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Physicality and Spirituality in Riddle 26

Riddle 26, an otherwise-unnamed poem in the 10th-century Old English collection known as *The Exeter Book*, suggests tension and interplay between its physical form and its meaning.¹ Scholars accept that the riddle's speaker describes the creation of a religious manuscript, but while physical processes drive the poem's narrative structure, the speaker ends by focusing on the knowledge that the described religious text contains. As John Hines summarizes, the Old English riddles "demonstrate a keen eye for and dramatically imaginative appreciation of the real world in which the authors and readers lived: both its natural and its manufactured components" (974). In other words, the riddles can show how individuals thought about the physical world around them. How, then, does knowing about the physical process of manuscript creation affect our understanding of the poem? To investigate this, I copied ten and a half lines of Riddle 26 onto parchment using hand-made oak gall ink in a script approximating that of *The Exeter Book*. This process has given me a more detailed understanding of the time and effort required to create a single line of text—which has, in turn, changed my understanding of the poem. In Riddle 26 specifically, the content of the riddle is reinforced by its physical form. The focused, spiritual nature of writing is embodied by an object, advertising value to the reader while reiterating and implicitly validating the system that allowed for its creation.

¹ For a complete translation of the poem, see Appendix 1. All translations used in this paper are taken from Marsden (314-316), though I also compared translations by Baum, Hostetter, and Williamson (*Feast* 84). These scholars use different numbering systems, though all translations refer to Riddle 26.

To clarify this understanding, I will first discuss how medieval manuscripts in general were created. Next, I will detail how my artistic work took form, making concessions to the fact that I am a novice scribe and a left-handed one at that. I will then turn again to Riddle 26, analyzing interpretations that can be made by a scribe and reader, roles that often were and are simultaneous for individuals creating manuscripts. Finally, I will end with my own larger understandings of the poem as a result of creating a mimetic artistic work.

I. Medieval Manuscript Creation

To better understand the form and content of Riddle 26 and of my artistic work, a discussion of typical manuscript creation is useful, paying particular attention to practices likely used to create *The Exeter Book*. Of course, manuscripts are created by people, and in general, the people doing this work were educated by the church. Writing skills were “acquired as part of a claustral education” for monks and nuns, and manual labor was a “feature of the monastic regime (in whichever form)” (Brown 102). As such, monks and nuns were the main labor force, usually responsible—as workers, scribes, and/or artists—for every aspect of a manuscript’s creation. Additionally, it is assumed that, “until the rise of more specialized urban production from around 1200 onwards,” all this work took place within monasteries, as excavated production debris, such as that in the English town Jarrow, shows (Brown 106). This considerably impacted a monastery’s estates as well as the nearby community (Brown 106). To figure out what specific resources were used and how the final product was made, though, it helps to look at the individual objects that are used in the manuscript creation process.

The first step in creating a manuscript is securing a writing support, and parchment forms the writing support for *The Exeter Book* (Muir, Introduction 13). When an animal skin is turned

into parchment, it is first dehaired and “defleshed in a bath of alum and lime” then “stretched on a frame and scraped, whilst damp, to the requisite thickness, with whitening agents such as chalk being added” (Rück qtd. in Brown 106). In Europe, insular sheets of parchment were “generally thicker than their late antique and continental counterparts, which were scraped thinner during production and which therefore exhibit a greater distinction between the whiter, velvety flesh side and the smoother, yellower hair side” (Brown 107). This color difference is conventionally used to organize the sheets (flesh to flesh or hair to hair), which are cut and grouped together to form a “quire” or “gathering” and in which each half sheet of parchment is called a “leaf” or “folio” (Clemens and Graham 14). These quires form the basic writing unit for medieval scribes. Either before or after folding the sheets, the parchment maker and/or scribe pricks and then rules the parchment using a sharp tool (such as a knife, compass, or awl) and a straightedge (Clemens and Graham 15-16). The worker essentially applies pressure to create lines that guide writing and form the margins of the leaf, sometimes cutting through the parchment itself. From the late 11th century onward, drypoint ruling started to be replaced by ruling in leadpoint, which doesn’t apply to the creation of *The Exeter Book* but which is important for my artistic process (Clemens and Graham 16). After the ruling is complete, the parchment is ready to receive its text.

When putting text on a page, the scribe’s essential tool kit includes a quill pen, a penknife, ink, and a surface to lean on when writing. To make a pen, generally speaking, quills are plucked from live geese, with the most preferred coming from the left wing so that the feather will “curve away from the eyes of a right-handed scribe” (Clemens and Graham 18). The quill is split and cut to size using a penknife, a tool that can also be used to scrape off mistakes made in copying and to sharpen the quill as it dulls through use (Clemens and Graham 18).

Successfully making these cuts requires a good deal of practice, and it was a task I struggled with, though I will discuss that in more detail later.

Ink is made using a variety of methods. The primary medieval ink used on parchment is oak gall ink—also known as iron gall ink—which works its way into parchment because of its acidic properties (Clemens and Graham 18-19). Oak gall ink is “essentially created by the chemical reaction between tannic acid and iron (II) sulfate in an aqueous solution” to which oxygen and a water-soluble binder are added to produce the final product (Karnes “Ingredients”). Each of these ingredients comes from a different source. Tannic acid is obtained from soaking or boiling oak galls, which are “bulbous growths formed on the leaves and twigs of trees in response to attack by parasites” such as gall flies (Karnes, “Ingredients”). Iron (II) sulfate, also termed “vitriol” or “ferrous sulfate,” is a byproduct of mining, and it can be obtained by soaking iron scraps in a weak acid such as sulfuric acid (Karnes “Ingredients”; Lemay). The most-referenced binding agent is gum arabic, a “water soluble golden-colored sap collected from Acacia trees native to North Africa,” and it suspends the pigment in water while also making the ink flow more smoothly (Karnes, “Ingredients”). This sap is also found in India and Australia, though “[l]ocal and cheaper sources like cherry gum ... were often used as substitutes” (Lemay). After these ingredients are combined, they are left to sit. This is because the ink develops its color with exposure to air as “the water-soluble, colorless iron (II) gallate [which is the result of mixing tannic acid and iron (II) sulfate] is oxidized into the insoluble, blue-black iron (III) gallate” (Lemay). There are numerous recipes for oak gall ink, and they vary slightly by region and time period—though the product is generally the same.

The last object, the surface to lean on, likewise varies by context. In most illustrations, the desk a scribe writes on is tilted, though some illustrations show a flat desk (Clemens and

Graham 20). In other instances, a scribe might use a lapboard supported by their knees (Clemens and Graham 20). With their parchment, quill, black ink, and a stable surface, the scribe can finally put their pen to the page.

Of course, writing is a specialized skill, and scribes worked hard to better their abilities. Several colophons record the process of so-called “vocational training” for monks, specifically mentioning that “the manuscripts were copied by a master and [their] pupils,” with the master being an experienced copyist in the community (Parkes 9). If a book was important enough, a single, experienced artist-scribe might be the only one to work on it, as is the case with the Lindisfarne Gospels (Brown 112). As such, the exact character of letters varies by region, time period, and scribe, though generalizations about the letters can still be made.

The script used in *The Exeter Book* belongs to the category insular minuscule. Insular minuscule was used from the 6th century to the 11th century in Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England, and it is characterized by a “hastier” pen that “seems to be constantly turning,” making a basic pen angle difficult to distinguish (Drogin 113, 118). The script itself has strong ascenders and descenders as well as serifs modeled after the style of insular majuscule, which was popular in Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England from the 6th to the 9th centuries (Drogin 113, 109). The serifs in insular majuscule are formed using three strokes: a diagonal stroke, a downward minim stroke, and a horizontal stroke connecting the two previous strokes to form a small right triangle (Drogin 111). This shape is mimicked using two strokes (diagonal and downward) and a different pen angle in insular minuscule (Drogin 114). Regarding the layout of words on the page, in most cases, “considerable space was left between lines, and words were broken between syllables at line endings,” effectively filling the horizontal space with text (Drogin 118). Modern poetic line breaks are not present in manuscripts, though in my artistic work I made a

considerable departure from this layout, which I will discuss later. An example of insular minuscule is pictured below in figure 1, which contains the portion of Riddle 26 that I copied:

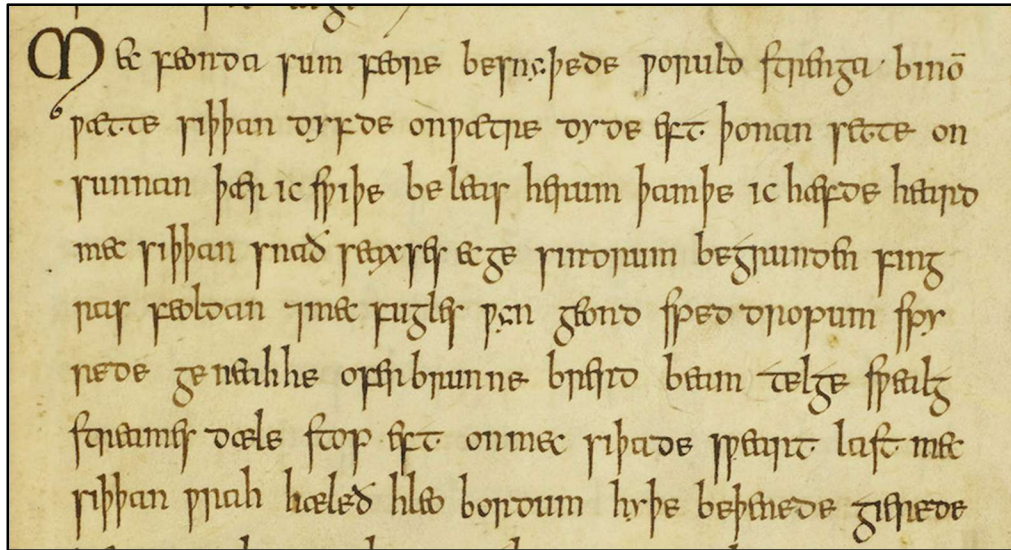


Fig. 1. Beginning of Riddle 26 from *The Exeter Book*.²

Using all this information, I was able to create my own rendition of the beginning of Riddle 26, though my methods differ from historical ones in several conspicuous ways.

II. My Manuscript Creation

Before detailing my experiences, it is worth noting that this project was constrained in both time and scope, a limitation that doubtless affected Anglo-Saxon scribes on occasion, though our situations differ greatly. A medieval scribe would have spent thousands of hours over many years copying texts, while I had one semester to create my work. As such, I never planned to make a complete, historically-accurate copy of Riddle 26, though I did hope to gain greater

² Folio 107a, c. 975 CE. *The Exeter Book Project*, University of Exeter, humanities.exeter.ac.uk/research/digital/projects/exeter-book/.

familiarity with historical practices. Because of this, I took liberties to complete the project within its timeline yet have a presentable work. Following my process chronologically can highlight both the decisions I made and the aspects I found challenging.

I decided early on that I would not be killing a cow to make parchment—not by myself, at least. Instead, I ordered scraps of parchment (to practice on) and two five-by-seven-inch pieces of manuscript-quality vellum (which is specifically calfskin) from a supplier called Pergamena. Their process differs somewhat from historical practices. According to their website, they soak and dehair skins in a large, spinning drum before running them through a defleshing machine, which takes most of the hand labor out of the process (“Our Process”). The skins are then dried, stretched, and treated before being cut and sent to individuals such as myself (“Our Process”). The sheets I ordered were treated so I could write on both sides if needed. I believe this means that the sheets were ground with a pumice and chalk to allow them to accept ink, as sometimes happened with medieval works (“Differences”), although the manufacturer is not forthcoming on how this treatment occurs (“Our Process”). In any case, I had my writing support—though I was only able to use it at the end of the creation process.

Next, I researched how to create oak gall ink. In doing so, I found no fewer than forty recipes, though all were traced to periods after *The Exeter Book*'s creation (Carvalho 188-204; Clemens and Graham 20; Karnes, “Recipes”; “Notes” 217-18; Special Collections 5-16). This might be because such recipes were passed down through practice rather than through a written source, though this is my own conjecture. After comparing the amount of time each recipe took to create, I chose one that called for boiling the galls, which is faster at releasing tannic acid than other methods such as fermentation. The recipe is pictured below in figure 2. It is unclear what the original source for this recipe is, though it proved valuable to me because it took less time to

create than others and because the compiler, Cyntia Karnes, commented on the ink creation process. After settling on this recipe, I ordered the oak galls, iron (II) sulfate, and gum arabic from online suppliers. This, again, took much of the hand labor out of the process—though it was up to me to actually produce the ink.

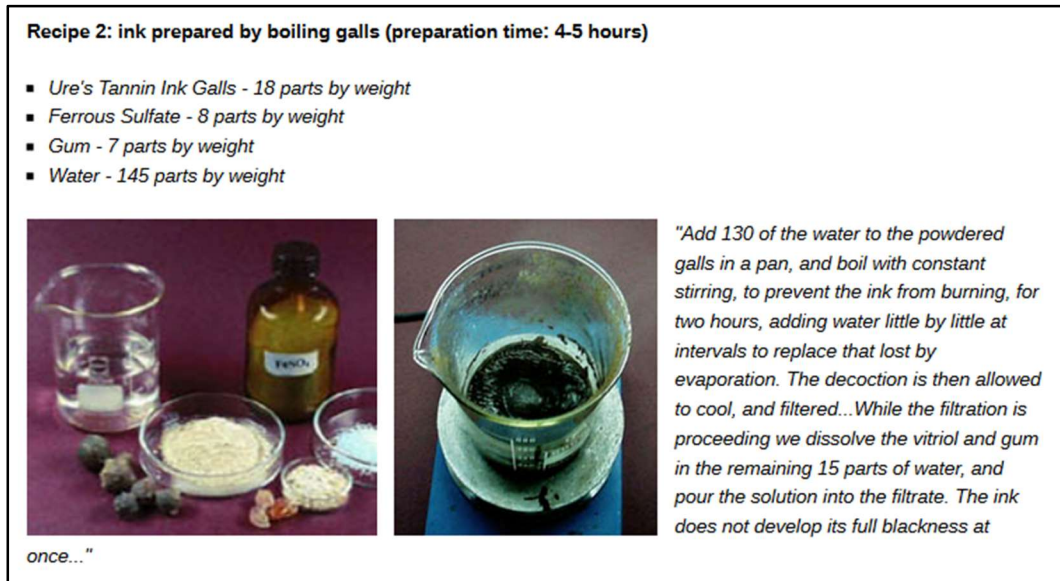


Fig. 2. Oak gall ink recipe.³

Once my supplies arrived, I made the ink, doubling the recipe to make certain I would have enough.⁴ First, I had to powder the galls I received, which meant hitting them with a hammer until the chunks were at largest a centimeter across.⁵ Then I measured each of the ingredients I needed. I mixed 36 grams of powdered galls with 260 milliliters of water. It was mid-March (in Minnesota) when I made this ink, so I used melted snow instead of rain water or distilled water, as most recipes called for. I boiled this mixture for two hours, stirring it

³ Karnes, Cyntia. "How to Make Ink: Recipes and Instructions." *The Iron Gall Ink Website*, Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, 2011, www.irongallink.org/igi_indexc33a.html.

⁴ I would like to thank Andrew Leo Stansbury for allowing me studio space in which to make the ink and for procuring supplies such as a heating element and scale.

⁵ I would also like to thank my friend Karen Kenison for assisting me in this process.

constantly, adding water every ten minutes to keep it from burning, and pushing down the solid precipitate that formed on the side of the pot with a spoon. The mixture gave off an earthy smell while this was happening, which reminded me of cooked acorns. After two hours of boiling, the mixture was a dark brown color, shown below in figure 3. Removing the oak gall mixture from heat, I began filtering it using a coffee filter. While that was happening, I mixed 16 grams of iron (II) sulfate with 30 milliliters of water and 14 grams of gum arabic, which was in small pieces. I let both mixtures sit for an hour, but at the end of that time, the gum arabic had hardly dissolved and the filter was weighed down with oak gall chunks. To better filter the oak gall mixture, I used a 30-grit straining pan and pressed the somewhat damp solids against the straining screen. Then I ran all the oak gall liquid through a 60-grit straining pan to remove any last chunks. To get the iron (II) sulfate and gum arabic mixture correct, I had to remake it in the same proportions, using powdered gum arabic instead of chunks of the sap. Then, I combined the two mixtures in a jar, after which they turned slightly purple; this can also be seen in figure 3. This ink was quite potent, and my nails were stained for a week after I made it. I let the ink develop for two weeks before I put it to use.



Fig. 3. Left to right: oak galls and water after two hours of boiling; filtered oak gall mixture (yellow bowl) and remade gum arabic/iron (II) sulfate mixture (glass jar with spoon); ink immediately after mixing all ingredients together.

So much of my time had gone into creating this small amount of purplish-black liquid, and the ink that resulted from my efforts was extremely valuable to me. Not all of my experiments regarding materials were successful, though. When I tried to make my own quill pens, I ended up with mangled feathers. I attempted to follow the directions of the bookbinder and calligrapher Dennis Rudd (qtd. in George), though none of my results were satisfactory. First, I cured the feathers (hardening them) in hot sand, and then I scraped away the outer membrane. When I cut the quills, it became clear that my skills were inadequate. After making a small slit in the end of a quill, I was unable to cut the sides at the proper angle to form a small enough nib, as it was difficult to cut straight and cleanly. After a number of tries, I ended up with a giant pen that dropped ink without much precision. Consulting thereafter with my mentor Nic McPhee, who is an experienced calligrapher, we decided it would be best if I used a metal nib and dip pen on my parchment instead--primarily to save time and effort.⁶ Similarly, to save time, I decided to write on a flat table, one that I wasn't afraid of staining. This way I avoided making my own tilted desk for this project, which allowed me to focus more on the actual writing process.

When it came to writing, I was and am squarely a novice. Traditionally, novice scribes were "required to imitate a model ... but eventually each scribe had to adjust the traces forming the letters to the rhythms in [their] personal *ductus*," a term that refers to the specific strokes that make up a letter (Parkes 100). Novice scribes, then, learned through mimicry and eventual adaptation. In this regard, I duly followed tradition, albeit on a compressed schedule. There was a slight problem, though, because I am left-handed, which is uncommon though not unheard of for medieval scribes (Parkes 62-3). This required extra adaptation, because a "right-handed

⁶ After completing this project, I found out from my mentor Lisa Bevevino that quills can be ordered online, a fact that neither I nor Nic McPhee were aware of at the time.

scribe would ‘pull’ the pen (and the ink) to the right, whereas a left-handed scribe would ‘push’ it, and adapt the traces of [their] personal *ductus* to produce the required strokes” (Parkes 62). As such, I often pushed the ink rather than pulling it to achieve the same general shapes. The result wasn’t necessarily historically accurate or neat, though I wasn’t going to attempt writing with my right hand. As such, imitation, though slightly imperfect, was the main mode of learning used to complete this project.

After consulting again with Nic McPhee, I decided on a practice regimen, building up to the final work. My first concerns were with formatting of all sorts. This included properly forming the letters, choosing which segment of the poem to copy, deciding on the line breaks and spacing, and choosing a nib that worked well. I started by copying *x*’s and *o*’s onto graph paper using a fountain pen and store-bought ink. After making those in a decently consistent size, I moved onto alphabets, using the insular minuscule alphabet penned by Marc Drogin as a model—though I had to make my best guess about how to pen Old English letters such as thorn (*þ*), eth (*ð*), wyn (*ƿ*), and ash (*æ*) (115). Once I could pen an insular minuscule alphabet in a semi-consistent size, I copied the first ten and a half lines of Riddle 26 onto graph paper, using the image in figure 1 as a model for letter shape. I chose to copy this segment because it deals with aspects of the creation process that I completed. Additionally, I departed from the line spacing that was given in the original manuscript, instead breaking up the poem by half-lines based on modern editorial standards that reflect meter and alliteration. I chose this layout to give myself a consistent unit to work with and to nod to the fact that this is, indeed, a piece of modern art. I was not, however, paying much attention to spacing and letter size when making my first copy, which became evident after I finished my lines. With a greater concern for spacing in mind and while still using graph paper and store-bought ink, I started using a dip pen and *purposefully*

experimenting with spacing, trying to figure out what I liked best. I decided on a 0.5-centimeter minim height while leaving 1 centimeter between lines, which fit the correct number of lines onto my parchment. When choosing a nib, I took the path of least resistance. I smudged a lot of ink when I was practicing, and as a result I began using smaller nibs that made a thinner line and generally took less time to dry. Eventually I settled on using a 1-millimeter-wide nib, which still showed variation in line width yet was thin enough for me to mostly avoid smudging. With that decided, my general formatting work was done.

With those parameters set, I copied and copied and copied, with each rendition of the riddle taking me about two hours to complete. When doing this practice, I found my own difficulties in forming particular letters. Specifically, the letters *e* and *a* gave me trouble, as did forming the serifs, flourishes, and decorative elements on the letters *t*, *s*, and *f*. I struggled to achieve the proper height on the letter *e* and to maintain the proper angle on the leftmost stroke of the letter *a*. Decorative elements on *t*, *s*, and *f* were difficult because they required variation in line thickness by using different pen angles and a steady hand. Additionally, maintaining straight ascenders and descenders was something I never fully mastered. Each of these difficulties got easier with practice, though, and these letters now grab my attention when I look at my model. Different stages of my practice can be seen below in figure 4. After completing two more copies of the riddle on graph paper, I did the same thing on unlined printer paper, still using store-bought ink. At this stage I began practicing pricking and ruling, which went well because the paper showed where it was compressed relatively easily. Gaining confidence in my skills, I finally used the ink I made to copy the riddle on unlined paper. The ink was thicker than what I had previously used, but generally this experiment went quite well. I was finally ready to use parchment.

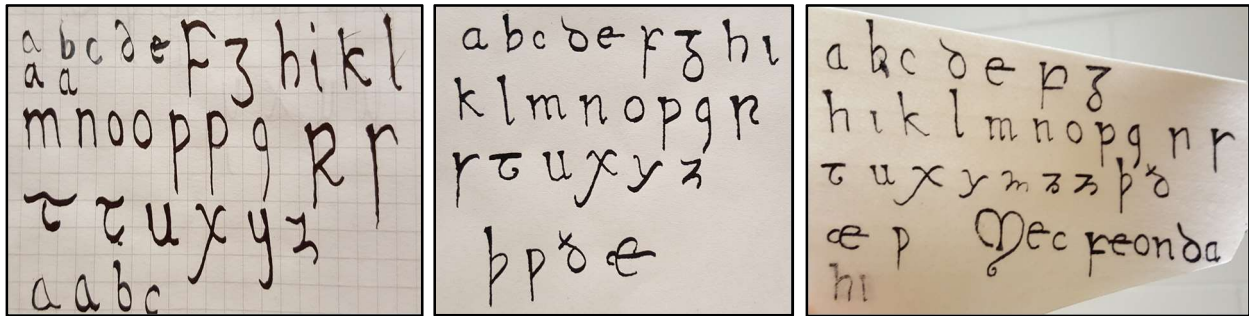


Fig. 4. Left to right: alphabet on graph paper with store-bought ink; alphabet on ruled printer paper with my own ink; alphabet on ruled parchment with my own ink.

Writing on parchment came with its own difficulties, and to get better at it, I went back to the basics. I started by copying alphabets onto smaller scraps of parchment. The scraps that I received were generally thinner than the larger parchment sheets, which meant that my pricking and ruling showed better when I started small. When I attempted a whole rendition of the riddle on a larger practice scrap, though, I quickly lost sight of my lines and had uneven spacing. As a result, I decided to line my final work with graphite, going back and erasing the lines once the ink was dry. This was a historically inaccurate practice, but it resulted in a much better work.

The final rendition of the project can be seen below in figure 5. Over forty hours of effort (including research, material production, and practice) went into creating this object, most of which was spent in quiet concentration and contemplation—with a notable amount of frustration as well. And my own hand in the creation is visible, literally and figuratively; from this writing sample, it is clear I am somewhat inexperienced. My left-handedness is apparent in the slant of the ascenders and descenders, and I struggled with the letter spacing, for example, on lines four and nine of the first page. The ascending strokes of my *d*'s were not always properly angled, and the thickness of my strokes varied, particularly when I wrote the letters *s* and *f*. I am pleased with the work, though. For instance, I achieved some grace when penning the letter *x* in the first line

of the second page, which varies in thickness and has a strong angle and delicate twist on the longer downward stroke. And while the result is still—perhaps obviously—the product of a novice, the object itself represents monumental amounts of care, attention, and personal effort.

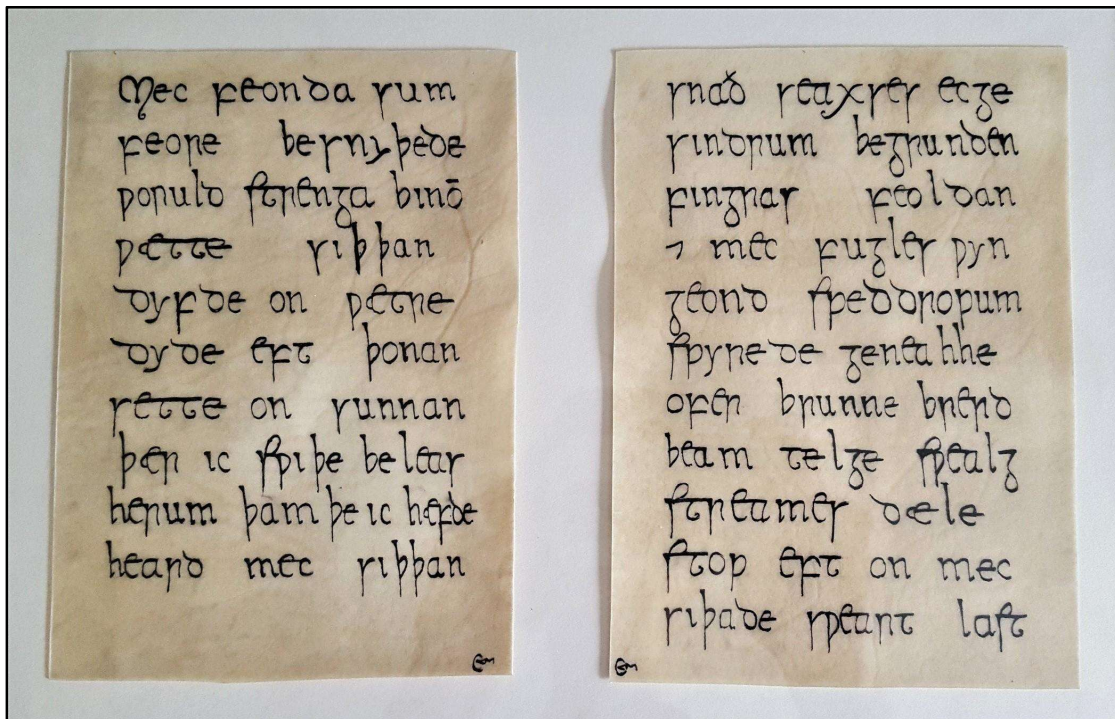


Fig. 5. My completed manuscript pages.

III. Interpreting Riddle 26

Given this large amount of personal work and thought, my view of the poem has changed, both when thinking about its content and when viewing it as an object. The connection between content and object is highlighted for me because the riddle’s speaker experiences much of the creation process that I went through, and they detail it in generally the same order that I have described. The poem starts violently, when a foe kills the speaker (1). Then the speaker is “dyfde on wætre” [dipped in water] and “sette on sunnan” [set in (the) sun], and their “herum” [hair] is removed before they are cut by the “Heard ... seaxses ecg” [hard knife’s edge] and have

their impurities ground away (3a-6b). This appears to follow the parchment creation process that I detailed above. Next the speaker states that they are “feoldan” [folded] and that the “fugles wyn” [bird’s delight] travels over them with “beamtelge” [tree-ink] until they are covered with a “sweartlast” [black track] (7a-11a). This likely describes the process of writing using a feather quill and black ink made from trees, presumably oak gall ink. My own familiarity with this artistic process made the object viscerally recognizable to me; it is more than a static artifact. While I did not complete the next steps—the riddle’s speaker discusses being clad with “hleobordum” [protective boards] and “gierede ... mid golde” [adorned ... with gold] and dyes—the implications are still clear because of my general familiarity with manuscript creation (12a-15b). These descriptions imply that the speaker is a book of some kind, clearly an important one if a precious metal such as gold is used in its binding.⁷ Because of my work, I was able to smell the ink and hear the scratch of a pen on parchment when such things were described, even though the speaker is somewhat abstract about these practices.

Yet even with the abstraction, this riddle is not difficult to provide a general answer for. Scholars debate the specifics, though many agree that the object described is likely a Bible, or at the very least a famous religious manuscript (Baum; Hostetter; Marsden 314; Williamson, “Notes” 211). Much of the specificity regarding the type of manuscript comes from the last eleven lines of the poem. Conceptually shifting away from the creation process, the speaker states that their users will be “heortum þy hwætran ond þy hyge bliþran, / ferþe þy frodran” [the

⁷ It is worth briefly noting that the poem’s physical form does not perfectly match the final form described by the speaker, which adds to the meta-textual engagement a reader has with the text. On a physical level, unlike the speaker of the riddle, *The Exeter Book* was not well-cared-for while it was in use, nor was it covered in gold. The text was used as a cutting board; it had a pot of glue and a brand placed on it; and sheets of gold leaf were often stored between its pages (Muir 1-3). And on a broader level, important religious works were typically written in Latin, not in Old English like the riddle (Hines 970). As such, even though the riddle appears in a manuscript and depicts a manuscript, there is a disconnect between the form seen and the form described. This illustrates the special reserve given to authoritative religious works (rather than riddles) in a monastic setting, and it might make the reader acknowledge that a riddle about a religious work cannot take the place of the religious work itself.

bolder in heart and the happier in mind, in spirit the wiser]—clearly promising good to those interacting with them (20a-21a). After giving more, similar descriptions, the speaker ends by bidding the reader to “Frige hwæt ic hatte” [Ask what I am called] (26b) before stating, “Nama min is mære, hælepum gifre ond halig sylf” [My name is famous, bountiful to men and my self holy] (27b-28b). This assertion of holiness, coupled with the previous promises of good spirit through use, provide strong evidence that the speaker is a holy text of some kind. In light of all this, the solution of “Bible” or some well-known “religious manuscript” is not difficult to guess.

Yet the solution does not explain all the poem’s meaning. The solution, in fact, does not encapsulate the complexity of the speaker it describes. In the poem, the speaker’s exact form changes quite often. This garners some confusion, although these changing descriptions seem to serve a broader spiritual purpose. When the speaker states that they are killed, it implies they are originally an animal that can die (1). When they are wetted, stretched, scraped, and written on with ink, it implies they are, instead, an animal skin that will take the ink (2b-11a). When they are bound with boards and given gold ornaments and dyes, it implies that they are a completed bunch of parchment leaves; the ink from before seems to have become part of them (11b-15b). And when the speaker tells others to use them, it seems that they have become a bound book, proud of the knowledge they contain (16a-28b). At each step, then, the speaker is drastically changed by the physical processes that are happening to them. Thinking more abstractly, these changes might be mirrored by a human individual discovering religion and changing their life to follow God. For the speaker—who is effectively preaching to their audience—it is a long journey from animal to book and, likewise, from ignorance to holiness. These differences are important enough for the speaker to, in some regard, change their implied identity; the spiritual journey is impactful.

By extension, how the speaker is created is also significant, and it appears that such creation was not without suffering. The poem starts with a sacrifice: as previously referenced, a foe takes the speaker's life (1). The speaker is then "swipe beleas" [deprived violently] of the hair they had (4b) and cut by the "seaxses ecg" [knife's edge] (6a) before being "sindrum begrunden" [ground from impurities] (6b). Being made anew seems to be both labor intensive and painful. When being written on, the speaker states that they are "stop eft on" [stepped on ... again] by the pen, calling to mind another form of abuse (10b). After they have words printed on them, however, they are at last protected and adorned (11b-14b). It is after the speaker is written on that they are *worth* protecting; the words they contain are of utmost importance. And while the speaker describes themselves as a product of pain, the speaker *also* states at the end of the poem that they are "niþum ... nytte" [a service to people] (27a) and "halig" [holy] (28b). This process, though excruciating, has changed them for the better.

After discussing how they came to be, the speaker turns outward. When doing this, the speaker highlights their function as an object and as a means for others to achieve spiritual enlightenment. The speaker states that if the children of men "min ... brucan willað" [want to use me], they (the children of men) will benefit (18). Grammatically, this makes the speaker the object of the verb "brucan willað," which takes the genitive ("Brūcan"). Here, the speaker's nature as a physical object is reinforced by their description of themselves as a grammatical object. And the speaker next describes themselves as a means for achieving good (18a-26a). By the end of the poem, then, the speaker is situated as a physical object that is indispensable for a good life.

If the object is indispensable for a good life, then the culture and process that created it are likewise important. In the case of *The Exeter Book*, monks are responsible for its creation, which is a time- and labor-intensive operation. Anglo-Saxon monasteries were "centers for the

copying, illuminating, and interpreting of written texts, as well as the teaching of students” (Howe 9). As such, individuals encountering this riddle, verbally or in writing, would have an intimate familiarity with the object under discussion, and the object seems to praise such familiarity in the poem. This meta-textual engagement—where a monastic culture creates a work in which a work discusses its creation—reinforces both the importance of the item and the importance of the process that led to the item, especially for the work’s largely monastic audience.

And this meta-textual engagement is multilayered, for the act of manuscript creation encourages contemplation of a written work that is implicitly praised in the poem. As previously discussed, the speaker encourages others to use them after they become a book; they offer engagement with others as a didactic text. Yet textual engagement has happened ever since words were written, though on a more individual scale: scribes thought about this object at every step of its creation. As Michelle Brown notes, “Undertaking the copying of the scriptures ... was likely to have been seen as a protracted act of prayer,” as evidenced, for instance, by the Roman statesman Cassiodorus’ “assertion that each word written was a wound on Satan’s body” (113). Creating religious words in a physical form is a benefit to the spirit, in part because that creation requires the scribe to think hard about what they are doing, as I now better understand. Even if a scribe’s thoughts are about the shape of a letter, they are still consciously pondering the text. In the case of writing a riddle, the scribe might also be intellectually engaged as they try to solve the work they are copying. All this thought is required to be a good reader, and the final product is an embodiment of and spur to contemplation. As someone who has completed this process and had many thoughts throughout, I can vouch for its effectiveness.

IV. Conclusions

Monastic scribes' sacrifices in manuscript creation are validated by the objects they produced. Scribes throughout history—this one included—have complained about the pain of writing, a pain that is connected distinctly to the speaker of Riddle 26. Of course, medieval scribes worked for years on end, which means greater pain than what I experienced as the body breaks down. For instance, at the end of a manuscript, one anonymous medieval scribe wrote, "Writing is excessive drudgery. It crooks your back, it dims your sight, it twists your stomach, and your sides" (qtd. in Drogin 79). Copying words is hard; the repetitive task strains and eventually damages the body. But the spirit can benefit. Akin to the speaker of Riddle 26, scribes suffer but, ideally, gain spiritual rewards through their physical work. Their suffering is justified as they make "halig" [holy] objects and engage with the text in their minds (28b).

Reading and writing are labor-intensive processes, and throughout this project, I have been given a taste of that labor. In creating this object, I have both increased and decreased my metaphorical distance from a medieval reader and scribe—cognizant of the places I departed from historical practices yet proud of what I could copy. In contemplating and creating letters on the page, I interacted with Riddle 26 simultaneously as object and as text, a concept that was amplified by the content of the poem itself. This simultaneity of object and idea is often lost on modern readers: words seem to function as a vehicle for concepts rather than being indistinguishable from the final product. In creating my mimetic work, I was able to inhabit a different intellectual space, one that challenged me to think and write differently—aware of the focused and spiritual nature of writing as a physical act. There is value in that, and I will think of it whenever I examine another scribe's work.

Appendix 1: Riddle 26

Below is the text of Riddle 26 and a facing translation. Capitalization, line breaks, and punctuation have been added to aid understanding. This translation was taken and slightly adapted from Richard Marsden's *Cambridge Old English Reader* (314-316), though I also compared translations by Paull Baum, Aaron Hostetter, and Craig Williamson (*Feast* 84). These scholars use different numbering systems, though all translations refer to Riddle 26.

<p>Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede, woruldstrenga binom, wætte siþþan, dyfde on wætre, dyde eft þonan, sette on sunnan þær ic swiþe beleas 5 herum þam þe ic hæfde. Heard mec siþþan snað seaxses ecg, sindrum begrunden; fingras feoldan, ond mec fugles wyn geond speddromum spyrede geneahhe, ofer brunne brerd beamtelge swealg, 10 streames dæle, stop eft on mec, siþade sweartlast. Mec siþþan wraþ hæleð hleobordum, hyþe beþenede, gierede mec mid golde. Forþon me gliwedon wrætlic weorc smiþa, wire bifongen. 15 Nu þa gerenon ond se reada telg ond þa wuldorgesteald wide mære dryhtfolca helm, nales dol wite. Gif min bearn wera brucan willað, hy beoð þy gesundran ond þy sigefæstran, 20 heortum þy hwætran ond þy hyge bliþran, ferþe þy frodran. Habbap freonda þy ma, swæsra ond gesibbra, soþra ond godra, tilra ond getreowra, þa hyra tyr ond ead estum ycað ond hy arstafum 25 lissum bilecgað ond hi lufan fæþmum fæste clyppað. Frige hwæt ic hatte, niþum to nytte. Nama min is mære, hæleþum gifre ond halig sylf.</p>	<p>A certain enemy robbed me of life, deprived (me) of worldly strengths, wetted (me) next, dipped (me) in water, took (me) out again, set (me) in (the) sun where I was violently deprived 5 of the hairs that I had. Then (the) hard knife's edge cut me, ground from impurities; fingers folded (me), and (the) bird's delight made tracks across me with its useful drops repeatedly, over the dusky margin (it) swallowed tree-ink, 10 (a) portion of liquid, (it) stepped on me again, travelled with (a) black track. Then a man clad me with protective boards, covered (me) with hide, adorned me with gold. Forthwith (the) ornamental objects of smiths adorned me, encased (me) with wire. 15 Now let the trappings and the red dye and the wondrous setting widely proclaim the people's protector, (not) the misery of the foolish. If children of men will use me, they will be the safer and the more sure of victory, 20 in (their) hearts the bolder and in mind the happier, in spirit the wiser. (They will) have friends the more, dearer and closer, more true and more virtuous, more good and more loyal, who will gladly increase glory and happiness and with benefits (and) with 25 kindnesses will cover them and they with embraces of love will clasp fast. Ask what I am called, as (a) service to people. My name is famous, bountiful to men and (my) self holy.</p>
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