
A Compound Prose Riddle in Cotton Vitellius E. xviii

Introduction

In contrast with the Latin tradition, Old English riddles were never accompanied by their solutions in the manuscripts, leading scholars to carry on puzzling over some of these thousand-year-old games in philological journals. The riddle printed below is one that lacks a definitive solution. Leaning on a long pedigree of scholarship, Dieter Bitterli has argued that the sequence is in fact made up of two riddles, given that the speaker of (3–4) identifies as female while the speaker of (2) admits to a wife, and same-sex relationships are not normally found in riddles of this period. Bitterli endorsed a common biblical solution to the second, “female” riddle (see if you can guess it yourself).¹ However, the conjunction “and” at (3) forbids a complete separation of the two sequences into distinct riddles. The speaker in a riddle could not so join their riddle to one that happens to precede it in the manuscript; but if we read everything but this one word as quotation, and the linking conjunction as the riddler’s contribution rather than the speaker’s, we may understand the full sequence as a compound riddle with two solutions, likely closely related (which is in fact how Bitterli read it). On the other hand, any solutions that have been proposed rely on a degree of metaphorical interpretation, defeating any

¹“Two Old English Prose Riddles of the Eleventh Century,” in *Words, Words, Words*, ed. Sarah Chevalier and Thomas Honegger, pp. 1–11, at 4.

objections based in gender. If you can come up with a satisfying unified solution yourself, it may well merit publication!

This riddle is a good occasion to reacquaint yourself with the noun class for “nouns of relationship,” called minor class 2 in Campbell and class 6 in *DOE*.

Manuscript

London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius E. xviii, fol. 16v (s. x1 med, unique).

Text

(1) Þu þe færst on þone weg, gret ðu minne broðor, minre modor ceorl, (2) þone acende min agen wif; (3) and ic wæs mines broðor dohtor, (4) and ic eom mines fæder modor geworden, (5) and mine bearn syndon geworden mines fæder modor.