The Pot, the Broom, and Other Humans: Concealing Material Objects in the Bern Riddles

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The early medieval Bern Riddles or *Aenigmata Bernensia* are a collection of sixty-four Latin riddle poems which are dated to the seventh century. Each poem portrays a material object of rural everyday life in anthropomorphic form, by way of a number of rhetorical devices such as prosopopoeia, metaphor, and paradox. The objects in the poems are made to speak, provided with clothing and housing, and entangled in complicated family lives. These anthropomorphic characterisations invite us to explore the interaction between humans and material objects.

In a manner unique amongst early medieval riddle poetry, the Bern Riddles conceal their material objects in anthropomorphic form.[1] As the material objects in them assume human bodies, speak, and perform various social roles, they marginalise the actual human beings who employ them in everyday life and who appear solely in passive verb forms, participles, or collective adjectives. I argue that the humanness of the material objects in the Bern Riddles is created through the rhetorical devices of prosopopoeia, paradox, and metaphor, all of which conceal the individual objects rhetorically. Riddles based on metaphorical language, or "metaphoric riddle[s]," are

> a complicated play on reality and appearance, linking the unlike, denying conventional similarities, and generally dissolving barriers between classes,

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[1] The modern title of these riddles is based on the location of the oldest surviving manuscript, codex 611 of the Burgerbibliothek in Bern.

to make us realise that the grid we impose upon the world is far from a perfect fit and not the only one available. (Barley 144-45)

The Bern Riddles dissolve the boundaries between the categories of "human" and "object." However, the humanness of the material objects as they are portrayed in the Bern Riddles is notoriously ambiguous. Normally, the ambiguous "play on reality" of a metaphoric riddle can hint simultaneously at several potential solutions to the same riddle, as with the onion riddle of the Exeter Book. Since the manuscript record does not offer a canonical solution, the riddles of the Exeter Book will always remain ambiguous in this way. In contrast, early medieval riddles in Latin, such as the Bern Riddles, come down to us with solutions alongside the riddles. Harking back to their late ancient model Symphosius (Leary 13-26), they typically integrate the solution of the riddle into the text.[2] Depending on the manuscript, the solutions to the Bern Riddles either appear as *tituli* (titles), headers, or as marginal glosses.[3] The titles reveal that not a single riddle poem is on a human being; instead, all solutions point towards material objects.

While the *tituli* and glosses give away the solutions to the Bern Riddles, rhetorical devices like metaphor, prosopopoeia, and paradox obscure the identity of the objects. Thus, I refer to these rhetorical devices as "techniques of concealment." However, the same rhetorical devices which conceal an object simultaneously reveal something unexpected about it, namely the anthropomorphic form and agency of material objects. I use the term "metaphoric texture" to describe how the techniques of concealment in effect reveal information that characterises an object. This term enables me to read the riddles as ambiguous poetic texts along the lines proposed by Dan Pagis:

> While a riddle that has been solved ceases to be a riddle for the solver, it does continue to exist for him as another kind of poem. In fact, many riddles, especially those founded on paradoxical metaphors, become impressive poems when solved for the very reason that their metaphoric texture is now revealed. (98)

What is revealed by the metaphoric texture of the Bern Riddles is precisely the humanness of material objects. This metaphoric texture, then,

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[2] While the Bern Riddles offer the solutions in the form of titles, some Anglo-Latin riddle poets use acrostics (e.g., Boniface).

[3] The solutions are more or less consistent across the manuscript record. For variants, see Glorie.

likens material objects to their human interactants and brings to the fore questions of agency in the presentation of human-nonhuman interactions.

Context

Although they share much with collections of Anglo-Latin and Old English riddle poetry, such as the riddles of Aldhelm, Tatwine, Eusebius, Boniface, the Lorsch Riddles, and the Exeter Book Riddles, the Bern Riddles are exceptional in many respects. Almost all Latin riddle poetry of the early medieval period can be ascribed to specific authors, places of origin, or at least dated, but neither the author, nor the time or place of origin of the Bern Riddles are certain. While the question of authorship must be entirely abandoned due to a lack of valid information, the dating of the riddle poems, based on language, style, and metre, points to the seventh century.[4] By comparison, Anglo-Latin riddle poems were written mainly from the very late seventh to the mid-eighth century, and remained part of the Anglo-Saxon monastic curriculum until as late as the eleventh century (Lockett 261-62).[5] The oldest surviving manuscript of the Bern Riddles, Bern 611, is dated to the early eighth century and is written in a Merovingian hand of East Francia.[6] Hence, the Bern Riddles may well be older than the Anglo-Latin riddles.

Furthermore, the manuscript record of the Bern Riddles shows that they were spread across the Frankish-Carolingian continent but not Anglo-Saxon England.[7] While we do not know where they were written, it

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[4] For the metrical properties of the Bern Riddles, see Norberg. For a very detailed, yet slightly outdated analysis of these metrical properties, see Cornu.

[5] The most important textbook manuscript, which includes the riddles of Aldhelm, Tatwine, Eusebius, and Symphosius among other riddles and puzzles, is "Cambridge, University Library [CUL], MS Gg. 5.35, a large codex of 446 folios compiled at Saint Augustine's, Canterbury, in the mid-eleventh century" (Saltzman 979). Its educational use is testified by a large number of glosses.

[6] Bern 611 contains among other texts a Latin glossary, the grammatical work of Asper, and various excerpts from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*. All of these texts suggest, as does the Greek alphabet which was added amidst the riddles in the bottom margins of 77v-78r, an instructional usage of the manuscript. Indeed, most of the twelve relevant manuscripts contain encyclopaedic texts, mainly excerpts of Isidore's *Etymologies*, or texts on grammar (Salvador-Bello 74ff.).

[7] None of the surviving manuscripts of the Bern Riddles are Insular, but one manuscript (Berlin, Phillips 167) might have been copied from an Insular exemplar (Lapidge and Rosier 246, n. 37). For the presence of riddle poetry in continental Europe, see e.g.,

seems that they spread mainly during the Carolingian educational re-
form of the late eighth century, after Alcuin of York had introduced the
genre of Latin riddle poetry at the Carolingian court and its court school
(Bayless 164).[8]

As a consequence of the difficult history of the Bern Riddles and
their many similarities to other texts of the same genre, scholars have
merely mentioned the Bern Riddles in passing in studies centred around
Aldhelm (Lapidge; Orchard; Juster), Symphosius (Leary), and, especially,
the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book (Bitterli; Salvador-Bello).[9]
There are two exceptions to this, namely Zoja Pavlovskis (1988), who
included a detailed reading of the Bern Riddles in her comparison of
Latin riddle poetry; and Thomas Klein (2019), who has shown that the
Bern Riddles are modelled on the *Aenigmata* of Symphosius on the one
hand, and, on the other, overlap significantly with the *Enigmata* of Ald-
helm. Although I do not offer a comparison between the Bern Riddles
and other early medieval riddle poems, I occasionally consider some of
the ways in which the Bern Riddles differ from these other riddles
whenever a comparison is necessary or useful.

Objects

The subject matter of the Bern Riddles is entirely non-human; their tit-
les evoke household tools, natural resources, plants, animals, weather
phenomena, and celestial bodies. These subject matters recall the riddles
of Symphosius and Aldhelm. Thomas Klein shows that "nearly a third
of Bern's solutions are also found in Aldhelm" (412), and that "roughly
a third of the Bern riddles mirror or closely resemble those of Sympho-
sius" (405). However, figures from classical mythology, as well as fantas-
tic and exotic beasts which feature in Symphosius (centaur) and Ald-

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the library catalogue of the Reichenau monastery by Lake Constance for the year 821
(Becker 10).

[8] Although there is no consensus regarding the origins of the Bern Riddles, scholars
usually argue for a Mediterranean origin, perhaps in northern Italy (see Klein 401-02;
Manitius 193; Meyer 161; Taylor 59).

[9] Disparaging comments about the Bern Riddles in nineteenth-century philology may
have contributed to their marginal position in the discourses surrounding the riddle
genre. Especially the stichic character of the poems has been regarded with undue con-
tempt. As A. M. Juster (xvi) has argued with regard to Aldhelm, in riddle poetry the
stichic form is not caused by the inability of the poet to create enjambments but by a
generic convention of Latin riddle poetry as such. This observation, if it holds true for
Aldhelm, must be applied to the Bern Riddles as well.

helm (minotaur, unicorn, elephant, lion, ostrich), are not found in the Bern Riddles. Furthermore, there are neither abstract nor religious concepts as in the riddles of Boniface or Aldhelm, nor are there mathematical or grammatical riddles such as those that appear in the riddles of Eusebius and Tatwine.[10] And references to religious or mythological themes, such as the appearance of Eve in a riddle on a millstone ("de mola"), are scarce in the Bern Riddles. In this riddle poem, the age of the millstone is compared to the age of Eve ("Eva sum senior ego" 12.1).[11] Mercedes Salvador-Bello regards the poem on the palm ("de palma") as an example of Christian symbolism, but Klein argues that "the Bern poet does appear to be thinking more of the actual tree" (414). Although it is certainly possible to interpret some of the objects in them as Christian symbols, the Bern Riddles, unlike all other collections of Latin riddle poetry, exclusively depict material objects.

The presentation of these material objects puts an "emphasis on an everyday material world" (Pavlovskis 234) that is not wild, exotic or dangerous, but rural, cultivated, and safe. Most of the plants, for example, are cultivated and fruit-bearing trees or flowers that grow in gardens. The few animals depicted in the Bern Riddles are domesticated and tame creatures such as sheep. Furthermore, there are no riddles on weaponry or armour, but several on kitchen utensils and tools. Hence, the material objects evoke "an idyllic, even paradisal existence" (233).

Within this framework of a peaceful and homely rural everyday life, the material objects of the Bern Riddles are "directly accessible to the senses" (234). The sensory accessibility of the objects, I argue, is underlined by the order in which the poems appear within the manuscripts. Although it is notoriously difficult to discuss the structure of the Bern Riddles due to uncertainties about both the order and the number of the poems in the different manuscripts,[12] I suggest that there is a gradual shift from tangible objects of the interior household towards less accessible and merely visible objects of the distant cosmos.

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[10] For an example of a religious topic, namely creation, see Sebo, *In enigmate*.

[11] The Latin text of the Bern Riddles follows the edition of Karl Strecker, which is more reliable than the more recent but occasionally idiosyncratic text of Glorie's edition.

[12] To our current knowledge, the Bern Riddles either survive in incomplete form or have accreted a number of riddles which were not part of the original composition, (e.g., "iterum de vino"). Only the ninth-century Cod. Lipsiensis Rep. I 74 contains all sixty-four poems. Originally, the Bern Riddles must have consisted of fifty or sixty poems, since Latin riddle poems were typically composed as sets of an even number. The preferred number was exactly one hundred, as in the *Aenigmata* of Symphosius (Leary 31).

Such a shift corresponds to the structure of Symphosius' riddle book, namely to a movement "from certainty to complexity" (Sebo, "*In scirpo nodum*" 191).[13] In the Bern Riddles, this corresponds to a gradual shift from the concretely tangible to the barely visible. Household tools such as the cooking pot, the table, or the broom appear only in the first third; plants (e.g., vine, rose, olive tree, ivy) and a small number of animals (e.g., sheep, silk worm) as well as natural resources (e.g., honey, resin) make up the middle part; and weather phenomena (e.g., wind, rain) and celestial bodies (e.g., sun, moon, stars), which cannot be experienced haptically, are treated at the very end of the composition. Hence, the subject matter of the Bern Riddles is set in a way that focuses on objects which are accessible to the senses. These objects are always visible but, as the subject matter progresses, become decreasingly tangible.

Techniques of Concealment

As mentioned above, the material objects in the Bern Riddles are concealed exclusively by three techniques, namely metaphor, paradox, and prosopopoeia. While these are, of course, frequently employed in early medieval riddle poetry, other riddle poems use additional techniques of concealment. For example, "at least forty of the Enigmata [of Aldhelm] depend directly on linguistic puzzles and clues" (Howe 57), and in a number of the Exeter Book riddles, runic letters occur "as an adjunct in the partially cryptographic texts" (Porter 7). Even the riddle poems of Symphosius, with their strikingly concise paradoxes, occasionally use puns or puzzles as techniques of concealment. The absence of puns and cryptography in the Bern Riddles, however, adds to the importance of these rhetorical devices both as techniques of concealment and as metaphoric textures: the riddles are not simple language games, but complex

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[13] While the ordering principle of most early medieval riddle poetry has been shown to bear close resemblance to the encyclopaedic structure of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, the Bern Riddles are less notably influenced by Isidore than any other early medieval Latin riddle poems (Salvador-Bello 438). Rather than a "compendium" (Pavlovskis 229) or a "collection" (Klein 400), the Bern Riddles, like the riddles of Symphosius, are a book of poetry. Indeed, only in one manuscript (Vat. Reg. Lat. 1553) are the Bern Riddles transmitted within a collection amongst a variety of riddle poems by Symphosius and Aldhelm (Finch).

poems based on the characterisation of their objects by metaphoric textures.[14]

The primary technique of concealment of the Bern Riddles is prosopopoeia, the rhetorical device whereby inanimate objects are made to speak – about themselves, in the Bern Riddles. Even though this is a common feature of (Latin) riddle poetry, the Bern Riddles yet again employ it with unusual consistency. The subject of the first poem ("de olla") is a cooking pot whose first utterance begins with the word "Ego" (1.1). Similarly, the second poem, on an oil lamp ("de lucerna"), and the third poem, on salt ("de sale"), both begin with the pronoun "Me" (2.1 and 3.1). The strong presence of first-person pronouns at the beginning of the first three poems in particular emphasises the subjects' speaking position and heralds the frequency and importance of prosopopoeia throughout the collection.

The second technique of concealment is metaphor. The metaphors employed in the Bern Riddles draw from conventional aspects of human existence, such as birth and death, family, clothing, housing, and the body. The cooking pot of the first riddle, for example, is "well-known for being a daughter of two fathers" ("nata duos patres habere dinoscor," 1.1). The different resources required for crafting a pot are referred to as fathers here. Fire, the cooking pot's mother, "forces [the hard pot] to turn soft" ("me mater duram mollescere cogit," 1.2). The process of production is presented metaphorically as a process of geniture. Metaphors of familial relations have been regarded as "a favorite motif, whereby the object's origins and environment are conceived in terms of bizarre relationships between mothers, fathers, and children" (Klein 406). Klein's characterisation of these relationships as "bizarre"

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[14] The manuscript record further underlines the centrality of rhetorical strategies in the Bern Riddles. With the exception of Berlin, Philipps 167, in which the riddles bear the title "Enigmata in Dei nomine Tulli" ("Riddles of Tullius in the Name of God"), most manuscripts refer to the Bern Riddles with (a variant of) the title "Quaestiones Aenigmatum Rhetoricae Artis" ("Questions of the Rhetorical Art of Enigma"). The link to rhetoric in the latter title is clear, but even the supposed authorship of one Tullius points toward rhetoric, as it evokes the authority of the Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero (Klein 400-01). The Latin term "aenigma" itself is a rhetorical term described by Cicero (III 167) as a trope subordinate to allegory, which was to be avoided due to its obscurity. Augustine (XV.9.15) and Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiae* I.37.26 and *De fide catholica* II.10.2) see in it an aid to the interpretation of the Bible and to meditations on God. For the importance of these texts in early medieval literary culture, see Law 23, and Irvine 364. Ernst Robert Curtius argued that Aldhelm regarded the study of classical rhetoric in monastic education as a "necessity [. . .] for a comprehension of the Bible" (46).

underlines that these metaphors often occur in conjunction with a paradox.

The third strategy, paradox, underlines the riddle-like quality of these poems.[15] In the cooking-pot riddle, the multiple materials of which the pot consists are metaphorically portrayed as two fathers ("duos patres," 1.1). While it is possible for a pot to consist of several materials, the presence of two fathers in a process of geniture is impossible. Thus, the metaphoric representation of the cooking pots' materials is paradoxical. Paradoxes force the reader to question the literal meaning of riddle poems, while the combination of metaphor and prosopopoeia anthropomorphises the objects of the Bern Riddles. Consequently, paradoxes foreground the metaphoric textures and their characterisations of the material objects. Thus, paradox does not itself partake in creating a metaphoric texture that characterises the objects as humans, but draws attention to it.

While these three rhetorical devices construct and underline the humanness of material objects, it is precisely the absence of one of them that allows a main concern of the Bern Riddles to surface: if all material objects are like humans, what is their relationship to actual humans? The riddle on the stars ("de stellis") is the only poem in which the speaker is not the material object itself, i.e., in which there is no prosopopoeia. The stars are instead described through a narrator's external focalisation as "a million sisters enclosed in one single house" ("Milia conclusae domo sub una sorores," 62.1).[16] The metaphors of familial relation and of domesticity are typical of the Bern Riddles but unlike all other objects the stars do not speak for themselves, or to each other. As the speaker of the poem observes, "none of them tries to speak with words to another" ("cum nulla parem conetur adloqui verbis," 62.3). Due to their lack of language, the stars also lack anthropomorphic agency. They can be marvelled at ("mirantur," 62.6) while "they serve in measured order their own courses" ("Suos moderato servant in ordine cursus," 62.4). Far removed from the tangible domestic world of the cooking pot at the beginning of the Bern Riddles, the stars are barely visible and can only be observed on their orbit at the edge of the material world. There, the stars are still anthropomorphic even though the interaction between

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[15] This is a key difference between the Bern Riddles and, for example, the Old English Exeter Book riddles, where the riddle character of the poems is expressed in formulaic questions such as, "ask what I am called" ("[f]rige hwæt ic hatte," Porter 28).

[16] All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are mine.

them and the human speaker is that of one-directional observation based on one single sensory faculty.

Humanised Objects

Interactions between anthropomorphised material objects and humans who are not clearly defined are frequent in the Bern Riddles. However, due to the metaphoric textures of the poems, these interactions are normally as anthropomorphised as the physical form of the material objects. In this way, as Pavlovskis argues, the Bern Riddles foreground "an intimate connection between human existence and the natural milieu in the midst of which this existence runs its course" (230). The most intimate are those interactions between objects and humans which are tied by metaphorical family relations, as in the riddle poem about a table ("de mensa," 5):

> Pulchra mater ego natos dum collego multos,
> Cunctis trado libens, quiquid in pectore gesto.
> Oscula nam mihi prius qui cara dederunt,
> Vestibus exutam turpi me modo relinquut.
> Nulli sicut mihi pro bonis mala redduntur;
> Quos lactavi, nudam pede per angula versant.

> While I, a pretty mother, gather many children,
> I like handing out to everyone whatever I carry on my chest.
> They who earlier gave kind kisses to me
> Now in a terrible manner leave me stripped of my clothes.
> No one ever received so many bad things for all the good things committed;
> Those whom I fed with my breast now push me naked in a corner.

The intimacy between mother and child evoked in the first two lines, and the nurturing role of the mother, are juxtaposed against the unrequited affection portrayed in the following four lines. The familial terminology in this poem on the one hand anthropomorphises the table ("Pulchra mater," 5.1) as a mother and on the other hand infantilises the human beings sitting around the table ("natos [. . .] multos," 5.1), presenting them as children.

The intimate relationship between material object and human is brittle. The mother, who in the first two lines of the poem has agency as she gathers the children ("collego," 5.1) and takes on responsibility as she hands out food ("trado," 5.2), becomes unable to act in the latter

part of the poem. In the third line, her narrative shifts to the past tense as if to hark back to a lost time. She is then stripped of her clothes and left behind in a terrible manner ("turpi [. . .] modo," 5.4), i.e., naked. The mother again escapes the present and looks back to the past, to the time when she breastfed her children ("lactavi," 5.6). The image of the children depriving their mother of her clothes clashes with the image of a nurturing mother. As a result, the relationship between mother and children, which is dramatised as a deeply conflicted one, entails a shift of agency from the mother to the children, from the material objects to the humans. However, the mother's helplessness and her escape into the past, which are the outcomes of this shift, further the anthropomorphisation of the table. The table is not only anthropomorphic in form and function but is also endowed with emotions.

The Bern Riddles also portray more playful interactions, such as that of the shadow and its human travel companion in the riddle on the shadow ("de umbra," 61), for example, is based on sensory experiences rather than questions of instrumental use and agency. The poem is a play on paradoxical sensory experiences which the shadow evokes in its companion:

> Humidis delector semper consistere locis
> Et sine radice immensos porrego ramos.
> Mecum iter agens nulla sub arte tenebit,
> Comitem sed viae ego conprendere possum.
> Certum me videnti demonstro corpus a longe,
> Positus et iuxta totam me numquam videbit.

> I always enjoy standing on humid ground,
> And rootless, I stretch out long branches.
> He who is on a journey with me won't catch me with a trick,
> But I can grab my companion on the road.
> To him who sees me clearly, I show my body from afar,
> And put right next to me, nobody will ever see me as a whole.

This poem contains a multilayered metaphoric texture. The first layer construes a similarity between the shadow and trees.[17] The vocabulary used in these lines is the same as in other Bern Riddles about trees. Both the palm tree and the vine are introduced with regard to their locations: "locis [. . .] desertis" (15.1) and "[u]no fixa loco" (13.1). Similarly, the

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[17] Only one other poem likens its subject to a non-human, namely the riddle on a stool ("de scamno"), which is described in terms of a horse.

palm tree and the vine both stretch out their branches to offer food. As is typical for the poems towards to the end of the collection, the shadow here is not strictly material. In order to be fully anthropomorphised, it first has to become a material object, i.e., a tree. From the third line, the shadow gains an anthropomorphic agency, which is immediately tied to a paradox. The shadow can catch others but cannot be caught itself. Likened to a traveller, the shadow as a paradoxical figure plays with the sensory capacities of a human being in its company. The shadow could simply mock its travel companion, who cannot catch it, but this human companion is not abused by the evasive shadow. Instead, the shadow expands its paradoxical self-description by adding another paradox regarding the sense of sight. Here, it becomes increasingly clear that the shadow tries to be constantly seen but never touched. Unlike the stars in the riddle discussed above, the shadow is dependent on humans (or other material objects such as tree or branches), from whom it hides and to whom, simultaneously, it is attracted. Thus, the shadow poem oscillates between the activities of showing and seeing while constantly defying the sense of touch. Here, the relationship between humanised object and human is one of companionship, even though the sensory experiences through which the human and the non-human interact are feeble and incomplete.

While the shadow escapes the human touch, most of the riddle poems try to suppress all human presence. In most riddles, humans seem altogether absent, even though the objects themselves are part of the everyday life experiences of humans. In many poems, human beings are described not as individuals but as quantities ("nullus"/"none," "pauci"/"few," "multi"/"many," or "cuncti"/"all"). Often, they are contained within participles, as in "one who sees" ("videnti," 61.5), "one who travels" ("iter agens," 61.3), or "one who asks" ("roganti," 25.6), which is a way of detaching the agent as much as possible from the action. At best, humans are referred to by a noun such as "companion" ("[c]omitem," 61.4). Sometimes humans appear only metonymically, for example as a blade which cuts back branches ("de vino") or cuts open an animal ("de membrana"). The ways in which such references to humans marginalise them serve to question human agency over objects and ensure that the material objects are firmly centred in the poems.

Marginalised Humans

In the rare cases when humans appear overtly in a poem, they do so not
as individual characters but as representatives of social classes. In these
cases, the Bern Riddles foreground not only the interaction between the
object and humans, but also the relationships among humans from dif-
ferent social classes. An example is the broom poem ("de scopa," 18) in
which an anthropomorphised broom is likened to a maidservant:

> Florigeras gero comas, dum maneo silvis,
> Et honesto vivo modo, dum habito campis.
> Turpius me nulla domi vernacula servit
> Et redacta vili solo depono capillos:
> Cuncti per horrendam me terrae pulverem iactant,
> Sed amoena domus sine me nulla videtur.

> I have flower-blossoming hair as long as I am in the wood
> and I live in a worthy way as long as my home are the fields.
> In a more terrible way than me no maidservant serves in the house
> and put to work on the vile floor I drop my hair.
> Everyone drags me through the horrible dust on the floor
> but no lovely home can exist, it seems, without me.

The anthropomorphisation of the broom is achieved in four steps. First,
the broom presents an ideal life form through its own speech (prosopo-
poeia). Second, the attribute "blooming" ("florigeras," 18.1), which
epitomises the mood of the first two lines, anthropomorphises the
broom by ascribing it a human physicality in the form of hair. Third, the
shift to a different mood after the second line is accompanied by a
change of location as the narrative moves to an indoor place. The house
is the opposite of the open fields and woods, and the broom starts lea-
ding a domestic life that coincides with a temporary shift of the gram-
matical subject from broom to maidservant. The fourth and most strik-
ing way in which the broom is anthropomorphised is by comparison
with the maidservant. From the third line, the broom fulfils the work of
a maidservant: it is humiliatingly put to work on the floor ("redacta vili
[. . .] solo," 18.4) and loses possession of the hair that was so vividly
described as its beauty before the broom was taken inside. This is fol-
lowed by a complete loss of agency when everyone ("cuncti," 18.5)
takes hold of the broom and drags it across the floor. Finally, in the
third couplet, the the brutal reality of the broom's indoor life is juxtapo-
sed with the rationalised suffering caused by this life. The function and

value of the broom are reflected not in the broom itself anymore, but in the cleanliness of the house.

Thus, the poem juxtaposes the value of an individual's life and the functioning of a household. This is dramatised by the relationship between the anthropomorphised broom and the maidservant. The maidservant does not cause the broom's suffering. Indeed, the maidservant does not have any agency at all. Her presence is a foil for the comparison between her and the broom. Based on this comparison, tentatively, the poem suggests that the maidservant, too, could be freer elsewhere, and that the cleanliness of a household is somehow at odds with the beauty of the natural world outside. The maidservant is akin to the broom in that they both suffer a loss of agency and dignity in the interior space to which they are confined and which they must keep lovely ("amoena," 18.6). In this poem, the relationship between anthropomorphised object and human being is thus one of a shared fate, of shared suffering and shared limits of agency within a domestic hierarchy. The process of anthropomorphisation entangles the broom in differences of social class. Yet, although a human character is overtly present, those who wield real agency and power within this hierarchy are absent.

Where there are servants there are masters, but only in one instance does such a master explicitly exert power. The riddle poem on parchment ("de membrana," 24) represents the reverse situation from the broom riddle. While the broom riddle foregrounds those who serve, the parchment riddle foregrounds those who enjoy wealth:

Lucrum viva manens toto nam confero mundo
Et defuncta mirum praesto de corpore quaestum.
Vestibus exuta multoque vinculo tensa,
Gladio sic mihi desecta viscera pendent.
Manibus me postquam reges et visu mirantur,
Miliaque porto nullo sub pondere multa.

Staying alive I am the whole world's gain;
once dead I make a miraculous profit with my body.
My clothes are taken off, I am put into chains,
my entrails, cut loose with a blade, dangle.
Afterwards, kings marvel at me with their hands and their eyes
and I carry a load of many thousands without feeling any weight.

At the end of this riddle poem about parchment stands a king marvelling at a manuscript. The poem as a whole displays "the entire transformation from living beast to finished book" (Bitterli 182). The economy

of book production hinges upon a profit greater than the profit that a living animal could generate. Death, in this riddle as in many others of the Bern Riddles, is the metaphor for a process of fundamental transformation, "invariably into something better" (Pavlovskis 233). Although there are examples of a death which is mourned and causes revenge, e.g., in the riddle on wine ("de vino"), death in the Bern Riddles is not a life-terminating event, but the beginning of a new form of existence. The process of transforming cattle into parchment begins with the realisation that the dead animal yields a profit. The physical process of production is acted out on the cattle's body ("de corpore," 24.2) as it is undressed, put in chains and stretched, and eventually dissected. Finally, the finished book – naked, bound and sewn – generates marvellous profits ("mirum [. . .] quaestum," 24.2), as it offers haptic and visual pleasure to kings (24.5).

Like some of the other Bern Riddles, the poem evokes sensory experiences, but in this instance specifically those of kings. Yet the passive participles which describe the process of production that created the object of the kings' sensory, even aesthetic, moment hide the workers, the subjects in the production process. In the poems, these producers are reduced to the results of their work and to their tools, such as the blade in the third line. The acting human is visible only by way of metonymy. The contrast between the invisible labourer and the prominently mentioned kings recall the difference between processes of labour and sensory-aesthetic experiences of this labour. In contrast to the maidservant and the broom, who both render a house beautiful that is not their own, the producer of parchment as well as the living animal ("viva manens," 24.1) at the beginning of the poem are unknown. It is not clear which animal yields the material, since the title of the riddle refers to the product, i.e., parchment, rather than the animal it is made of. The pragmatic experiences of both the material and the labourer are hidden behind the image of the manuscript page's marvellous beauty, which satisfies only the sensual pleasures of kings.

Conclusion

The Bern Riddles explore the relationships between material objects and human beings. They dramatise this interest by considering objects as humans, employing the rhetorical devices prosopopoeia, paradox, and metaphor. These are techniques of concealment that draw attention to the close connection between human beings and the material objects of

their immediate (domestic) environment. This environment, as evoked by the order of the Bern Riddles, consists of material objects which are anthropomorphised to various degrees so that they gain agency, a human body, a life story. Prosopopoeia lends the subjects of the riddle poems a voice; metaphorical family relations, clothes, hair, and homes are but a few of the anthropomorphising characterisations which breathe life into them; paradox, finally, demands from readers that they consider the metaphoric texture laid out in the poems, and thus foregrounds the anthropomorphic characterisation of the objects as opposed to the mere identity of the solutions to the riddles.

In contrast to the anthropomorphic world of objects, the human beings that appear in the margins and behind passive verb forms do not have clothes, bodies, or hair, let alone life stories. They do not have a voice and are not highlighted by the force of paradox. Instead, the riddle poems display intricate relationships, either pragmatic or sensory-aesthetic, between the subjects of the riddles and the human beings who interact with them. The Bern Riddles rarely describe an object in isolation. Instead, the riddle poems foreground the object's relationship to human beings, its place in the domestic life of humans, and question why humans would want to see it or touch it. Thus, the Bern Riddles depict a material world at the disposal of humans in which the uses of material objects have become akin to social interactions between humans.

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