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Extracting from Exeter:

Contextualizing the Contents of the Exeter Book

The clouded window through which we access the distant past continues to diminish with the passage of time. The remaining manuscripts containing Old English texts are limited and often fragmentary; they must be examined with utmost scrutiny to allow us a glimpse at the foundations of our language. One of the most important resources that we have for researching Old English is the codex known as the Exeter Book. In this essay, I will discuss the significance of the Exeter Book in relation to our understanding of Old English and the people who spoke it. I will briefly explore the history and contents of the Exeter Book, and I will analyze selections from it to demonstrate how it can provide insight into the experiences of life and suffering shared by the speakers of Old English. Through analysis, these works offer contextual clues for their cultural moment.

The precise origins of the Exeter Book have long been debated. Most scholars agree that the first record of it appears in an inventory written around 1070 that describes items bequeathed to the Exeter Cathedral by a bishop named Leofric. It is described in this inventory as "i mycel Englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisum geworht" (Gameson 135-136). This roughly translates as "a big English book with each thing made in a poetic/lyrical manner"[1]. The contents

[1] Translations without citation have been provided by this essay's author; translation resources that were utilized will be acknowledged in the Works Consulted. These created translations are a composite of definitions compiled through the consulted references in conjunction with knowledge of Old English grammar and conventions.

of the Exeter Book, however, indicate that it was written some time in the century prior to the Cathedral's acquisition, likely between 960 and 990 (Gameson 166). Contextually, these estimates would place England under the rule of King Edgar, King Edward the Martyr, or King Æthelred (Britannica). Following extensive damage at the hands of Scandinavian raiders, Danelaw was established at the end of the ninth century as a means to peacefully disengage from these invaders. Further attacks would follow into and throughout the tenth century, bringing with it significant Old Norse influences. These tumultuous circumstances, considered in tandem with the Christian roots that had been planted at the end of the sixth century (Smith 117, 155-159), largely inform the works in the Exeter Book.

The Exeter Book is the largest surviving resource of Old English verse. It contains dozens of poems of varying lengths; some can be traced to Latin sources, but others are Anglo-Saxon in origin. Most famously, it also contains a wealth of poetic riddles not found anywhere else in Old English texts ("Exeter"). The significance of this collection cannot be overstated, as it provides numerous examples of rhetorical devices and conventions employed by poets contemporary to the work (Nelson 424). Additionally, the way that language is used may allow us to consider the thoughts and perspectives of those who used it.

From an anthropological perspective, language can provide insight into a culture. The theory of linguistic relativity proposes that culture and thought are negotiated through language (Sandoval). Thus, the study of a specific language can, to an extent, supply an understanding of a specific peoples' worldview and shared experiences. A conceptual inventory can be collected with thorough study. When examined as a whole, the Exeter Book provides work from multiple sources which may be cross-referenced to carefully construct a deeper vision of the context in which it was created.

The riddles of the Exeter Book have long captivated linguists. They are presented without answers, thus the challenge that they put forth is twofold: translation and their subsequent solving. However, Jennifer Neville notes that they yield substance beyond wordplay, expounding, "[A]n insistent focus on the literal meaning of these texts can reveal something arguably more important than solutions: social norms and expectations" (507). Rather than deciphering the metaphors of the riddle, we can recognize the significance of metaphor itself. In order for the solutions to these riddles to be truly 'puzzling', their contemporary audience must first have a frame of reference with which the description becomes conflated (Neville 506). In this way, the riddles afford us valuable clues about circumstances surrounding daily life and conventions.

If we consider the riddles in conjunction with a selection of poetry from the Exeter Book, motifs about the cycle of life appear and recur. Dr. Harriet Soper's riddle-related work on the use of the verbs that signify the beginning of a life (*cennan* and *acennan)* demonstrates the versatility of their meaning throughout the riddles. Not only are they used to describe conception, but they can also refer to the state of pregnancy as well as the birthing process (Soper 847). When this is considered alongside descriptions of the early life stage in Riddles 9, 10, 38, 60, and 77, Soper's research shows an emerging theme. The beginning of life is illustrated as a "gradual, ongoing development, often within an atmosphere of nurture, feeding, and growth" (Soper 852). The next stage of life, then, is marked by change.

Reaching adulthood is often represented by a literal or metaphorical journey. A life is usually prescribed a purpose upon reaching maturity. Descriptions of fulfilling one's duty tend to convey suffering endured or challenges encountered (Soper 853-856). As the riddles' subjects age, the final stage of life is approached. Both *frod*, literally meaning "old; mature; wise" and

eald, defined as "old; ancient; senior", are used to describe various objects or characters. The riddles in which these terms appear, according to Soper, have a tone of "diversity, wide-ranging experience, and enhanced perspective" (862). This model that Soper proposes for discussing adulthood and aging can be observed in Riddle 5, also sometimes referred to by its solution, "A Shield" (Baker 224). A translation of it reads:

I am a solitary one iron-wounded
sword-wounded weary [of] the work of battles
weary [of] edges. Often I see battle,
dangerous fighting. I expect no help,
that no help will come to me in the strife of battle,
before I, among men, perish entirely,
but the remainders of hammers strike me,
hard-edged and sword-sharp, the work of blacksmiths
bites in the fortresses; I must experience
a more hateful encounter. A physician never
in battlefield was able to find me,
whose herbs healed wounds,
but my wounds from swords become greater
through death-blows day and night.[2]

The stages of the object's life are denoted by the mixing of tenses. It recognizes its past in line two with the past participle *gebennod*, translated as "wounded", as well as through the verb *meahte* translated as "was able to". It speaks in the present tense throughout the riddle, even in

[2] The original Old English text in line 14 reads *dagum ond nihtum*, which signifies plurality; the above translation relies on the implied plural in the modern-day idiomatic expression "day and night".

the first line with *eom* ("am"); this signifies its current, living state. Finally, it anticipates the future in the last lines. The shield expects death to come for it as its wounds become more and more significant.

In relation to Soper's analyses, Riddle 5 connects to both adulthood and the end of life. The recounting of its injuries as a result of serving its purpose relates to the broader theme exhibited throughout the riddles in which work or occupational language is associated with obligation and hardship (Soper 860). After the object miserably recounts the labors of its life, it seems to conclude that it is not long for this world. The anticipation of death, then, sets this piece in a reflective mindset; its age is related to the aforementioned tone of experience found in Soper's research.

I propose that this life cycle idea of a nurtured beginning, laborious midlife, and reflective elder can also be found in other poetry throughout the Exeter Book. One piece, usually referred to as *The Fortunes of Men* (Neidorf 97), follows this pattern in the first stanza:

Full often that it happens with God's might,
that man and wife into the world bear
a child with origins and with colorful dress,
` "they tame and teach" (O'Camb 256)[3] until that time comes,
5 overrun with years that then the boy's limbs
become grown, jointed and hearty.
Father and mother, having carried and taught to walk,
Given all and prepared him. God alone knows

[3] The original text here uses the words 'tennaþ' and 'tætaþ' which are not found elsewhere in the known Old English lexicon; this translation borrows one researcher's hypothesized correction based off of the assumption of a mistranscribed 'temiaþ' and 'tæcaþ'.

What growth awaits, what the winter will bring.

As Soper noted in the riddles, entrance into the world is signaled with *cennað* (a conjugation of the verb *cennan*), translated here as "bear" in line 2. The idea of that verb encompassing all that comes between conception through birth itself is strengthened by the mention of man and wife as jointly responsible for the child. Its development, then, is also thoughtfully measured.

Several words are used to signal that process of maturing over the course of childhood. Lines 5 through 8 signify a slow and nurtured growth; a great deal of emphasis is placed on the work that went into raising the boy. We can consider, too, the way that the father and mother are mentioned twice to bookend the child's maturation. This attention paid to the parents is further indicative of adulthood's associations with obligation and exertion.

Another aspect of the Exeter Book that can be explored is the way in which it portrays sorrow as an inevitability of growth. A common recurrence in these works is violence or hardship in conjunction with helplessness, much like we saw in the Shield anticipating further battle but being unable to prevent it from happening. One such example is found in the following passage in lines 10-14 of the above poem, *The Fortunes of Men*:

Sometimes it happens that in youth
man's hardship ends,
becomes woeful. The wolf shall eat him,
the grey health-stalker; that death
the mother laments. None such a thing is under man's control!

After the careful nurturing process to care for the child, nature still consumes him. In this way, we can consider the emphasis that Soper noted is placed on child-rearing. Clearly, these were dangerous and difficult circumstances for bringing life into the world. The tragedy of the child's

death is compounded with the labor spent on raising him. The work also demonstrates a sense of fate when it comes to these tragic events, as seen in line 14, which will be discussed later.

We can find further instances of tragedy in conjunction with the contemplation in old age that Soper describes. One clear example comes from another poem of the Exeter Book. The piece *Deor* makes several references to Germanic folktales. Each stanza describes a gruesome, disturbing myth and is concluded with the following phrase: "Þæs ofereode, / þisses swa mæg" (Smith 160). This has been translated in a number of ways, but it is generally agreed that it signifies a form of, "That ended, / so may this." The very last stanza of the poem turns inward and uses the first-person to describe the poet's life. He declares to the audience "þæt ic hwile wæs/ Heodeninga scop" (Smith 161); this means, "[T]hat for a while I was / the poet of the Heodenings" (Smith 161). The past-tense *wæs* signals a changed state in his adulthood; he proceeds to describe being replaced in his position by "leoðcræftig monn" (McGillivray), which refers to a poetically artistic man. The poem then concludes with the prior refrain – "That ended, / so may this."

While *Deor* differs from the riddles that Soper explored in that the poet's age is not directly referenced, there is still a pervasive sense of the passage of time throughout the poem. The range of tales described create a mood of history being experienced; then, the poet's life at the conclusion of the poem recontextualizes them as though his own life is becoming part of that history. The refrain that he has chosen emphasizes the wisdom that has been afforded to him as a result of his experiences; in this way, it aligns with Soper's analysis of advanced age being equated with reflection in Old English literature.

Reflecting on these tragic moments and times is a recurring motif in the elegy poems of the Exeter Book (Bintley). *The Wanderer,* for instance, features a warrior who has lost all of those close to him in the ravages of war. In lines 8-11, he recounts:

> Often I [have] had to, alone, each dawn
> lament my sorrows. No one is alive now
> [with] whom I dare express
> my soul.[4]

As the poem goes on, the narrator further ruminates on the conditions in which he exists. It is reminiscent of Soper's elder-object analyses in the riddles; this character, who has endured so much, is recounting the experiences of his life. Lines 106-110 offer this reflection:

> All is full of hardship in the kingdom of earth.
> Destiny overturns fortune [in this] world under heavens.
> Here is treasure transitory, here a friend is temporary,
> Here is man transitory, here kinsmen are temporary[5].
> All this earth's foundation becomes void.

In these lines, the figure seems to emphasize that the suffering he has endured is not unusual; rather, he believes it is an innate quality of life.

As Lászlo Iliásics explains in a piece that closely examines *The Wanderer,* this idea is likely tied to the Anglo-Saxon's pagan belief in *Wyrd,* which is seen as a personification of fate (4). He explains further, "*Wyrd* is a destructive force that carries and sweeps away men in battle .

[4] This translation has been adjusted to suit modern English's subject-verb-object ordering within the poem's original compositional structuring. The original lines 10-11 read "þe ic him mōdsefan mīnne durre / sweotule āsecgan", which more closely translates to "[to] who[m] I him my soul dare / openly tell."

[5] The original text here uses the singular "bið mæg"; this translation uses plurality to convey the solitude which the poem as a whole communicates.

. . *Wyrd* in Old English poetry is usually associated with death and disaster" (Iliásics 4). This concept of fate inextricably coupled with inevitable, relentless suffering harkens back the *Deor* refrain which insists, "That ended, / so may this." In this light, we can consider how pagan beliefs informed the pieces of Anglo-Saxon origin within the Exeter Book.

Relating the hardships of one's life in solitude can also be found in the Exeter Book's *The Seafarer* and *The Wife's Lament* (Weber). Contextually, this literary obsession with grief and sorrow also aligns with the nation's history of being pillaged and plundered. These works attest to the harsh realities – and cruelties – of battle. Sometimes, these pieces offer a brief moment of justification for the pain that they have endured.

Moments of Christian reasoning are also included in many of the works described; they often give purpose to the suffering that occurs. This theme is most heavily featured in *The Fortunes of Men*. As seen in the previous example in lines 10-14, the piece details the many ways in which a person can meet misery or their untimely death. The poem, then, shifts focus halfway through. Lines 58-61 offer this alternative:

Some must in youth by means of God's power
[endure] a miserable journey wasting all,
and in old age blessed become,
dwelling in joyful days and receiving riches

Ultimately, on lines 64-65 the poet acknowledges, "So differently the mighty Lord / around the earth's surface distributes to us all". The piece closes with a prayer of gratitude for God's mercy. The juxtaposition in the piece between the tragedies of life and the grace of God emphasizes the role of fate in one's life.

That specific vision of helplessness due to fate is seen in other pieces that examine suffering. In *Deor,* for example, the forty-two line poem offers a single mention of a higher power on line 32. It reads, "The wise Lord [brings about] change often"[6]; this is all of the justification that is offered for the brutality in the Germanic folklore which the piece describes. Additionally, *The Wanderer* makes references to the Christian God in its introduction and conclusion, as well as an inclusion in line 85 regarding *ælda Scyppend* – the Creator of men. However, scholars have suggested that each of these pieces were pre-existing Anglo-Saxon works merely reframed in a Christian context (Weber). This idea of a recontextualization is strengthened by the inclusion of the concept of *Wyrd* in *The Wanderer;* in line 5, the poem reads "Wyrd bið ful aræd." For this, some translations may offer*, "*Fate is very determined," but in a pagan context, it would state, "*Wyrd* is full resolute" (Iliásics 7). Even *The Fortunes of Men,* which contains some of the most substantial references to a higher power out of the works considered here, has been scrutinized in this way. In a close analysis of the poem, Neidorf mentions that a disconnect between the themes at the beginning and end have led to theories that it was a pagan poem reappropriated by a Christian poet (106). These religious lenses through which suffering was viewed, then, must be considered.

It is important to contemplate the cultural moment that produced the Exeter Book. While its exact origins are not certain, its inclusions of texts translated from Latin manuscripts point to its production in a religious environment. From this, scholars have concluded that the Exeter Book project was undertaken in a monastic institution (O'Camb 255). As Marie Nelson noted in a piece discussing Latin rhetorical devices found in the riddles, scribes of Anglo-Saxon England were "learned men living in a time of the fusion of two cultures" (424-425). These remnants of

[6] The original text here reads "witig dryhten wendeþ geneahhe"; this more literally means "The wise Lord changes often". The translation reflects the broader context to which this phrase applies in the poem.

Anglo-Saxon culture which were preserved in literature were produced in a Christian context (Smith 161). At the same time of their production, the nation was experiencing widespread violence and loss. Additionally, in the middle of the tenth century, the Church of England was reformed; its practices became more unified, and an emphasis was placed on education and art (Hudson). The extent to which these works accurately reflect the religious beliefs of its people during this period is debatable, and ultimately, unknowable. The parallel appearances of both pagan and Christian values throughout the Exeter Book, however, demonstrate a desire to reconcile harsh realities in an ideological context.

There are, of course, limitations to this methodology. The contents of the Exeter Book are extremely diverse, and the interpretations for each piece that it contains are countless. The selections which I have discussed only represent a small section of the collection. To strengthen this study, a wider selection could be examined. While my focus was on pieces that appear Anglo-Saxon in origin, the texts translated from Latin could also be surveyed against their original texts for linguistic disparities. The Exeter Book presents a wealth of information; all it requires in return is methodical interpretation.

In conclusion, the Exeter Book has academic value far beyond the rare literature that it contains. Through close analyses across its varied contents, a picture of life at the time of its creation emerges. We can extract attitudes on childhood, consider the roles of work and obligation, and ultimately reflect on the sorrow of a war-torn nation in the midst of a cultural shift. Furthermore, we can peer through the lenses that brought these people purpose or comfort when they suffered. As the distant past continues to fade, we must utilize every resource at hand to clear the window through which we view it. Þæs ofereode; þisses swa mæg.

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