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THE SPEAKER IN THE HUSBAND'S MESSAGE

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The Old English poem The Husband's Message (hereafter HM) presents a variety of problems for editors and critics. Many of these stem from the fact that the one surviving manuscript of the poem - the Exeter Book - has suffered damage, with the result that parts of the text of HM are irrevocably lost. A further complication is that the group of verses which precedes HM in the manuscript, usually defined as Riddle 60 by editors, is held by some to be part of the same poem as HM. The scribe's presentation of his work is not decisive one way or the other, and we cannot be sure that the missing portions of HM did not provide evidence relevant to the problem. Among questions of interpretation, one of the chief difficulties has been the identity of the speaker of the poem. Some have taken this to be a human envoy whose mission is to convey and present a rune-staff (the inscription on which is given in lines 50-51 of the poem) sent by a man to his wife or beloved from whom he has been separated; others take the entire poem as a prosopopoeic utterance of the rune-staff itself. This question, too, is affected by the fact that the first of the two main damaged sections of the text (lines 2-7) forms a large part of the passage (1-12) in which the speaker introduces himself. This essay will reconsider the various objections that have been raised to the theory that the speaker is a rune-staff, and suggest some new answers to them in the course of a reinterpretation of the poem.

As the meaning of the damaged opening of the text has a bearing on the nature of the speaker, it will be useful to begin with a re-examination of it. Leslie's arrangement, in his edition, of the surviving words and letters in verse-lines 2-7 tries to take account of the size of the gaps in the manuscript in estimating the amount of text we have lost. There is, of course, room for disagreement about the amount and meaning of the original material represented by the larger lacunae; but where the gap is small, as in the first MS line of the poem, the possibilities are limited, and the character of the surrounding text limits them further. Leslie's text of verse-lines 1-3 is as follows:

Nu ic onsundran ðe secgan wille
........ (n) treocyn. Ic tudre aweox;
in mec ald[a] ...........sceal

The final a of ald is purely editorial; the n preceding treocyn is little more than a guess; dots represent the approximate number of lost letters. A hole in the margin after treocyn creates the
possibility of an original inflected form such as treocynne; and so the word is best quoted as treocyn(-). The editors of the facsimile edition are more cautious than Leslie in their transcription of the words of Leslie's third line: they underline in and the a of æld to signify that these are damaged letters which are not to be established beyond all doubt from the manuscript.  

The legible text from 1 Nu to wille makes a complete verse-line of normal metrical type, and so Leslie's assumption that the first word in the lacuna was also the first word of verse-line 2 is secure. But it is also clear from the meaning that verse 2a contained a continuation of the sentence begun in 1, and the question arises of where this sentence ends. If one takes verse 2b as part of the same clause as 2a (as those scholars evidently do who place no punctuation after treocyn[-]), it must, I think, be assumed that verse 2a contained an unstressed conjunction at its beginning. But in this case, there is a difficulty about 2b ic. Tudre is clearly the head-stave of the line, forming the first stressed element of 2b; and so it follows that the preceding ic is unstressed. But according to the rule ("Kuhn's law of particles") which governs the relationship between stress and position of personal pronouns (amongst other parts of speech) in verse-clauses, unstressed ic ought to occur in the first dip of the clause, which would in this case be at the beginning of 2a. And so the available evidence seems to point to 2b ic as introducing a new clause which must, given the context, also be a new sentence, as Leslie's text indicates.

This question of the punctuation and meaning of the first two lines of HM has been drawn into the controversy over the identity of the speaker. Greenfield, followed by Anderson, notes that the editorial omission of punctuation after treocyn(-), with its implication that 2b is part of the same clause as this word, accords with the interpretation of the speaker as a personified wooden object, particularly a rune-staff; and it is true that treocyn(-) would probably have to be taken in this case as referring in some way to the ic of lines 1 and 2. But that Leslie's punctuation (in all probability the right one) necessarily implies a human speaker, as Greenfield seems to suggest, cannot be demonstrated from the text as we have it.

Several of the letters at the beginning of verse-line 3 are, as we have mentioned, not clear in the manuscript. Professor Pope has recently made an important contribution to our understanding of the poem by his re-examination of line 3's initial word in the manuscript, Leslie's in. He concludes that what remains of the letter which previous transcribers have read as n looks more like the top of the runic letter wynn. Thus he reads iw, "yew" here; and if he is right, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the speaker is indeed the rune-staff, here referring unmistakably to its own substance. But as iw can probably never be established with certainty as the scribe's intended word, it is still necessary to consider the various stated objections to the rune-staff theory which have arisen largely from undamaged parts of the text; and to these we now turn.

Leslie, in his edition, distinguished four main objections to the rune-staff theory, some of which have been criticized since by
Anderson. These are considered in turn below. As most of them can best be answered in the context of the general interpretation of HN which I shall attempt later, I restrict discussion here to the nature and strength of each objection, and to such parallels in Old English verse as have a possible bearing on their validity.

Leslie's first objection is that the speaker has made frequent voyages (6), which behaviour is "not reconcilable with a particular rune-stave". Anderson, Greenfield and Goldsmith all accept this objection as valid. It is certainly true that the "life" of a rune-staff as a usable object would be limited. But we may note that in the Exeter Book Riddles, objects with a similarly brief life among men, when personified, sometimes lay claim to a breadth of experience impossible for an individual example. One practical justification for this licence is that the experience of a single example of the riddle's solution is too limited to enable the solver to identify it. But a more important justification lies in the nature of the solution, which is generic rather than particular. Thus the solution to Riddle 65, quoted here as the best example of this type of riddle, is properly "The Onion" rather than "An Onion":

\begin{verbatim}
Cwico wes ic, ne cwæð ic wiht, cwele ic efne seþæah.
Ær ic wes, eft ic cwom. Æghwa mec reafæð, hafað mec on headre, ond min heafod scirep,
biteð mec on bær lic, briceð mine wisan.
Monnan ic ne bite, nymþe he me bite;
sindan þara monige þe mec bitæð.
\end{verbatim}

(I was alive and did not speak; all the same I die. I have existed before and have come again. Everybody desploils me, keeps me in confinement and shears my head, bites into my naked body, and breaks my stalk. I do not bite a man unless he bite me. Those who bite me are many.)

Riddle 11 "Beaker of Wine" provides (if this solution is correct) a second example. The possibility that the speaker in HN is also generic in this sense will be considered further below.

Leslie's second objection is that the clause se bisne beam agrof (13b) suggests that speaker and staff are not one and the same. Greenfield suggests that "comparison with certain riddles" might reduce the force of this objection, but that in the light of this and the later verse 31b (see p.46 below), the rune-staff theory "seems strained". Anderson seeks to remove the objection by reference to a particular riddle - the Exeter Book Riddle 35 - and to The Dream of the Rood. The first of these texts is of questionable value for his purpose, however. Riddle 35 is one version of an English translation of Aldhelm's Latin riddle De Lorica; the Leiden Riddle, written in Northumbrian OE, is another. The Leiden Riddle translates the Latin quite closely, whereas Riddle 35 "omits the last two lines as found in the Leiden Riddle (corresponding to the last line of the Latin text), replacing them with a standard riddle formula, 'Saga socowidum . . . hwat þis gewæde sy'". It seems possible that in these final lines we hear, not the personified
mailcoat, but the voice of the translator who, his riddle complete, invites a solution from the reader. The Dream of the Rood contains references by the cross to itself by its own name, in 40 gestah he on gealgan heanne, and 56 Crist was on rode, both verses being represented in the Ruthwell Cross inscription as well as in the Vercelli Book text.\(^{15}\) HM 13b is certainly comparable with these verses from the Dream, though I shall argue below (p. 48) that there may be a special justification for the speaker's naming of itself in this fashion in HM.

Leslie's third objection is that expressions used by the speaker of his master (7 mondryhten min, 10 mines frean, 39 min wine) "indicate a lord and retainer relationship with which the limited and temporary nature of a rune-stave appears incompatible" - an objection echoed by Greenfield who would nonetheless allow that all three expressions are "susceptible of a personification interpretation".\(^{17}\) Anderson, by way of reply, points to Beowulf 457 and 530 as examples of wine used between men in purely temporary relationships.\(^{18}\) He does not discuss the other two expressions because they occur in a part of the poem (1-12) which he would assign to a human messenger who brings the rune-staff to the woman in the poem. But in any case this would seem to be the weakest of Leslie's objections. It is surely pedantic to insist that the convention whereby an artefact may refer to its user as lord or master is appropriate only if the duration of the object's usefulness corresponds with that of a human servant. And it may be noted that in the Exeter Book Riddles, frea (cf. HM 10) is by far the commonest title given by manufactured objects to their users or owners (Riddles 20.2, 24; 44.2; 62.2; 73.8; 91.6; 93.1; 17.5 freo is probably an error for frea). The word mondryhten does not occur in the same kind of context (though dryhtne in Riddle 58.6 is emended by some editors to mondryhtne for metrical reasons).

The fourth and final objection which Leslie raised to the rune-staff theory is that the verb sagde in 31 peesbe he me saegde is "much more appropriate to a human messenger than to a rune-stave whose function is essentially the conveyance of a written message". Greenfield, as we have seen, agrees. Anderson cites Riddle 60.9, where "the verbum dicendi sprecan is used to suggest the conveyance of a written message".\(^{19}\) However, if it is accepted, with Anderson, Leslie and others, that the speaker in this Riddle is a reed made into a pen, the analogy is not at all close. For in HM, sagde would have to be taken as a metaphorical expression for the carving of the runes on the staff by the human inscriber, whereas in Riddle 60 it is the pen itself, not the human writer, which apparently "speaks" by writing. Anderson's second parallel, Riddle 48.4, where cwe6an "suggests the conveyance of a message apparently engraved on a Chrismal or chalice"\(^ {20}\) is similarly inexact.

It was emphasized above (p. 45) that satisfactory replies to Leslie's objections to the rune-staff theory depend on a fresh interpretation of HM as a whole. And so I now return to the poem's opening. Some editorial problems connected with the first two lines formed the starting-point of this investigation. Other problems in them remain. Elliott, followed by Goldsmith, thinks that the use of
Nu and onsundran in 1 "points stylistically to an obvious connection with what immediately precedes", that is, with Riddle 60. But Nu, "Now", is open to a different interpretation. The most appropriate time for a personified rune-staff to speak would be on its receipt as a message. Here we may take it that its tongue, so to speak, is loosened the moment the woman's eyes fall on the runes; hence "Now". There is reason to suppose that the brief message contained in the runes is impenetrable to all but her; thus onsundran, which can mean "especially" in OE, may be taken as a sign that the staff may speak only to her.

The suggestion that the woman's perception of the runes releases the power of speech in the staff brings us to the nature of the speech itself. How is it possible for the staff to speak to the woman beyond its runic message? There are two ways in which this might be explained in terms of its personification. First, there is no reason why a text should not itself be personified so that it may say something about, for example, who wrote it; and this is what happens in the Metrical Preface to the Pastoral Care, in which the text (in dis arendgewrit) speaks in words independent of Gregory's message. We may also note here the speaker's reference to itself as if to a separate object. Second, the runic message is brief - so brief that it seems possible that it is little more than a pre-arranged signal whereby the man may tell the woman that all is well and that she should join him. It is noticeable that the speech contains nothing which the woman could not know or reasonably surmise on this basis; nothing, in particular, about the man's experiences since his exile (36b-40a, 45b-47) which is specific enough to force us to assign it to a human messenger who has recently spoken with his lord. And so the speech may be, not so much an expansion of the runic message, but more an expression of what it was meant to imply to the recipient. More will be said about this possibility below.

Not all of the speech, however, can be accounted for in this way. The portions of lines 1-8a which remain are sufficient to suggest that the speaker here says something of his origins and of his previous travels by sea; and 8b-9a may perhaps imply that the speaker's present mission is in some ways typical of his usual work. The speaker's account of his origins in 2b is in a sense natural enough if the speaker is a rune-staff. Such an object is not a disembodied message but a manufactured, material thing which could, like the personified tools and weapons in the Exeter Book Riddles, be invested with an elaborate "personal" history. However, if the speaker is a staff, why does it feel the need to identify itself at all? We can assume that the woman would be in no doubt about the general nature of the object delivered to her. But there is no explicit reference as far as we can tell, to a rune-staff until 13b se pisne beam agrof. Does the rune-staff theory, then, involve the assumption that lines 1-8a represent the poet's clumsy device for providing the reader with vital information about the speaker which the woman herself, ostensibly addressed here, would have no need of?

A possible answer to this question lies in verse 2b. The range of meaning of tudor in OE means that we may translate this verse either as "I grew up from a child" or as "I grew up from a shoot",
depending on how we envisage the speaker. Goldsmith suggests that "the poet is being deliberately enigmatic" by "choosing a word (tudor) which might fit either a plant or a human being". This in turn suggests the possibility that the poet is consistently enigmatic about the speaker's nature. But this is unlikely in view of the probable reading iw, "yew", in line 3 (see above, p. 44). It is difficult to see how the sequence: iwmec could, in the context, be any other than a clear reference by the speaker to its own material nature. And so a sustained attempt to puzzle the audience in the manner of a riddle can probably be ruled out. Yet the ambiguity of tudre is striking enough to suggest another, related hypothesis: that the poet, though from the first quite unmysterious about the inanimate nature of his speaker, is for some reason pushing the figure of prosopopoeia to the limit by realizing the personification of the object in every way open to him.

A useful preliminary measure of the possibility of reading HM in this way is the degree to which the force of Leslie's objections to the rune-staff theory is reduced by it; for these objections are grounded in passages which, to Leslie and others, particularly suggest the idea of a human speaker. If we can accept, for the sake of argument, that the poet is anxious to exploit every available point of similarity between the rune-staff and the persona most readily suggested by its function - that of a human messenger - then the speaker's description of his frequent travels (Leslie's first objection) which line 6 seems to represent is certainly consistent with his aim. As to the question of similarity, it seems possible that the degree to which the poet cheats here - that is, by presenting a particular rune-staff as participating in the general experience of its kind - might have been regarded by poet and audience alike as fair play in accordance with an accepted riddle convention, exemplified by the Riddles cited above in this connection (p. 45), whereby an object, though as an individual quickly consumed in the natural run of things, becomes heir, once personified, to the accumulated experience of its predecessors. Some support for this view may exist in The Dream of the Rood 87-8: "Iu ic was geworden wita heardost, / Leodum laoost", in which it appears that the true cross arrogates to itself the experience of other, earlier crosses used as gallows. Leslie's second objection, based on 13b se pisne beam agof, is criticized by Anderson, as we have noted (above, p. 45); and it could also be argued that the composite nature of a rune-staff means that it may, as a message, legitimately speak of its own material substance as something distinct, just as a man may speak of his own body. But here, if the speaker is personified as a messenger, there is an evocation of just such a human character showing the staff to the woman. Leslie's third objection, to the speaker's use of words meaning "lord" of its master, was, as we have argued, always the weakest of the four. We need only note the appropriateness of the Riddle parallels already cited if the theory of deliberate elaboration of the staff's personification as a messenger is entertained. The verse which forms the basis of Leslie's fourth objection, 31b paspe he me sagde, similarly presents little difficulty. It certainly suggests a human messenger as speaker if read in isolation; but here the staff may be taken as speaking metaphorically: the aspect of its nature which enables it to "speak" to the woman (I seegan)
also justifies its presentation of the carving of runes upon it as oratio obliqua.

It is now possible to say something about the methods whereby this double characterization of the speaker, which I have suggested is the poet's conscious aim, is achieved. The main technique is obviously ambiguity, particularly the kind of stylized ambiguity best exemplified elsewhere in the Exeter Book Riddles. To give an example, the word frea, "lord", is ambiguous in OE only as an element of an enigmatic personification of an object, where it refers obliquely to its owner, user or maker. In this connection we should also notice HM 2 Ic . . . aweox, which is reminiscent of the openings of Riddles 73 "Spear" (1 Ic on wonge aweox) and 88 "Antler" (1 Ic weox per ic . . .). Perhaps the unique compound ceolbele (9) should be mentioned here. Leslie's gloss is "ship", though the analogy with, for example, wagbeie, "wave-plank", hence "ship", is not exact. A better parallel is Finnsburh Fragment 30 buruhbelu, "castle-floor", literally "castle-plank", which suggests that ceolbele means "ship-plank", so referring to a part of a ship in which a passenger as well as cargo might be carried.

It is necessary at this point to confront the difficult passage 49-51, which incorporates the uncertain manuscript form genyre/gehyre (50) and the runes themselves (50-51). Unlike HM 1-2, but like line 3, these lines are crucial for the question of whether the speaker is the staff or a messenger. Since Kaske's examination of the manuscript under ultra-violet light suggested that genyre, rather than gehyre, is the scribe's form, Goldsmith has re-examined the manuscript and concluded that gehyre is "not positively ruled out" as the true reading. Those who prefer genyre have differed over the meaning of such a word in the context. Kaske's own translation, "constrain" (in the sense of "exhort" rather than "constrict") is, as Greenfield points out, unattested elsewhere in OE as a meaning of genirwan, the verb of which genyre is taken to be the first person singular, present indicative. Greenfield also notes that the commonest sense of genirwan is "crowd together" or "contract", which in his opinion "fits the context beautifully if the runic letters are incised on a piece of wood". His interpretation is that the "probable human speaker is climactically showing his rune-stave and explaining its import to the princess he is addressing". However, as Anderson has shown, that the woman has already seen the staff is indicated by 13b se pisne beam agrof, and genirwan would be a peculiar choice of verb in this case. But in any case it seems incredible that an actual messenger should name the runes to the woman: the whole point of sending a staff is surely that the woman should make something of the runes herself. Anderson, in his second article on the poem, attempts to support the speaker-as-messenger theory of which he had been so critical in his first by taking genyre . . . atsomme offer as a phrasal verb meaning "superimpose"; but there is no support for this meaning of genirwan offer elsewhere in OE, and it seems likely even that line 49, beginning Offer, does not begin a sentence continued by lines 50-51, but is rather the end of the sentence beginning with 44b Nu. A further point against genyre in any sense is that 51 benemnan, if governed by it, would probably have to be taken as an infinitive of purpose: "I crowd together (the runes) in order
to declare". Though this is good modern English, there seem to have been limits on the type of verb which could introduce such an infinitive construction in OE; and in verse we find only verbs of motion and *sellan*.\(^3\)

Given, then, is questionable on grounds of sense and syntax. With *gehyre*, the word which some scholars read in the manuscript, there is no problem with *benemnan*, for the construction can be taken as accusative-with-infinitive of a type well-exemplified in OE, and paralleled in *HM* 22-3 "sippan þu gehyrde . . . galan geomorze geac on bearwe". But if the speaker is human, in what sense might he be said to "hear" the runic message? If it were carved on the staff, there would be no reason to entrust it orally to the bearer. However, if the speaker is the staff itself, "hear" makes sense as a metaphorical reference, like 31 þære he me sæge, to the original act of inscription. The present tense of *gehyre* has never been adequately explained; but it is explicable as a perfective use of the present.\(^3\)

It seems to be generally accepted now that the runes in 50-51 do not together spell a word or name, but that they are to be read in groups as their names. The first and second runes are separated from the later three by the word *geador*, "together", and are accordingly to be joined as *sigel-rad*, "sun-path", i.e. "sky"; the third and fourth runes, separated from the fifth by *ond*, "and", together give *ear-wynn*, probably "lovely earth"; the fifth rune means *mon*, "man". The variety of constructions which has been placed on this basic interpretation makes it unlikely that the runes can provide a safe basis for a general interpretation of *HM*. For the present interpretation, a good deal of their importance lies in their very presence in what is plainly meant to be read as a speech. I have already touched on the absurdity of an image of an actual messenger naming the runes to the woman (above, p. 49): we do not expect the postman to read our letters out to us on the doorstep. A personified rune-staff, on the other hand, may, and perhaps, logically, must, pronounce the runes carved on it as something it has "heard" by word of mouth. It is tempting to suggest that there is a rather abstruse conceit here, based on the paradox of speaking in what is essentially a literary mode. That runes in verse were intended to be named is shown, here and elsewhere, by the fact that the verses in which they appear cannot otherwise be scanned; but in a poetry clearly meant to be read aloud, this is inevitable. The danger, of course, must always have been that the runes would be misunderstood as standing merely for the words by which they were named, and so disappear from the text. In the Exeter Book *Riddles* 42 and 58, the names of the runes have in fact been written out, though context ensures that they are understood as runes, here used to spell the solution of the riddles. Cynewulf may well have felt that there was a danger of his signature disappearing by accident from his own works: in *The Fates of the Apostles* 96-8 he deliberately alerts the audience to the puzzle he is about to set them - a sign, surely, of awareness that recognition of the true nature of runes depends upon the creation of a "silent" visual image in the mind of the hearer. Whatever the poet of *HM* had in mind, there is certainly a very marked contrast between the poetic eloquence of the naturally dumb staff, developed to a point where the audience sometimes
finds itself envisaging a human envoy, and the terseness — one might say, the taciturnity — of the text it bears.\(^{35}\) Critics have identified a number of themes and ideas connected with the relationship between the two human characters in *HM*: fidelity, combined with a slight note of uncertainty on the man's part about the continuing strength, for the woman, of their old promises; and the desolation of past separation and exile reviewed in the light of present prosperity and the hope of reunification. On some of these, the poem's usual classification as "elegy" rests.\(^{36}\) But the interpretation advanced here does not tend to relegate these aspects of the poem to the position of ornamental detail. On the contrary, the rune-staff's eloquence, though almost incredible initially, when the runic passage climactically reveals to the reader the brevity of its text, becomes, in retrospect, a witness to the strength and intimacy of the relationship which its arrival confirms and advances. I have already mentioned the possibility of viewing the speech as a reflection of what is implied by the runic message and the fact of its being sent (p. 47). Two passages will illustrate this. The woman has no need to be told of her lover that "Hine fahbo adraf / of sigebeode" (19b-20a); she will already know it well enough. But it is inevitable that her mind should revert to this time of separation and loss as she gazes at the staff. Her lover's point of view seems to be reflected in 24-5: "Ne lat þu sippan sipes getwafan, /lade gelettan, lifgendne monn"; the sense of urgency is unmistakably his, but is in any case implicit in the very sending of the staff. The speech may be read as being in the nature of what usually exists between the lines of a brief letter or postcard between old friends or lovers.\(^{37}\)

It will be clear that the interpretation offered here implies a closer relationship between *HM* and the riddle genre than most recent critics have been willing to allow. But it is scarcely surprising that the old view that *HM* is itself a riddle has found no recent champion.\(^{38}\) A riddle merely disguises its solution with a veil of personification which the solver is invited, though not always explicitly, to penetrate. But in *HM*, according to the present interpretation, the equivalent of a riddle's solution is not, apparently, disguised, while the personification of the object is developed to such a point as to suggest almost supernatural powers of communication in the staff and its runes — powers which mirror the firmness of the bond (12 *tirfaste treowe*) between sender and recipient which reaches ofer heah h[a fu (8) and is unweakened by feud, exile and time. No source or close analogue for *HM* has yet come to light, and so the history of the poem's form is a matter for speculation. It is perhaps worth noting a tendency, in certain of the OE Riddles in which the speaker is a personified object, to elaborate the presentation of the person beyond the requirements of the solver. A good example is *Riddle 93* "Inkhorn", in which the object, personified as a warrior, presents its carving by man as a brutal attack (18 *bennade, 24 biton*) with weapons (17-18 *iern . . . brun, 20 *stigecg style*) which the bloodless warrior (18 *blod ut ne com*) endures heroically (20b-21a *No ic ba stunde bemearn, /ne for wunde weop*), though revenge is denied him (21b-22 *ne wrecan meahte/ on wigan foere wonnsceafte mine*). The effect here is that
concentration on the problem of solution wavers as one becomes absorbed in the dramatic situation of the persona, as if the speaker were human. It seems possible that the N W poet drew some inspiration from this kind of effect in riddles to put the enigmatic style to a fresh and memorable purpose.39


Pope ("Palaeography and poetry", p.45) rules out any word beginning with a letter with ascender immediately after l wille: "Enough parchment remains where the first letter would have occurred to have preserved the upper portion of b, h or l", see further footnote 7 below.

See Hans Kuhn, "Zur Wortstellung und -Betonung im Altgermanischen", Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur 57 (1932), 1-101, esp. 4-5, 8. HM's first line conveniently illustrates the law's operation on personal pronouns. The subject ic falls in the first metrical dip of the clause and is duly unstressed; whereas the indirect object be, displaced as it is from the first dip, bears full metrical stress in a verse of Sievers' type B. Pope's attempt to join 2a and 2b as a single clause casts doubt on his suggested restoration of 2a as [of hwylcum] treocyn[ne] ("Palaeography and poetry", pp.45, 48). His rejection of Mackie's suggestion: [ymb pisum] treocyn[ne] on grammatical grounds (ymb, "about", normally governing the accusative, not the dative) is justified, however, and one might add that the Exeter Book scribe
always writes *pisum* (abbreviated as *pisū* only in *Wife's Lament* 41), never *pisum*. But Pope's objection to *ic tudre aweox* as a self-contained clause ("as mindlessly self-evident a statement as can well be imagined" is his comment) ignores the possible ambiguity of *tudre*, on which see pp.47-8 below. Although one may doubt the wisdom of supplying conjectural restorations to lacunae in a text of *HM*'s difficulty, those who believe the gaps can be filled without prejudicing interpretation might consider the possibility of *fram* (with "low" first graph; see note 6 above), "about", "concerning", as the first word of 2a. It governs the dative, and is common with *secgan*; see T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1898), s.v. *fram*, II; Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Supplement* (Oxford, 1921; rep. with revisions, 1972), s.v. *fram*, I (18).


Pope, "Palaeography and poetry", pp.44-5. Pope's attempt to read Riddle 60, 1-7a as a yew-tree's description of its own early life (pp.54-5) places considerable strain on the text. The indications that the speaker here is a semi-aquatic plant (rather than a tree growing on a ness or island, as Pope would have it) are probably too strong to be dismissed.


Anderson, "Voices", 242; "Persuasion", 292; Greenfield, p.150; Goldsmith, p.248. Goldsmith believes that the speaker is a pen which "'voyages' whenever writings done at his lord's command are disseminated across the world".


Greenfield, p.150.

"Voices", 243; Pope, p.52, also refers to *The Dream of the Rood* in this connection.


Greenfield, p.151.

"Voices", 243; see also Goldsmith, p.248.

Loc. cit.

Loc. cit.

Elliott, p.2; Goldsmith, p.243.

See below, p.50.

Toller, *Dictionary*, s.v. *onsundrum*, III. This meaning occurs only once.
(in the Blickling Homilies). Toller's meaning II, "in retirement from others", "apart" is also possible here; for whether or not the woman is literally alone as she reads the runes, her wooden messenger's speech is in the nature of a private communication.


Goldsmith, pp.247-8. I share Goldsmith's doubt about the possibility of taking this verse simply as the presentation of a human messenger's credentials.

Cf. Pope's suggestion ("Palaeography and Poetry", p.53, footnote 71) that the implication of lines 1-8 is that the speaker is a palimpsest - a substantial rune-staff from which previous inscriptions for other purposes have been planed away. Though such a practice may well have existed, it is difficult to prove in the absence of contemporary literary references to it.


"Persuasion", 290.
"Tempus und Modus im Beowulf", Anglia 10 (1888), 542-63, esp. 550, § 14. This use of the present tense in Modern English has been defined as expressing "the persistence in the present of the effect of a past communication" (R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech and J. Svartvik, A Grammar of Contemporary English (London, 1972), p.86) - a definition which accommodates HM 50 gehyre perfectly if the original act of inscription is regarded as a still-operative communication to the staff.


Elliott's view (p.8) that the speech is largely an expansion of the runic message is criticized by Leslie (ed., p.15), partly on the grounds that it makes the runes "simply a summary of what has gone before" rather than a climax. Pope ("Palaeography and poetry", p.53) takes the view, not far from my own, that the poem is "figuratively speaking, a dialogue".

Comparison of a letter with a messenger is widespread in riddles; see Archer Taylor, English Riddles from Oral Tradition (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951), p.276. The suggestion that HM is a riddle was made by F. Hicketier, "Klage der Frau, Botschaft des Gemahls, und Ruine", Anglia 11 (1889), 363-8.

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