for its letter value nor its name, but for its spear-like shape, useful for Satan-skewering (Niles 194).

<sup>19</sup> Construed Williamson's way, the four lines read: "So I with the key's craft the lock of the treasure-hord unlocked, that which held the riddle against runemen tight in mind, wound in the heart with clever bands." The phrase doesn't dissolve into incomprehensibility if read with "hwylc," but the syntax makes much less sense: "Which thing (referring presumably to the overall riddle, or the preceding runes, and read in apposition to "þa clamme") with the key's craft the lock of the treasure-hord I unlocked, that which held the riddle against runemen tight-in-mind, wound in the heart with clever bands."

illuminations.<sup>20</sup> In 42, while it refers specifically to the runic lore required to correctly unscramble the solution, its broader resonances must have been evident to its audience, themselves possibly "rynemenn." In other words, "cægan cræfte," the route toward the solution---the logos, the key, the heart of the matter---is writing itself.

As 42 illustrates, when *runstafas* are involved, this necessary writing can assume a variety of forms. The runes' flexibility render them ideal for puzzles; the lack of a standard method for runic use allowed authors ample opportunity for innovation. The same can be said of modern scholars. Niles, for example, theorizes that both Cynewulf and the author of "The Husband's Message" used runes as signposts, where the rune gestured towards the word which would provide the most meaningful and metrical fit:

"From the author's perspective, if one wants to incorporate into a piece of writing a rune that does not have a well-known conventional name, then that rune can be used to signify any apt word beginning with that sound... from the reader's perspective, the strategy of finding the name that provides a felicitous 'fit' for a rune in a given instance is much like what is required in the riddles." (Niles 261)

This method, perhaps more than those examined above, requires visual interaction with written riddles. Solvers would first encounter the rune as an isolated phonetic object, then, through trial and error, build on it to construct an appropriate answer---in effect, become writers themselves. Using this strategy, Niles argues that the long-observed "Husband's Message" reads "eadig wif ond monn... 'a happy man and wife'" (Niles 211). Though I strongly question any attempt to "solve" this particular lyric, Niles's hypothesis works well elsewhere; more importantly, it showcases yet another way in which writing becomes the hinge for poetic meaning.

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<sup>20</sup> See further Lynn Swan, who notes that "surviving texts have left us with a substantial number of Old English words associated with writing as a skilled physical process, or cræft" (74).

Riddle 19 carries the double distinction of being highly runic and little-understood. Initially dubbed a "hunt riddle" for its backwards rendering of the words "hors," "mon," "wega," and "haofoc" (horse, man, warrior, and hawk, Hacıkyan 65), its most recent and plausible solutions are both nautical: "ship" (Craig Williamson 186) and "snac," a type of light warship (proposed by Mark S. Griffith and cited in Niles, 105). Every solution proffered thus far understandably relies heavily, almost exclusively, on the runes. Griffith's is particularly noteworthy in that it combines several of the strategies we have considered thus far. If 42 is a riddle-tutorial, 19 is a riddle-test, rich with potential meaning and almost hazardous in the multiplicity of ways to craft its central puzzle into an appropriate answer.

The layout of riddle 19, like that of 24, 42, and 58, suggests interaction on a visible level. To maintain the alliteration, two of the four reversed runic words have been split onto different half-lines. Though Exeter's original punctuation doesn't physically represent these breakages, the poem's meter requires them, just as it requires the words to appear backwards (for example, the S rune at the "beginning" of hors must fit the poem's opening, "ic on siþe seah" [I saw on the journey]; the horse's "ending" H gets booted down a line, heading off the three-word "H hygewloncne, heafodbeorhtne" [proud, brightheaded H]). Either way, oral presentation of 19 would be difficult. The answer, presumably encoded in the relationship between *hors/mon/wega/haofoc*, necessitates reading the runes primarily as phonetic groupings (though depending on the solution, their "traditional" names might aid in constructing meaning---see Endnote 2). Performed out loud, the poem's audience would have to guess which runes were words and which represented phonetic concepts. As the "accepted" runic names were already everyday

objects, such a distinction would be difficult; the challenge grows even hairier if, as Osborne and Longland suspect,<sup>21</sup> runic names were subject to occasional change. Griffith's inspired solution only underlines this fact. Like Williamson, Griffith arranges the runic groups into the diorama of an elaborate metaphor. The horse is a "nægledne" (nailed, 5) clinker ship upon which the warrior travels, his noble hawk---the winged sail--perched on his forearm. Together the little war-party sails "swifne ofer sælwong" (swift over the field, 2), a field transformed into an ocean. The order of the words gives this picture greater specification. Griffith then takes the last letter of each runic group---technically the first letter, considering the actual layout---and strings them together to spell "snac," a type of light warship (Niles 105). As in 58, this runic play asks the poem's reader to momentarily become a writer, combining letters from a restricted alphabet to craft an answer which fits both meter and meaning. And as in all previous riddles mentioned, 19 drops its audience a hint as to how to proceed. "Widlast ferede rynestrong" (the strong-running wide-road carried, 6-7), the riddler notes. Williamson, Griffith, and Niles all read "rynestrong" as an adjective modifying "widlast"; the completed phrase roughly translates to "strong-running wide-road." If so, "rynestrong" is the only word in the poem which gestures towards its seaworthy solution, describing as it does the swift current of the wide sea-road. It's also a play on words. Though the pronunciation of "ryne" (running) and "ryne" (rune) differs, the discrepancy is negligible, certainly not enough to mask the term's second meaning. "Rynestrong," the single word naked of metaphor which indicates 19's nautical answer, is also rune-strong, an accurate description of the riddle itself as well as a clear endorsement for the manner in which it

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<sup>21</sup> The pair cites several specific examples of such change in "The Rune Poem," where "several of the rune-meanings... are specific to this poem and tell us more about the poet's interests than about the original

should be solved. Though 19's "key" is "snac," it shares its *cægan cræfte*, writing, with every riddle thus far examined. This theoretical agreement is no accident. My study concludes with an investigation into a possible origin for these poems' mutual valorization of the written word, and a suggestion that this privileging may stem from the same source as Anglo-Saxon literacy itself: Christianity.

### *The Christian connection*

The Christian author of the Rune Poem upheld his verse's doctrine by adjusting the traditional names of some controversially-pagan runes; most notably, turning "os" (God, from Norse) into "os" (mouth, from Latin) (Osborne, Longland 385). This incident provides a tiny---if representative---example of an editorial influence that pervades the entire Old English corpus. Literacy, Latin, and Christianity arrived in England as a trio. Like the Holy Trinity itself, this group was inseparable; the passage of traditionally-oral stories into writing was mediated by a Christian filter, and all subsequent literary production occurred in a similar context.<sup>22</sup> Thus prejudices already inherent in Christian theology were infused into the idea of writing itself. Especially considering that most early manuscripts were compiled and copied within religious houses, any literary act was also already a religious one---even in purportedly secular works. Perhaps the most powerful (and paradoxically invisible) of these Christian carry-overs were notions already assigned to the regulation/practice of the written word. For example, the widespread citation of other authors as textual legitimizers may arise from a "literacy introduced by a Christian religion which depended on the Book for its authority"

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epigraphic runes and their names" (Osborn and Longland 385).

<sup>22</sup> Writes John Niles: "All extant OE poetry is therefore religious poetry, at least in the sense that it was composed and copied out by persons who had integrated the basic concept of Christianity into their mode of thought and perception" (Niles).

(Orchard 103). And if Western logocentrism wasn't coined by Christianity, it was enthusiastically adopted by it: "Christianity is logocentrism par excellence," writes Earl (Earl 54). Though the riddles are a naturally logocentric genre, the advent of Christianity probably heightened their authors' sensitivity to the phenomenon, as illustrated in the "cægan cræfte" of riddle 42.

Christianity may also be the source for the riddles' repudiation of phonocentrism. Werner H. Kebler traces the genealogy of the Gospel of John---the most emphatically logocentric chapter in either Old or New Testaments---back to the varied, oral world of Jesus's parables. As spoken morality tales, the parables' multiple logoi shifted with each new performance, complicating their collection into a doctrinal whole. After Christ's death, his followers distilled his writings into the Gospel, and his parables' logoi into one Logos---the Word. The religion's founding cohesion thus required a movement from the unsteady realm of oral communication to the solid ground of written truth. Writes Kebler, "the Logos of the fourth gospel... lays claim to the purity of underived origin and to self-presence as speech... the privileging of protology vis-a-vis plurality, this logocentric reduction of logoi to the Logos, was inspired by ecriture" (Kebler 91). Not only did this reduction conflate Christ himself with an easily-definable canon of his "true" teachings, it couched these teachings---preserved as Biblical writings---in a material authority. By doing so, Christianity replicated "the classical metaphysics of presence epitomized by the Logos;" only this time, "sayings and discourse were now embodied in and controlled by a transcendental authority"---the written Word of God (Kebler 91). The importance of the Bible as a permanent manifestation of God's Word was expanded by subsequent doctrine, which championed "divine writing" as God's

preferred method of communication. Derrida cites Christianity's paradoxical tenement that "good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body" (Derrida 17). Despite the latter retraction, Christianity did---and does---continue to tout the physical Bible as the last Word in holy teachings.

While the influence of this message pervades the riddles as a whole, it appears concretely in several places. Riddle 38 carries heavy Christian overtones. For example, although "gewritu" translates generally as "writings," it also commonly means "scripture" (OED). Read in this way, 38 not only points its prospective solvers towards the library, it recommends a specific book.<sup>23</sup> *Gewritu* stage an even more radical performance in Alfred's poetic prefaces to his Latin prose translations, usurping the function of speech with an audacity merely shadowed in riddle 38. Writes Earl:

"These poems... simulate... the voice of the Logos itself.... in Christian terms, by calling attention to the Word which underlies the text, here depicted as speaking writing. The writing speaks, but its speaking is only a metaphor for writing; the words are only metaphors for the Word." (Earl 56)

Other riddles, not as figuratively rich, opt instead for the obvious: for example, 67 and 26 take the Bible itself<sup>24</sup> as their solution, and 67 emphasizes the good book's ability to impart wisdom without speech---"nænne muð hafað" (it has no mouth, 6). Likewise, riddle 91 (currently solved as "book," and perhaps "Bible" as well) claims that "ic

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<sup>23</sup> Other evidence in the poem also points back at the Bible as a likely source of information. The mysterious creature is often depicted with Christian details. The realm it traverses is bookended by "heofonum" and "helle" (heaven and hell), neither of which it can touch; while living, it "sceal wuldorcynge larum lifgan" (must live according to the doctrine/learnings of the wonder-king). The dative "larum" supports multiple translations, the most common of which I've already given. A more provocative reading might read, "it must live IN the doctrine/learnings of the wonder-king." Not only do "gewritu secgað" the only information about the creature, it literally can be found within "gewritu": scripture, the Bible, God's collected "larum."



monigum sceal wisdom cyþan; no þær word spreca ænig ofer eorðan" (I must teach wisdom to many; I do not speak any word there over earth, 9-10). Meanwhile the runic riddles, already self-consciously textual, have even deeper ties to Christianity. To Anglo-Saxons living long after the *fuðarc* had fallen out of common use, "runes seemed to have represented esoteric knowledge" (Magennis 93). Their air of magic and historical gravity would have been well-suited to Christian mysteries---the word "geryne" (rune) was used to describe everything from Easter to communion (see Endnote 1). Furthermore, runic inscriptions possessed a power to unite not just words and logoi, but Word and Logos on an intensely physical level. Magennis notes that "perhaps the most famous Old English runic text is the crucifixion poem inscribed on the monument at Ruthwell (in Dumfriesshire)" (Magennis 93). As Jesus's resurrection represents his final ascendance---his transformation into the ultimate Logos as told by John---this inscription fuses Christian Logocentricism with its most recognizable material symbol. The marriage of written inscription and physical object can be likened to riddle 24's jay flying around with runes tattooed across her feathers: the text is the answer is the logos, inseparably. Furthermore, in Anglo-Saxon literature the Cross can function metonymically for Christ himself, either empathetically sharing the pain of his execution or speaking directly in his voice.<sup>25</sup> On some level, then, Ruthwell's runes not only represent Christ, they are part of him: " In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (King James Bible, John 1:1).

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<sup>24</sup> Several riddles, including 67, 26, and 95, have books as solutions. Among these, 67 and 26 are usually further specified as Bibles (Hacikyan 66-67); their self-depiction as texts bound with gold filigree attests to their likely-religious significance, as does their claim to provide men with wisdom.

<sup>25</sup> The famous poem "The Dream of the Rood" does the former; part of this text may even comprise the Ruthwell cross's inscription.

Encountering such objects as the 7th or 8th century Ruthwell Cross, Anglo-Saxons of the Exeter Book period could not help but attribute some special power of expression to the epigraphs they found there. The riddlic authors put this power to work in poetry, employing runes to guide their audiences towards textual solutions. As Magennis notes, however, "in pre-Christian times... runes seem not to have been used as a medium of developed textual discourse"; early runic inscription was restricted to proclamations of ownership or artistic signatures (Magennis 93). The literate deployment of runes in the Exeter poems is therefore an anachronism, belatedly imposed on a society whose pre-Christian mentality afforded them no special logocentric power. Such usage by no means stopped with the riddles: the Exeter authors also applied the *fuðarc* in lyrics illustrating their pagan past. Perhaps the most famous of these runic anachronisms occurs in the elegy now called "The Husband's Message." Inserted between Exeter riddles 60 and 62, the poem is not itself a riddle: its composer never challenges his audience to "solve" it,<sup>26</sup> though its narrative turns around a runically-encrypted correspondence whose riddlic flavor perhaps explains the poem's location in the Exeter Book. The lyric's set of five runes opaquely encapsulates a man's fervent pledges of faithfulness to his estranged lover. Writes Louis Bragg,

"The runic passages of the poem suggest that the Exeter Book's public imagined legendary Germania to have been a society that used runic writing for encrypting messages---in short, a society just like theirs. That it is an anachronism is not particularly surprising, since retrojection of later uses of runes into the prior age of runic epigraphy also occurs in *Beowulf*, where Hrothgar reads the story of creation incised in runes on a sword hilt in an age that knew no narrative

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, he takes pains to clarify the situation by detailing exactly who is speaking to whom: "nu cunnan scealt hu þu ymb modlufan mines frean on hyge hycge" (now you [the lady] must know how you should think in your mind about the heart's love of my [the speaker] master [the husband], 26-28). A series of burn marks obscuring the beginning of the text have eroded some of the poem's opening exposition, and this factor more than anything else may account for scholars' preoccupation with "solving" "The Husband's Message" by identifying its speaker/narrative situation. See further James Anderson for a particularly elaborate, if farfetched, "solution."

inscriptions." (Bragg 46)

Though "historically" inaccurate, "The Husband's Message" nevertheless showcases the superiority of writing (especially runic writing) in communication, providing a practical application of the hierarchy expounded playfully in the riddles. The poem constructs a dichotomy between written and spoken promises, valorizing the former not only as a more permanent profession of faith, but the physical manifestation of a direct mind-to-mind link. As God addresses man through spiritual inscription, so the husband's carved missive sounds in his beloved's soul, soliciting her return in the strongest medium possible.<sup>27</sup>

The poem begins with the genesis of the husband's message itself, as the carved mast describes its own creation. "Me seaxes ord ond seo swiþre hond, eorles ingeðonc ond ord somod, þingum geþydan" (Knife's point and the strong hand, earl's intention and the point together, pressed me with things, 12-14), it recalls. The act of incision is depicted as a direct expression of the carver's thoughts. The mast stresses twice how the husband's intentionality, first via "hond" (hand) and later through "ingeðonc" (thought), must work "somod" (together) with his tool to produce a message. He's not dictating---the flow of meaning from mind, to hand, to knife, to epigraph occurs soundlessly. The lack of an intermediary is significant; dictation was standard practice among the Anglo-Saxon elite, and an "eorl" (lord) would have normally employed a scribe to do his gruntwork (even Alfred, self-dubbed paragon of learning, dictated most of his writings [Horspool 130]). The fact that the husband himself is wielding the knife identifies his message as

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<sup>27</sup> The mass of scholarly debate surrounding Husband's Message necessitates that any discussion of the poem must be prefaced by a summary of where its author stands. For the record, I believe that "Riddle 60" and "The Husband's Message" are part of the same poem, and furthermore that their speaker is the mast of a ship upon which the husband carves his oath. For an explanation of these choices, see Endnote 3.

something too personal to entrust to another. In a reversal of phonocentric hierarchy, the husband wishes to record his *ingeðonc* directly, bypassing the filter of speech: carving is a joint endeavor, fusing intention and incision into a single "ærendspræce" (message). This missive is signed, sealed, and delivered as a material embodiment of the husband's thoughts. Indeed, his method of conveying these intentions is strikingly telepathic. His opinions leap straight from "modlufan mines frean" (the heart's love of my master, 27) into his beloved's head: "nu þu cunnan scealt... on hyge hycge" (now you must know... understand/think in your mind, 26-28).

Soliciting her return, he instructs the mast to cite oaths that the lovers "on ærdagum oft gespræcon" (often spoke in older days, 33). Before launching into the history of this relationship, however, the mast assures her that "þu þær tirlfæste treowe findest" (there you will find a steadfast promise/truth, 29). The words point back to the master's "modlufan," the heart's love in which his oath of fidelity still beats tirlfæste (steadfast). However, they also look forward to the end of the poem, where the husband reaffirms this promise in runes. "Gecyre ic ætsomne S R geador EA W ond M aþe benemnan" (I join together S, R, EA, W, and M to declare as an oath, 66-67), explains the mast, who, as the bearer of the carved letters, is the agent joining them. Thus the husband's "modlufan" and the runic encryption are one and the same, a mind-container made of letters whose function is strikingly similar to 42's "þæs hordgates... þa clamme... heortan bewrigene orþoncbendum" (lock of the treasure-hoard, wrapped in clever bands of the heart). "þær" (there), within the husband's heart's love and its runic manifestation, lies his "tirlfæste treowe" (steadfast promise/truth).

If a logos exists in "The Husband's Message", this "aþe" (oath) is undoubtedly it. The entire poem hinges on the husband's renewed "tirfæste treowe" (steadfast oath); only if the beloved accepts its sincerity will she "faran on flotweg" (travel on boat, 59) back to him. The husband views this oath as culminating a lifetime's worth of lesser promises. Worried that his beloved may have forgotten her pledges to him, he twice has the message-mast cite "þa winetreowe" (the faith/oath, 68) and "þa weordbetunga" (word-promises, 32) which "git on ærdagum oft gespræconn" (you two often spoke in older days, repeated in line 70 and 33). Their flimsy "eald gebeot" (old promise, 65) is specifically verbal, placed in opposition against the authoritative finality of the husband's newly-minted runic pledge. Unlike their spoken "weordbetunga" (word-promises), this written *aþe* is permanent: "be him lifgendum læstan wolde" (he will uphold [it] as long as he is living, 69). Its appearance at the very end of the message underlines its capstone status. Writes Anderson, "closely bound as they are to... aþe benamnan, the runic letters somehow help consummate an implied drama of contractual love" (Anderson 152).

No doubt a portion of their power derives from their medium. Wood outlasts words, and an epigraph would ensure "that a given message is communicated without any possibility of mistake" (Niles 213). The runes S, R, EA, W, and M materially embody the crucial pledge, which the poem simultaneously locates within the husband's "modlufan" (heart's love). Their written forms exemplify the "soul inscription" Derrida attributes to Christianity, being literal, literate expressions of unspoken thoughts<sup>28</sup>. As befits a promise destined for direct deposit "on hyge" (in the mind) of the woman, the requested answer

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<sup>28</sup> The Christian overtones here are so strong they tempt scholars to exaggerate. Anderson, for example, reads the entire poem as a Christian allegory, with the runes very literally standing in for God's silent "soul-inscription": "In this poem, with its complex dual-voiced riddling, the Eucharist of Easter, risen Word of the New Covenant, arrives at last under the cover of the language of Germanic oath swearing... as the runes of

also proceeds mentally. In a parallel enactment of the reaffirmation offered by the husband (both in his mind and physically, in the runes), he begs his beloved to "sylf gemunde on gewitlocan wordbeotunga" (remember to yourself in your mind of the promises, 32). Though these *wordbeotunga* were of the weaker, spoken variety, he presumably hopes their resurrection, combined with his fervent runic reprisal, will be enough to sway his lady.

The runes' obvious importance makes it all the more interesting that no one has actually figured out what they *mean*. Scholars have approached the runes as they would a riddle; "solutions" range from "follow the sun-road" (Baker 212), to "sword" (Anderson 155), to "happy man and wife" (Niles 211-213). Niles even discusses them with the same language riddle 42 uses to depict its logos: "whatever the characters may signify, they seem to encode the main point of the speaker's monologue. They have every appearance of being a key by which the enigma of the poem's narrative is to be unlocked," he writes (Niles 191). Though this reading is probably correct, it may be helpful to ask just who wields this key---who can, and who should. I venture that the runes of "The Husband's Message" are less like a riddle and more like Poe's purloined letter: their content is obscure, unknowable, and ultimately unimportant to the literary function of the story. After all, the husband's original goal was privacy. The mast classifies its message as "for unc anum twam ærendspræce" (for us two alone, a message, 15). Its author chose his medium for exclusivity: writing can trumpet its intentions ("abeodan beadlice," proclaim boldly) with a force perceived only by its recipient, while "beorna ma uncre wordcwidas widdor ne mænden" (more men cannot more widely relate our words, 17-18).

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"The Husband's Message" are given to the silent wife, the mystery of the Eucharist as it is expressed at vespers... echoes in the mind" (Anderson 83).

Furthermore, the husband's decision to inscribe the note himself already suggests that it is too personal to entrust to a messenger; the language of the poem constructs his correspondence with his lady as a meeting of two minds, steeped in unexpressed personal history and culminating in a runic reiteration of his love-pledge. Louis Bragg writes that "despite its proximity to oral culture, this is truly a very literary poem, for it focuses... on the message itself, on the written medium by which it was possible for two literate people to communicate over long distance" (Bragg 55). Narrow Bragg's definition of "literacy" to a code exclusive to two people, and the runes' apparent opacity resolves into something legible---if not itself transparent. The husband's runes cradle the most personal of logoi. A secular version of God's divine mental inscription, "S, R, EA, W, and M" chronicle the private correspondence between two souls. Considering the multiplicity of ways in which manuscript runes could be read, it should not be so surprising that we lack the "cægan cræft" needed to crack this particular code. "The Husband's Message" is a poem about an encryption, not an encryption itself; and *the husband's message* is "for unc anum twam." We haven't "solved" it, quite simply, because we're not supposed to.

### ***Conclusion***

While the Exeter riddles playfully refute Derrida's notion of Western phonocentrism, "The Husband's Message" offers a practical reason for the reversal. Writing is a permanent, exclusive medium with the ability to circulate among thousands and yet be understood by only two. Riddle 42's metaphoric illustration of the logos as a guarded treasure hits the nail on the head: the written word is the safest vehicle for communicating logoi, accessible only to those select few who possess the key's craft. Christianity provides a logical source for this hierarchy. In a culture where even secular

texts were being transcribed within an overarching religious tradition, a canon in which the Word literally was God could not have helped but influence ideas about literacy. And as the written Bible became the last word in religious authority, so the written word acquired an authoritative status of its own. Given the enormous impact of Christianity on Western culture as a whole, it's actually surprising that this literary > oral dichotomy did not last longer. Derrida's critique of Western phonocentrism remains valid in other periods and languages (and in later English as well). When did things change, and why? Or is the scripto-centric world of the Exeter riddles a fluke, unique in the canon? Would other kinds of riddles reveal a similar privileging?

More saliently for Anglo-Saxon studies, these poems' refutation of phonocentrism strongly suggests they were composed with a reading audience in mind. Though it's not impossible that (for example) riddle 19's *scop* could have verbally outlined his poem's runic play, it's highly unlikely. Whatever the genesis of the rest of the Old English corpus, the riddles, at least, were complex literary productions which acknowledged their textual dependence and guided their readers accordingly. In a sense, riddle 42's "riddlic tutorial" is not so unlike the husband's *ærendspræce*: both self-consciously employ runes-as-text to express a hidden logos. Where the first celebrates writing's unique ability to relay meaning, the second harnesses it for an intensely private message; in the first, the poet guides his readers to the solution via "cægan cræfte"; in the second, we'll never know just what the *gewritu secgað*.

Endnote 1.

I have been calling the runes' audience "readers;" but this is an assumption which stands some defense. The question is twofold: did Exeter's runic passages necessitate decoding on a visual level, and if so, why did the book's authors opt to employ a writing system that had been



dead for several centuries? The answers are related; for the second, Cynewulf again serves as both exemplar and guide. Had he attempted to embed his signature using Roman letters, he would have been foiled by their allusive paucity: in his poems, "runes are used with their letter-names punningly constituting part of the text's meaning. Letters of the Roman alphabet did not have meaningful names" (Robinson 293). The *fuðarc* not only had greater metaphoric potential, its Germanic origin better suited it to Old English poetry's alliterative metre. As we will see, "riddle 24... uses runes as alphabetic characters while the meter requires them to be named in reading" (Bragg 39). But the best explanation is perhaps the simplest: the runes were *different*. Exeter is written in Roman letters already; without employing some alternative mode of script, distinguishing Roman-lettered "oral" passages from Roman-lettered "textual" passages would be nearly impossible. R. I. Page identifies the "tradition of runes used side by side with... Roman lettering" and concludes that "there is interplay between these various scripts" (Page 19); Hugh Magennis notes that

"some Old English poetic texts have features accessible only to people who can see them---and read them---on the page, particularly texts that exploit letters and written words, often, though not always, through the incorporation of runes."  
(Magennis 96-97).

Considering some of the associations runic writing had for literate Anglo-Saxons, it's actually not too surprising to find poems in which the solution depends on visual interaction with the runic text. The word "rune" derives jointly from Germanic "geryne" and Norse "run." "Geryne" especially was variously used to signify "mystery," "inner thought," "special skill," and any specifically Christian mystery such as Easter, baptism, sacrament, or the Trinity (Fell 206). Its associations with both Christian logos and learned skill are reflected in the writings of Byrhtferth ("knowledge of a special skill"---*cægan cræfte*, anyone?), Cynewulf ("word" or "inner thought") (Fell 208), and the creation poem *The Order of the World*, where "run" is a type of knowledge disseminated either through poetry or wise counsel (Fell 213). Knowledge was power, even in 900 A.D. Again, it is not surprising that a newly-christened manuscript culture might attach weight to written discourse. Throughout the medieval period, the authority of any given written text depended not on the text's inherent value, but on how many other texts backed it up. Writes Lynn Swann:

"Anglo-Saxon writers are keen to assert the validity of their texts by proving that they come from a recognized and valued source...they are interested not in the authorial identity of the individuals named, but rather in the status of those individuals as authoritative sources which set up a chain of affiliation and validation for the text that names them. As Joyce Hill notes... 'it is a means of identifying the authoritativeness of what is being said by identifying the authority, a commitment... to intertextuality rather than independence'  
(Swan 78).

This tradition remained unbroken all the way from Bede (citing Orosius), through Aelfric (citing Bede), to Chaucer (who liked originality so much he fabricated his sources) (Swan 78). The runes had powerful connotations already; their identification as purposefully-incorporated snippets of textuality would have only heightened their significance in the eyes of their Anglo-Saxon readers.

#### Endnote 2.

Though my own proposed solution for riddle 19 does not belong in the body of my thesis, it has some relevance to the overall topic and so I include it here.

I've always been confused by the brightness of 19. The proud stallion is "heafodbeorhtne" (brightheaded) while some aspect of the riddle's central metaphor adds a lot of sparkle to its final

journey: "for wæs þy beorhtre, swylcra siþfæt" (the journey was brighter, of such journeys 9). Though a ship couldn't glow like this, a sun could, and I propose reading riddle 19 as "sun in sky." Precedent for this type of anthropomorphization occurs in riddle 4, where the sun appears as God's warrior (Williamson 71); and 29, where an aggressive sun reclaims the light stolen from him by a thieving moon (Williamson 85). In riddle 19, the warrior on his "heafodbeorhtne" steed is the sun racing "swiftne ofer [the] sælwong" (swiftly over the plain) of the sky; their furious progress brightens their journey (and the day): "for wæs þy beorhtre."

This solution fits a number of oddities within the riddle. First, I propose reading the syntax of the poem's central lines is not, as usually constructed, "He (the horse) had on his back battle-strength---man. The warrior rode the nailed one"; but "He (the horse) had on his back battle-strength---nailed man. The warrior rode the wide rode. [He] carried, rynestrong..." The apposition of accusative "hildeþryþe" (battlestrength) with "mon nægledne" (nailed man)---where "nægledne" is not a substantive but merely an adjective modifying mon---deepens the context for both. The man has "battle-strength" because he is "nægledne": wearing chain-mail armor. Anglo-Saxon chain mail was constructed by alternately linking and nailing rings together with metal rivulets (Williamson 245); this mail was presumably pretty shiny ("beorhtre"), and highly prized--for example, in "The Husband's Message," the estranged husband describes "nægled beagas" (nailed rings, 54) among his newfound wealth. Meanwhile, the falcon is simply a fellow traveler, another poetic hint towards the poem's location, the "widlast" ("rynestrong" with not water but wind) of the sky.

Most importantly, when read with the solution "sun," the traditional names of 19's seventeen runes (listed by Williamson 466 and others) take on greater significance than a simple phonetic alphabet. The two alliteratively-determined "line-breaks" occur in lines 1/2 and 7/8. The first of these sequences, SRO / H, reads "sigel-rad-os," with "hægl" dropping a line to complete the "H hygewloncne, heafodbeorhtne" sequence. "Sigel-rad-os" is "sun-road-god," something of a redundancy, as the god of the "sun-road," a common kenning for "sky", is already the sun.<sup>29</sup> The second sequence, comprising the first half of CO / FOAH, reads "cen-os," "torch-god"---another fitting epithet for a deity whose job it was to make journeys "beorhtre."

Finally and somewhat dubiously, the names and positions of the runes may also have Christian significance. The NOM sequence, read runically, translates "nyd-os-mon," "need-god-man." Set within the adjectival phrase "mon nægledne", "nailed man," it could plausibly be a veiled reference to Christ. This reading would not be incompatible with the remainder of the riddle. For example, in Ælfric's *De Temporibus Anni* and the Anglo-Saxon poem *Christ III*, Jesus is described metaphorically as a sun: "in the latter poem, the Lord Christ is said to rise on the Day of Doom like the morning son" (Williamson 149).

Endnote 3.

Writes Anderson, "Despite their ostensible separation in the manuscript... 'Riddle 60' and 'The Husband's Message' more and more appear to be united in theme, recounting together the making and message bearing of a runic artifact with magical speech" (Anderson 146). Many arguments support this conclusion; I offer a few of the most pertinent to my main discussion.

Most importantly, on its own, "riddle 60" never presents itself as a riddle. It never demands that the audience (for example) "Saga hwæt ic hatte" (say what I am, riddle 66) and lacks the cryptic tone of riddles like 39 or 42. Nevertheless, most critics "solve" the riddle (reading 60 as a non-riddle, their "answer" merely identifies the narrator) as a "reed-pen." However, the speaker clearly depicts itself as the recipient, not inscriber, of written words: "mec

<sup>29</sup> Footnote to the footnote: I read "os" here as "god" and not "mouth." "Os" is a definition unique to the Rune Poem, lifted from the Latin by a Christian monk who found "os"-as-"god" a little too pagan for his taste (Osborne Longland 385).

seaxes ord ond seo swiþre hond, eorles ingeþonc ond ord somod, þingum geþydan" (Knife's point and the swift hand, earl's thought and the point together, impress me with things, 12-14). This self-portrait is much more in line with a ship's mast or rune staff, which could rightly depict itself as having been carved by someone else---as indeed it does, in HM: "se þisne beam agrof" (he who carved this beam, 30). Additionally, the thematic progression between "60" and "HM" reads like two halves of the same story. "60" ends with an inanimate speaker addressing a living recipient about the author of its inscription, an "eorl" who carved his "ingeþonc" (thought) into "for unc anum twam ærendspræce" (a message for us two alone, 15). This message is a specifically private one, written "swa hit beorna ma uncre wordcwidas widdor ne mænden" (so that more men may not wider relate our words, 17). In "HM," an inanimate, carven object desires to convey something similarly exclusive: "now ic onsundran þe secgan wille" (now I will say separately to you, 18). Furthermore the latter "poem" actually opens with the word "nu" (now, 18), suggesting continuation of an existing story rather than an entirely new beginning.

The possible speakers of 60/HM include a carved rune-staff, ship's mast, and human messenger. Several scholars have argued for the latter, citing the unlikelihood that a rune-staff would be used as a long-distance personal missive. Ericksen has recently refuted this claim with archeological evidence of a Scandinavian rune-staff containing what appears to be a marriage proposal; as well as other rune-staffs whose scrubbed surface indicates repetitive use, perhaps as alternating correspondence (Ericksen 34-35). However, Bragg, Niles, and others have drawn attention to the speaker's self-identification as a "beam," a word which generally denotes something much larger than a stave. Bragg posits that the narrator is therefore a carved ship's mast (Bragg 41-42). This solution neatly explains the speaker's status as a veteran traveler; when riddle 60 is read as part of HM, "ship's mast" also fits a bulk of other internal evidence. As the poem opens, the speaker positions itself as "be sonde, sæwealle neah, æ merefaroþe" (by the sand, near the seawall, at watershore); in this place, it remains "frumstapole fæst" (fast in its first state), while around it, "uhtna gewham yð sio brune, lagufæðme beleoc" (each morning the brown wave, enveloping waves enclosed me). Most translations of this passage read it as the mast's/staff's narration of its previous life as a tree/reed; I would cautiously suggest that, instead, it refers here to its time spent as a ship's mast. The husband of Husband's Message has been driven into long exile by enemies. He's probably taken his ship with him, mooring it tightly at some lonely sea-wall where it watches the waves lap at its keel, beheld by "fea ænig ... monna cynnes" (few of men's kindred, 4). The poem thus begins *in medias res*, with the husband and his wooden ship trapped in exile. Subsequently it backtracks to describe the mast's actual birth---"treocyn ic tudre aweox" (tree's kin, I grew in fruit, 18-19)---before proceeding to relate its carved message to the man's estranged beloved.

Brittany Pladek  
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Brittany Pladek

*Gewritu secgað*: "the sensible inscription" in Old English Riddle poetry

--Here in this essay came the Riddles into the land of Litheory, & were welcomed in friendship.

--Here then in this essay came Derrida into the land of Litheory, & he seized the burg of Logos from the heathen army, & worked there great ruin. & speechloving Plato's son forthfared into death, & the inkstained ecriture, Derrida's son, came to power.

--Here then in this essay came the Riddles into the burneddown burg of Logos, & denounced speechloving Plato's son, & inkstained ecriture welcomed them in friendship. & together they drank of textjoys, sharing cups of confusingashell theory.

Yo!

We have yawned at yarns of yellowpaged manuscripts,

Exegeses of Exeter transcribed in the tenth century

By loving Leofric, lending light to literacy. Long

Read rudely, unrightly marginalized as matterless,

The rollicking raunchy riddles truly speak sense.

Speak more than sense, breathe bold theory,

Call shots as sound as Saussure's, signify signs,

Prove that preConquest primates, sans Frenchies,

Could croak confusing criticism also; though they,

History hastens, were simple simians in silly hats.

Liar history! The tumultuous tenth century,

Ages before Harold bought it by an arrow,

Had just learnt literacy from Latin, also those crazy Christians,

And scrapped scrawled runerocks for comfy cowskins.

Anachronisticallysexy Alfred burnt his hot cross buns,

Swore off baking Danishes and bent to binding books.



Enlightened literacy lapped the brows of learned men,  
 And slowly the singing scop watched his words whittling,  
 Wasting wordbound into writing. Tongue turned to pen,  
 And some clever curdle-minded monk, Mel Gibson of 1000 AD,  
 Beat blood, battle, boasting, bribery and bravery into Beowulf, and  
 Beowulf he cleft in calf, cuddled and kissassed for ten centuries  
 By frumpy sexually-frustrated freshmen. So says one camp.  
 Artfully Orchard, O'Keeffe and others oppose: oral  
 Composition continued for centuries, contend contentious critics,  
 For formulas found, recurring repeated,  
 Spoken signposts for lazy scops. So hwaet the hell  
 Has deconstructing disseminating Derrida, lord of Logoskill,  
 In the alliterative alien kingdom of Anglo-Saxon studies  
 Have here to analyze? I redundantly recombine P,  
 H and lucky N, lying cleavaged in two O's,  
 C, E, N, T, not fiddy,  
 With the whitedseeded SouthAsian staple sans E,  
 Our undergradoverused twoletter copulative, and M.  
 But do not forget, Derrida defies simplicity,  
 Denies sense: whatever word you wrought,  
 Solution sought, is always already wrong.

[Three pages have been obscured here by fire.]

Then here in this paragraph spoke Derrida of phonocentricism, & how it, Frenchiephrase  
 snootysounding, so long were in Western philosophy, until that he overpowered it &  
 ecriture ascended to kingship. Then the logos in the Riddles was shown, for that because  
 in them it appears, as in 42 and 39, as a key wound with clever bands of thought. & there  
 with litanalysis and with closereading phonocentricism is attacked & the logos without  
 speech will be sought. & so in this way ends the introduction. Amen.

Often the riddlesolver, solutionseeking,  
 Locates logos in runes. Not Tolkien tidbits,  
 Forged by Froddressed dwellers of mothers' basements, but  
 Real writing, Ruthwellcarved, pointing pilgrims  
 Of rollicking raunchy riddles towards solution salvation.  
 Long must they linger, stab with stylus  
 Frustrating *fuðarc* grammars, until that they  
 Either enlightened by learning or clasping Cliffnotes,  
 Hoot like highschoolers at all the naughty bits,  
 Delicious doubleentendre, fuckfilled *fuðarc*,  
 Lewdly-laden logos. Like frisky 42,  
 Voyeurism *in vitro*

[...the manuscript appears to have been irrevocably damaged here by Coke Zero stains and small, unflattering doodles of the BMC Financial Aid office being wrecked by Grendel, dressed as Pate Manning]...

I say to you, ordained Thesis Reader, as you bade me of this: 42 was a poem in transparency settled, until that point when it was half finished, and through writer's block and laziness it was deemed to call it a riddle. Then readers saw runes approaching them, and the riddle stood and hailed them: "Readers, name me!" Then they answered and said: "Hell no! Give us a bloody hint, for we cannot solve." Thereafter he said who was riddling them, "You can too." Then said they: "How shall we solve?" Said he: "Use the runes." Then they took this answer and felt stupid. Then by unjumbling the letters, and after much tenth-century Wikipediaing, they began to solve in words they had never used in polite conversation before, of which this is the arrangement:

Now shall we Scrabble the ready runes  
 Waiting willingly without speech, staring us  
 Redundantly right in the textface, facingtext,  
 Hatch hen and hubby from loaded liteggs,  
 Churn out Chaunticleers. (Chaucer's bird was better,

Beauteous Bettany in the buff, B-grade actor  
 Cast in C-grade chickflick, playing A-grade poet).  
 Cock crow could not, hen henpeck, without  
 Wisecracking writing; speech fails for  
 Logolocation, though lawyers like it  
 For filing infringement, so found  
 This author when Caedmon sued....

[Approximately twenty-seven pages were lost here in a freak snowshoe accident. The remaining five pages were lost when the frustrated author voiced a wish to use her thesis as "a chopping-block," and somebody took her seriously.]

Now has this senior thesis overthrown,  
 Or vice versa, or maybe checkmated---  
 For sure finished. Hwaetever.  
 This fruit of plentiful procrastination finishes  
 In pithy plea to the alliterative AllWaldend.  
 I join together 2 0 0 7 in an oath:  
 Lord of literature lovers, that dark day  
 I forget fun in fiction, succumb to sobriety,  
 Give up gaiety, shoot me. Seriously---  
 Is how literature, like life, must never  
 Be talked about, because it's too important.  
 Thanks, AllWaldend Wilde. Right as always.