

Re-centralising the Animal Body in Bookmaking with Exeter Book Riddle 89

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Animal bodies were instrumental to the processes of medieval bookmaking: the leaves of manuscripts consist of parchment scraped from animal flesh, the covers were made using tanned cattle hide, while the contents of their pages were written using quills taken from bird feathers using ink stored within horns. This element may be easily forgotten for those of us working from modern critical editions of these same texts, printed upon the fiber of paper rather than written with quill upon animal skin. Yet the people working upon said skins may not have so easily forgotten the animal origin of their work, and indeed often worked to underline the medium to readers. One of the most famed of these manuscripts is the Exeter Book, the largest known manuscript of Old English literature that preserves roughly one sixth of the extant corpus.¹ Amongst the many riddles featured within the Book is ‘Riddle 89’, a partially damaged riddle in which the speaker reminisces at length upon their past as the horn on an animal’s body, whom the speaker imagines as a lord to which they are the retainer.² Their words shift from their former life to their present one, having been pushed out from the retinue by their ‘gingra broþor’ [younger brother] (l. 15), kidnapped by human hands and ‘bennade’ [wounded] (l. 18) by dark iron in order to be turned into an inkhorn. Given that the Exeter Book riddles were penned on the same parchment with the same quills used on other medieval manuscripts, there is an aptness to the emphasis placed within this riddle on the speaker’s animal past, reminding the reader that the very text they read is written with the body parts of an animal displaced from their origin and purpose. This article will explore the notion of displacement

¹ Richard Gameson, ‘The Origin of the Exeter Book of Old English Poetry’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 25 (1996), pp. 135-185 (p. 135), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0263675100001988>.

² ‘Riddle 89’, in *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, ed. by Craig Williamson (Norton, 2011), pp. 119-120. All subsequent references by line number and in parentheses are from this edition. All translations are my own.

regarding the animal within early medieval bookmaking culture, using Carol Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat* while considering the elegiac genre used in 'Riddle 89'. The horn as a body part is linguistically displaced from its original, animal function by the word 'inkhorn', displacing the very animal nature of the bookmaking process. 'Riddle 89' recognises these forms of displacement from one's animal origin and from the bookmaking process, and, in doing so, serves to re-centralise the animal body.

In discussing 'Riddle 89', Craig Williamson suggests the word 'inkhorn' (*blæchorn*, in Old English) as the intended solution to the riddle.³ He is not incorrect to do so: the riddle's speaker does entail their later life as a vessel for ink. Yet the word 'inkhorn' makes absent the animal body in a manner reminiscent of Carol Adams' notion of the absent referent, where animal bodies are linguistically made absent as they become meat to be consumed.⁴ The word 'meat', Adams argues, is used to obscure the dead, butchered animal bodies at hand; elsewhere, animals become metaphors for people's experiences, making the referent absent through its application to something else: a woman's statement of feeling 'like a piece of meat' makes absent the animal body that is literally a piece of meat. While Adams primarily addresses the butchering of animals for consumption, her notion of the absent animal referent can be pushed further into other fields that objectify animal bodies, including that of modern manuscript culture. Like 'meat', 'horn' implicitly refers to an animal body yet resists proper understanding and visibility, being abstracted through its removal from the body as a whole. This removal from the whole body thus displaces the word from its original function; 'meat' typically refers to the muscle parts of the animal used to exert itself, yet when used by humans the meat no longer serves that purpose. Accordingly, the isolation of 'horn' fails to remind us that the horns

³ Craig Williamson, 'Solutions and Commentary', in *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, ed. by Craig Williamson (Norton, 2011), pp. 393-394.

⁴ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 25th anniversary edition (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 20-22.

served upon an animal body as a weapon, or otherwise as a tool. This isolation from the animal body, thus making it absent, is underlined by its linguistic joining with 'ink'. This binding displaces the body part from its original function even further through applying it to a new function in bookmaking. The word's original meaning and purpose are now undercut by its displacement from its original function and meaning, and subsequent absorption into a different hierarchy of meaning. As Adams argues, the application of the animal body to something else thus makes that animal absent, permitting us as humans to forget about the animal as an independent entity and to resist efforts to make animals present.⁵ 'Inkhorn' implicitly denies the original animal body as an independent entity as it displaces the animal part from its original purpose and body, alongside displacing the very role of animal bodies away from the process of bookmaking.

Yet I argue that this obscuring of the animal body is not present in 'Riddle 89', nor indeed the other Exeter Book riddles concerning animal bodies. Many have drawn comparisons between the Exeter Book riddles and Aldhelm of Malmesbury's Latin *enigmata*, with some even speculating that Aldhelm was responsible for composing some of the Old English riddles.⁶ A key difference between the Old English and Anglo-Latin riddles, however, is the presence of answers to the riddles: where Aldhelm gave the answers to his riddles in their titles, the Old English riddles are not so magnanimous, and their solutions are still debated to this day. While many have laboured over providing solutions to the riddles as though the exclusion of answers was a mistake, Jennifer Neville argues for ambiguity in approaching the Old English riddles, arguing that their purpose is not to lead to individual solutions but to an open-ended process.⁷

⁵ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, pp. 21-22.

⁶ Craig Williamson, 'Introduction', in *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, ed. by Craig Williamson (The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 23-25; Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (University of Toronto Press, 2009).

⁷ Jennifer Neville, *Truth is Trickiest: The Case for Ambiguity in the Exeter Book Riddles* (University of Toronto Press, 2024), pp. 3-22.

According to Neville, these riddles illuminate their nonhuman subjects in a manner that crosses boundaries and leads their readers to imagine things that move from one identity to another.⁸ Following Neville's argument, I assert that the lack of focus upon an individual solution within 'Riddle 89' that may obscure the animal body involved allows it to recognise the speaker's animal past that continues into their present involvement in bookmaking. The riddle's exploration of its subject is notably reminiscent of the elegiac poems also contained within the Exeter Book, where a first-person speaker recounts their personal history and misfortunes. Compared with *The Wanderer*, an elegiac poem often used as an exemplar of the Old English elegiac genre, the speaker of 'Riddle 89' similarly speaks personally of a lost past amongst one's kinsmen and displacement from one's environment.⁹ Invoking this genre allows the poem to shift its mood into a melancholic, elegiac tone, where the past is dredged up and intermingled with the present, rather than forgotten. Through these effects, readers of 'Riddle 89' are reminded that the very inkhorn used to write said riddle has had its own animal history independent of human hands.

Yet there is a reversing of *The Wanderer*'s use of elegiac tropes in 'Riddle 89'. Where the speaker of *The Wanderer* laments his displacement into the wilderness and yearns for the 'seledreamas' [hall-pleasures], the speaker of 'Riddle 89' has been displaced away from the natural landscape into the societal hall. The speaker declares their lost 'epel' [homeland] (l. 10) amongst the 'deop dalu' [deep dales] (l. 11) and 'stanwongas' [stony plains] (l. 12), associating them distinctively with the landscape. Corinne Dale emphasises the riddle's sense of place and argues of its ecocentrism, rightfully noting that more lines are dedicated to depicting the

⁸ Neville, *Truth is Trickiest*, p. 13.

⁹ *The Wanderer*, in *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, second edition, ed. by Richard Marsden (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 377-382. All translations are my own; Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (McGill-Queens' University Press, 1992).

landscape the speaker once inhabited than its present location.¹⁰ Through this, Dale argues, readers are invited to recognise the existence of environments beyond the human-centred worldview.¹¹ This emphasis on ‘place’, however, additionally allows the text to additionally underline the speaker’s sense of dis-place following their kidnapping, not merely in the difference in its surroundings but also in its engagement with those surroundings. Once, the speaker was able to identify their environment and its features - the plains being ‘hrimighearde’ [hard with rime] (l. 13). Now, they are unable to identify that which ‘fealleð’ [falls] (l. 26) on them, just that it is ‘eorpes nathwæt’ [dark, something unknown] (l. 27). Likewise, the variety of the speaker’s former habitat, from the dales to the plains, and their ability to navigate it are both stolen from them. Now, they have ‘anne fot’ [one foot] (l. 27), and must ‘stonde’ [stand] (l. 26), a notable change from their once being ‘strong on stæpe’ [strong in step] (l. 12) and former ability to ‘stealc hliþo stigan’ [ascend steep hills] (l. 9). The environmental displacement featured within ‘Riddle 89’ is, then, not merely one of being removed from one’s natural environment, but additionally of one’s interaction with said environment. Invocation to the elegiac genre thus compels readers to genuinely consider the animal components of bookmaking, as the animal history of the ‘inkhorn’ is, for a moment, restored. Furthermore, the inversion of elegiac genre additionally compels consideration of the ecological hurt that bookmaking inflicts.

This ecological damage is later echoed in the speaker’s declaration of their current state: ‘[n]u min hord warað hiþende feond / se þe ær wide bær wulfes gehleþan’ [Now my hoard guards from a pillaging enemy, who once widely bore the wolf’s companion] (ll. 28-29). The reference to the ‘feond’ here is likely to a raven feather due to the raven’s associations with the

¹⁰ Corinne Dale, *The Natural World in the Exeter Book Riddles* (Boydell & Brewer, 2017), pp. 43-45.

¹¹ Dale, *The Natural World*, pp. 43-45.

wolf through the beasts of battle motif, which alludes to the raven, wolf, or eagle seeking to devour the corpses of the battle-slain.¹² This reference grants another core component of bookmaking — the quill — its own animal history; rather than referring purely to the quill's present purpose, the speaker refers to the quill's past as a pillager of corpses. The provision of a now-lost animal history comparable to the speaker's allows the riddle to illustrate the collective displacement that these bodies have suffered. This is alongside making apparent the significance of animal roles to writing, as it is their interactions that allow the very process to occur. Furthermore, this reference provides a new perspective upon which to regard the speaker's current state. The beasts of battle are typically depicted in the act of carrion-consumption, or just after it. If this reference is to be applied to the speaker's current situation, the quill's pillaging of the horn's goods thus appears as a figurative act of carrion-consumption. Such an apparition raises questions concerning the speaker's present state: if indeed they are part of the quill's figurative carrion-consumption, that would make the speaker the carrion, illustrating the speaker as being corpse-like. While this throws the bookmaking process into a rather negative light, it does continue to remind readers of the de-centralising of animal bodies and their components, where an animal 'corpse' and its pillaging becomes the locus of the writing process.

Discussing 'Riddle 89', Neville argues that the text expresses no interest in literacy, and that its efforts are focussed more upon the physical process of writing.¹³ It is this physicality that I would like to conclude on: while 'Riddle 89' does depict writing, the only focus on literacy that the poem demonstrates is its own textuality. 'Riddle 58' is ostensibly similar in that its speaker is also involved in the writing process, often being interpreted as a reed carved

¹² John D. Niles, *Old English Literature: A Guide to Criticism With Selected Readings* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), pp. 204-205; John D. Niles, 'Pagan Survivals and Popular Belief,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, second ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 127-128.

¹³ Neville, *Truth is Trickiest*, 83.

into a pen; yet the speaker of 'Riddle 58' marvels at their new abilities to 'ofer meodubence muðleas spreca[n]' [speak mouthless over meadbenches], invoking the magic of literacy in a manner that 'Riddle 89' decidedly does not.¹⁴ Rather, 'Riddle 89' concentrates itself upon physicality; while a reed pen may figuratively speak through a poem, 'Riddle 89' reminds us that its speaker had no willing part in the process and cannot literally exert themselves to speak, being a component of a nonhuman animal in origin. The poem serves to remind us of the obscuring identity of 'inkhorn' that is thrust upon the animal speaker, displacing them from their animal origins. This in turn allows the text to re-centralise said origins by drawing the reader's attention to the animality of the now objectified manuscript components, whilst additionally demonstrating their involvement in the process as being integral.

¹⁴ 'Riddle 58', in *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, ed. by Craig Williamson (Norton, 2011), p. 103. My own translation.

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