



## Article

# Objects That Object, Subjects That Subvert: Agency in Exeter Book Riddle 5

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**Abstract:** A sequence of Old English riddles from the Exeter Book allow an implement to speak. This article focuses on one example, Riddle 5, generally solved as either a shield or a cutting board, to show how each interpretation gives voice not just to an inanimate object but also to a non-elite member of early medieval English society—either a foot-soldier or a kitchen hand. The two solutions come together because the two answers are captured in a single Old English word—“bord”—and also because the two interpretations resonate in parallel ways, creating sympathy for down-trodden members of society who rarely get so much attention in the surviving poetic record. This article argues that Old English riddles provide an enduring legacy of social critique crafted through humor.

**Keywords:** Old English poetry; Old English riddles; Exeter Book; Riddle 5; shields; cutting boards; prosopopoeia; agency; social critique; humor

## 1. Introduction

Riddles are wonderful. Recent essays by Dailey (2013), Ramey (2017, 2018), and Rhodes (2020) have all emphasized the wonders to be had in the Old English riddles, which so clearly revel in what is *wrætlic* (wondrous). Not least of these wonders is giving voice to the non-human (explored in Orton 2014, 2015, and Paz 2017), thereby bringing the non-living to life (see Hayes 2008). Simultaneously with animating the inanimate, riddles can also give voice to non-elite humans, who rarely get to speak within the corpus of surviving Old English poetry. By engaging with this characteristic in a martial riddle from the Exeter Book, I will explore the surprising contribution Old English riddles can make to questions of social justice.

The Exeter Book riddles are a sequence of short enigmatic poems in Old English, preserved in three blocks in Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fols. 8–130. An appealing and accessible edition, translation, and commentary is provided on the website *The Riddle Ages* (Cavell 2020), while scholarly editions of the riddles abound.<sup>1</sup> I will draw here from the text of Muir 2000, who edits the complete series of Exeter Book poems, using the riddle numbering made conventional by the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records and *The Riddle Ages* website.

The Old English riddles of the Exeter Book have been the subject of much outstanding and ingenious scholarship, not least from the honoree of the present collection, John D. Niles. Niles has presented a cogent standard for solving any Old English riddle (Niles 1998) and has provided a useful compendium of credible solutions in the riddles' own language of Old English (Niles 2006, chp. 4). Niles's recent study reading the Exeter Book as a whole provides a context for any reading of poems within the collection (Niles 2019). In addition, much of Niles's scholarship has provided a model for interpreting Old English poetry in relation to the surviving material record (see, inter alia, Niles 1980, 2007), and the present essay will build on such exemplary methodology.

One distinctive feature of a sequence of the Exeter Book riddles has been termed by Neville 2011 as the implement trope, where “the interaction between a human and an inanimate object (often a tool) is described metaphorically as a relationship between



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a lord and a servant or thegn,” and which thereby reveals “the foundational principles of a hierarchical society.”<sup>2</sup> Neville sees such riddles as ultimately exposing the lack of reciprocity in such hierarchical relationships, but she holds back from suggesting that such riddles present an enduring critique. I want to go further in this essay, suggesting that the deployment of humor in animating a subservient object creates sympathy for the downtrodden user of that object in a way that inverts hierarchies and enables a powerful and lasting social message.

While this essay will center on Riddle 5, a similar technique is evident in a number of martial riddles.<sup>3</sup> Riddle 23, for example, describes with a certain pride the deadly work of a manifestly dangerous *wrætlic wihl* (wondrous being, line 2a). This riddle has a clear solution since “bow” is lightly anagrammatized in the opening line,<sup>4</sup> but its wonder is to draw the audience into sympathy with a speaking subject that is usually merely an object, and one that can boast about how it is highly skilled, even as it is also deadly. The riddle closes with a paradox:

Nelle ic unbunden      ænigum hyran

nymþe searosæled.

(Riddle 23, lines 15–16a)

Unbound I will not obey any, unless skillfully tied up.

This suggests that the serving and speaking subject has some choice over the matter of obedience and contains an implied threat by the speaker of insubordination if treated wrongly, despite the expectation, or even necessity, of constraints. Cavell (2016, pp. 179–84) shows how the binding here paradoxically suggests both hostile bondage and cleverness and artistic skill, while Boryśławski (2004, p. 137) hints at the carnivalesque power of such a paradox to invert hierarchies. Through the paradox, the bow gets to articulate both a self-confident claim to its own agency and artisanal mastery and a making visible of the repressive hierarchical structure dependent on a threat of physical binding. In the inevitable slippage from the impossible-and-therefore-comic non-human agent to the adjacent non-elite human, the archer who uses a bow is given a voice to point to the repressive nature of the structures of a military hierarchy, even as he claims agency and mastery of a craft. What appears to be a playful obfuscation of a military weapon, made manifest through an easy linguistic trick, turns out to empower a rarely heeded foot-soldier who gets to make his own bid for sympathy.

The sword of Riddle 20 is even more clearly and cleverly self-confident about his abilities and picky about his service, even as this high-status weapon so clearly collocates with the elite male who wielded this object that I do not want to pursue it here, except to suggest that the same characteristics are probably visible in the fragmentary Riddle 71 (possibly another sword, possibly a spear, possibly something else completely), where the self-confident speaking subject, the red-clothed possession of a powerful one (“rices æht, reade bewæfed,” line 1), sometimes causes a person who carries gold to weep “for minum gripe” (6a, “on account of my grip or attack”).<sup>5</sup> Because of the fragmentary nature of the text, it is not clear if the implement is imagining the grief of a person engaged with the business end of this tool (in which case the red clothing of line 1b is presumably the victim’s blood) or the one holding the grip (in which case the red clothing is probably gold, adorning either the implement or the “[g]o[ld]dryhtne min . . . ,” if that is what is concealed in the lacunae of line 9), with a resulting suggestion that the implement’s skills are paradoxically unsatisfying for the user.<sup>6</sup> This is another object claiming agency by boasting of its deadly skill and probably establishing a critique of the one it serves in the process.

The attitude I am suggesting for these riddles is most clearly visible in a non-martial example, the wondrous Riddle 21 (plough), which ends:

Fealleþ on sidan

þæt ic toþum tere,      gif me teala þenap

hindewardre,      þæt biþ hlaford min.

(Riddle 21, lines 13b–15)

What I tear with my teeth falls onto the side,  
if he serves me well from behind, that one who is my lord.

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The downward-turned nuzzler of the earth accomplishes fecund success if the human who imagines himself in command (hlaford min) but who occupies the hindmost position and who is earlier described as the improbable “weard æt steorte” (line 4b, the guardian at the tail) is not, in fact, in a position of independent control but rather “me teala þenap” (14b, serves me in a satisfactory manner). By voicing such an attitude, the subservient subjects of these riddles revel in their own craft skills and undercut their masters, hinting at both the brutality and the ineffectualness of top-down control.

## 2. Riddle 5

To clarify that claim, I will focus on the example of Riddle 5 and suggest that the two most-favored solutions each demonstrates the rich resonance between non-human and non-elite agency and that there is added power in viewing the two interpretations in tandem. In both readings, giving voice to the wonders of an object gives voice, in turn, to a non-elite member of society, and both readings present a criticism of the neglect of those at the bottom of society. The two readings combine to suggest a particularly effective critique of unthinking hierarchy.

The riddle in its entirety reads as follows:

Ic eom anhaga      iserne wund,  
bille gebennad,      beadoweorca sæd,  
ecgum werig.      Oft ic wig seo,  
frecne feohtan.      Frofre ne wene,  
þæt mec geoc cyme      guðgewinnes,      5  
ær ic mid ældum      eal forwurðe,  
ac mec hnossiað      homera lafe,  
heardecg heoroscearp,      [h]ondweorc smiþa,  
bitað in burgum;      ic abidan sceal  
laþran gemotes.      Næfre læcecynn      10  
on folcstede      findan meahte,  
þara þe mid wyrtrum      wunde gehælde,  
ac me ecga dolg      eacen weorðað  
þurh deaðslege      dagum ond nihtum.<sup>7</sup>

I am a solitary being, wounded by iron,  
damaged by a sword, tired of battle-deeds,  
wearied by edges.      I often see battle,  
a fierce fight.      I do not expect comfort,  
that any help may come to me in the battle strife,

before I completely perish among people [*or* in the flames],  
 but the leavings of hammers beat me,  
 the terribly-sharp hard-edged ones, the handiwork of smiths,  
 they bite me in the strongholds; I must await  
 a more hostile meeting. I have not ever been able to find  
 in the places of people one of the clan of doctors,  
 one of those who would heal my wounds with herbs,  
 but the injuries of the edges have increased on me  
 through death-blows by day and night.

In the opening, the speaker refers to being wounded by iron, damaged by a sword, wearied by edges, in the context of battle-deeds, and in lines 7–9a to being beaten and bitten by the leavings of hammers, terribly-sharp hard-edged ones, the handiwork of smiths (periphrases that build up the crafted stature of an attacking weapon)—all conjuring a defensive posture in a battle context. The subsequent description emphasizes the lack of doctoring and so suggests the speaker gets destroyed with use and ultimately discarded rather than repaired. This has suggested to many modern critics the solution “shield,” a solution neatly laid out by Williamson (1977, pp. 146–48). If it is a shield, we should not be thinking of an elite example like that of Sutton Hoo,<sup>8</sup> where the high-status weaponry serves as an enduring metonymy for the high-status individual buried in such style but rather the more humble quotidian examples. These would be circular shields, made of light woods with a metal boss, strap, and some sort of reinforcement around the rim, which survive in furnished graves, and which are well illustrated in later manuscripts.<sup>9</sup> Possible confirmation for this solution comes in the s-rune at the end of the text, which some critics have seen as standing for the Old English word *scyld* (shield), although others have seen this as a clue to an answer in Latin (*scūtum*), or as referring to the following riddle, which is generally solved as *sigel* (sun).<sup>10</sup> An equally possible shout out for this sense of Riddle 5 is the Old English word *bord*, a frequent term for shield in poetry.<sup>11</sup>

In reading this riddle as describing a shield, the riddling wonder comes from the prosopopoeia that gives voice and a hint of agency to a material object. That object, now as subject, expresses a certain attitude: on the one hand, of pride in doing a job well (note the *oft* of line 3b); on the other hand, of a certain injustice:

Frofre ne wene,  
 Pæt mec geoc cyme      guðgewinnes,      5  
 ær ic mid ældum      eal forwurðe,  
 I do not expect comfort,  
 that any help may come to me in the battle strife,  
 before I completely perish among people [*or* in the flames].<sup>12</sup>  
 (lines 4b–6)

This complaint gets spelled out at more length in the concern about doctoring in lines 10b–12:

Næfre læcecynn      10  
 on folcstede      findan meahte,  
 para þe mid wirtum      wunde gehælde,  
 I have not ever been able to find  
 in the places of people one of the clan of doctors,  
 one of those who would heal my wounds with herbs.

The paradox, as Williamson explains (1977, p. 147), is that the riddle subject is more enduring in battle than expected of a person, and so it is an object that cannot be easily killed, but it will still finally be discarded, and so it is an object that cannot be easily cured.

A reading of “shield” may have added resonances within a Christian culture. Salvador-Bello points to the image of the shield of faith, popular from Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians (6:16), to motivate a reading of the shield as a possible allegory, matching a reading of the subsequent riddle’s description of “the sun” as another Christian allegory (Salvador-Bello 2015, p. 300). The ultimate destruction of the shield in the riddle might call to mind Psalms 45:10, where the Lord is imagined as ultimately destroying weapons of war, “and the shield he shall burn in the fire.”<sup>13</sup> This particular shield, though, seems both proud of its enduring resilience and yet resentful of the ingratitude shown to it, despite all its abilities, and so more likely projects a secular context.

A speaking implement conjures up a human behind the object, in this case, the warrior carrying the shield. Such a soldier presumably *could* receive the doctoring ministrations of the leechy-clan—but likely did not. And so, a lowly object complaining at the prospect of being discarded conjures up a lowly human making the same complaint. The ghostly presence of a non-elite shield-bearer complaining of his fate as sword-fodder gives a spectral voice and sympathy to the member of a group not usually represented in surviving heroic literature, in stark contrast with the imagined eagerness of the loyal fighters at Maldon to fight to the death as portrayed in *The Battle of Maldon*.<sup>14</sup> A riddle about disposable boards of wood carries more punch as a riddle about disposable people, the foot-soldiers crucial to early medieval battle formation, who are not usually given such realistic voice and the opportunity to object to their fate.

Such possibilities are enriched by considering an alternative solution that calls for a more metaphorical interpretation of the clues, namely that they add up to a cutting board or chopping block, a reading ably presented by Pinsker and Ziegler in their edition (Pinsker and Ziegler 1985, pp. 155–56) and described by Neville (2007, pp. 131–33) and others. As Olsen (2020) demonstrates, this takes the same inputs as the shield solution but performs their conceptual blending in a domestic rather than a martial space. In reading the speaking object as a chopping board, the attacking sword and edges are metaphors for meat-cleavers or paring knives, used in the metaphorical battle of daily food preparation, which is here built up in mock-heroic terms. As with the shield, the wounds are the scars and fractures left from such use, and the lack of doctoring reflects the low status of the implement receiving such cuts, which, for all its durability, will ultimately be discarded. Riedinger (2004, pp. 33–34) gives additional support for such a reading by pointing to the emphasis on the edges of the attacking pieces, while Tigges (1994, pp. 100–1) suggests the duality of the *wyrtum*, which could be vegetables chopped in the kitchen for culinary use or the herbs of healing remedies. Riedinger also shows how the playfulness works at the level of technique, since the resonances of the formulas mislead an audience to think in the martial terms of heroic poetry. The final half-line makes better sense with this solution, since food preparation would likely occur both in hours of light and dark, whereas battles tended to pause for the period of darkness (as seen, for example, in the events around Ravenswood in *Beowulf*<sup>15</sup>).

The low-status versions of such domestic supports are unlikely to survive, since a cutting board or chopping block used in the kitchen would have been readily discarded. The manuscript containing this riddle may itself have served the function, most likely in the scriptorium, in view of the pattern of damage on the opening pages of the Exeter Book.<sup>16</sup> More normally, though, a chopping block was probably made of wood, and as such it would probably have been called a *bord*, which is the prosaic word for a plank or board of wood, as well as the poetic word for a shield.<sup>17</sup>

A speaking cutting board conjures up one who uses a cutting board almost as much as a speaking shield conjures up one who uses a shield, although the transference is less straightforward since the contiguous human is probably doing the chopping and hence the wielder of all those edges rather than the target. Nevertheless, it is an obvious metonymy to



associate a lowly kitchen implement with a lowly kitchen worker. Later medieval romances are full of the mistreatment of such scullery workers—usually in surviving stories a hero incognito who gets buffeted and beaten as the cook’s assistant, such as Havelok the Dane in his humble phase or Sir Gareth as the Fair Unknown with the Fair Hands in the kitchen.<sup>18</sup> When not a hero in disguise, such a modest figure might well not expect comfort or help from the clan of doctors for all that effort expended by day and by night on the fundamental work of food preparation.

### 3. Conclusions

Riddle 5, then, conjures up two pairs of doubled readings—shield and (lowly) soldier and cutting board and (lowly) kitchen hand—all animated by the clues and by a potential solution as OE *bord*.<sup>19</sup> These two solutions overlap in a surprisingly practical way in a representation of the Norman Conquest in the Bayeux Tapestry, where shields serve as possible cutting boards set up as improvised trestle tables for a feast organized by William’s invasion force.<sup>20</sup> I want to bring the two doubled readings together to emphasize the power of their social critique.

In the martial reading, a material object, a shield, becomes a subject not because it has the expressive skills of language but because it is unable to get the doctoring it needs, its only agency is to perform its allotted task with skill and to complain, thereby matching a later foot-soldier-servant, Thersites in Shakespeare’s retelling of *Troilus and Cressida*, with his lament about his master: “He beats me, and I rail at him. O worthy satisfaction! Would it were otherwise: that I could beat him, whilst he rail’d at me.” (*Troilus and Cressida*, Act 2, scene 3). Presenting a speaking/feeling/complaining shield is funny because wood and metal do not do those things, and the humor briefly empowers a non-elite human who thereby gets on the poetic record to speak, feel, and complain. To the extent that the speaker elicits the audience’s sympathy, the riddle crafts a critique of the disposable nature of such a non-elite foot-soldier.

Something similar happens with the kitchen reading. Here the cutting board gets to make the complaint and thereby to elevate the status of the lowliest of scullery activities—the chopping up of the produce for the cooking process<sup>21</sup>—by lamenting the disposable nature of the piece of wood at the base of such quotidian but fundamental activity. The presentation is comic both because an inanimate object is getting to speak, feel, and complain and because a humble object elevates its status by portraying itself in mock-heroic terms. But, as the audience knows, chopping boards cannot speak, feel, and complain—it is the food preparer, the kitchen hand, the scullery-person who has a vocal apparatus and a sensitive body and a mind, even if that lowly individual never gets the opportunity to speak out in the surviving early medieval record. The scullery-hand here gets to ask for sympathy at being so easily cast aside in a critique that perhaps can be the more readily heard by an elite audience of poetry listeners because of the playful framing and presentation through humor.

The resonances between these two readings play on in many ways. I am suggesting that Riddle 5 is not just a shield, although it is that, but also a chopping board, and it is not just shield and chopping board, but also the foot-soldier and kitchen-worker who use those implements. And the paradoxes are not just that soldiers kill people while cooks feed people (even as soldiering gets treated to a higher level of discourse than cookery); not just that a single speaking voice may be occupying two differently gendered positions (if an early medieval soldier is likely to be male and a food chopper is likely to be female); not just that lowly people are like the objects that they work with (an idea present in many of the implement riddles); not just that such lowly humans may feel as cast aside as disposable objects (although that is a powerfully skewering critique)—but, rather, that riddles enable the speaking of the otherwise unsayable and that their indirection makes direct critique possible, and their humor enables the broaching of serious issues.

Niles’s reading of the Exeter Book as a whole plays up the community-building inclusivity of the Christian themes that run through the sequence of poems (Niles 2019,

chp. 7, and passim). In an earlier reading of a single poem within the collection, Niles brings to life the power afforded the otherwise-disempowered female persona of *The Wife's Lament* through her ability to curse (Niles 2003). The present essay is in harmony with such readings as I am suggesting the power of humor in these riddles to give voice to the least privileged in society. A society of disposable people is a problem at any time, but texts that can skewer the issue—edgy humor that can show the danger of edges—is a contribution that riddles can make that suggests such modest poems are always worth further discussion.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> (Williamson 1977) is an exceptionally useful edition, albeit using slightly different riddle numbers, while the most recent edition and translation is Orchard (2021). Translations from Old English in this essay are my own. A version of this essay was delivered at the International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England 2021 conference, with thanks to the organizers and audience.
- <sup>2</sup> (Neville 2011, pp. 506, 508); Neville includes Riddles 23 and 73 in her grouping, but not Riddle 5.
- <sup>3</sup> These were examined as a group by (Irving 1994) and (Stanley 1995), and my reading picks up on the insight of the former, in particular.
- <sup>4</sup> (Rudolf 2012) sees the misspelling *agof* for *agob* = *boga* as a deliberate obfuscatory archaizing and sees the form of the opening letter in the manuscript as suggestive of a bow, thereby making less arbitrary the connection between sign and thing.
- <sup>5</sup> DOE, s.v. *gripe*, suggests “attack” for this usage, but “grip, grasp” for the word more generally. (DOE, forthcoming)
- <sup>6</sup> The hint of sexual braggadocio in line 2 also aligns with sword of Riddle 20.
- <sup>7</sup> (Muir 2000, I: p. 290), but emending line 8b alongside other editors to restore alliteration and sense.
- <sup>8</sup> Illustrated by the British Museum (British Museum n.d.).
- <sup>9</sup> See, for example, the fighting personifications in the Illustrated Prudentius: British Library, Cotton MS, Cleopatra C. viii, fol. 18v, freely available among the British Library’s Digitised Manuscripts (British Library n.d.), or the exploits of the Nine Kings in the Illustrated Hexateuch, British Library, Cotton MS, Claudius B. iv, fol. 24v, [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton\\_ms\\_claudius\\_b\\_iv\\_f024v](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_claudius_b_iv_f024v) (last accessed 20 December 2021). On shields, see (Dickinson and Härke 1992) and (Owen-Crocker 2011, pp. 215–18).
- <sup>10</sup> (Niles 2006) gives *scyld* for Riddle 5 and *sigel* for Riddle 6.
- <sup>11</sup> DOE s.v. *bord*, sense 1 “shield, buckler (in poetry).” (DOE, forthcoming)
- <sup>12</sup> The form *ældum* in line 6a could be a spelling of *ylдум* (people) or of *æled* (flame).
- <sup>13</sup> My thanks to Dieter Bitterli and Max Ashton for pointing to that connection at the ISSEME conference.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Battle of Maldon*, lines 255–59, does give voice to the “unorne ceorl” (humble freeman) Dunnere, but only to ventriloquize the elite ideology of dying for his lord.
- <sup>15</sup> *Beowulf*, lines 2922–98; see (Fulk et al. 2008, pp. 260–61). Night-time violence might be less likely to feature a shield.
- <sup>16</sup> Exeter Book, fol. 8r. See the digital images in (Muir 2006).
- <sup>17</sup> DOE s.v. *bord* has “table” as sense 3 and “wood, plank, board” as sense 4. (Murphy 2011, pp. 68–70) also builds up the punning solution, *bord*. (DOE, forthcoming)
- <sup>18</sup> *Havelok the Dane* is ed. (Herzman et al. 1997); “The Tale of Sir Gareth” constitutes Book IV (or Book VII in Caxton’s organization) of Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*.
- <sup>19</sup> Less convincing as a possible solution, in my opinion, is “whetstone” as suggested by (Sayers 1996) as this moves to high-status martial overtones.
- <sup>20</sup> Scene 42–43 on the Official Bayeux Tapestry Digital Representation (Bayeux Museum n.d.).
- <sup>21</sup> Much cooking involved boiling multiple ingredients, presumably chopped up, in a pot; see (Banham 2004).

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