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A Sensual Philology for Anglo-Saxon England

Abstract: What forgotten forms can philology assume anew? Reassessing how early medieval writers loved words differently than we do reveals significant gaps between past and presence senses of the physical phenomena words can index. In the early medieval language of Old English texts there remains a largely uncharted capacity for less linguistically driven aspects of expression, formed through a network of words, sounds, bodies and media: how the mute sound of a bell and the crook of a silent finger come together in medieval sign language, or how the Old English word for ring becomes a weeping, poetic gasp within a heaving breast. Such early medieval moments of communication survive because of language and in spite of language, and qualify the visualist framework through which we predictably reconstitute the medieval past, calling, *sotto voce*, for more than lovely words.

A Sensual Philology for Anglo-Saxon England

I came to see philology as a touchstone – a sorting hat, if you will – that could prompt us about our own place in the school of language and literature.

> – Haruko Momma, *From Philology to English Studies, Language and Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (xi-xii)

The long history of philology has established nothing more surely than its protean nature. Philology – the literal love of words made manifest in the historical and contemporary studies of language and its use, comes to us today as a discipline whose historical and semantic subject has for centuries undergone reinvention. One irreducible quality of philology, though, remains its critical function as a mediator between communities and languages. As Momma's Hogwartsian metaphor of the sorting hat suggests, students of language and literature who reach into philology can learn a lot about these subjects, but also about the nature of the interpretative work they themselves do ("Sorting Hat"). Momma's own recent study, which relates philological concerns to those of nationalism and race, exemplifies a current scholarly desire to widen the embrace of the philology, and re-root the field in broader aspects of culture and community. *Touchstone* in the quotation above is used in its modern notion: a figure of something that enables judgment about the quality of other things. But underneath this meaning lurks the original sense of the word as denoting a physical, haptic object, one that would literally be rubbed against other materials in order to assess their nature and value. Words, too, may rub up against

and reveal other systems of cultural and aesthetic meaning. The gradual opening of philological studies over the past several decades has begun to show us that as an encoding of communication, language mediates more than itself, and that its own relationships to physical, sensory and technological aspects of human expression may also be fruitfully excavated. More than words, language also operates in conjunction with non-linguistic activities and modes of expression less immediately available to the modern eye. Philology asks what kind of connection does its practitioner seek with the past through language, and with the communities of language. In the study of medieval texts, reassessing language in a new philological mode -- how early medieval writers loved words differently than we do -- reveals significant gaps between past and presence senses of the physical phenomena words can index. In the early medieval language of Old English texts, for example, there is a largely uncharted capacity for less linguistically driven aspects of expression, formed through a network of words, sounds, senses, bodies and media.

The (more) Sensual Word
Philology's own semantic roots – the *love* of logos – invoke something more under the words, in the emotional, sensory or even physical experience derived from working with language. Belief in such affective qualities returns throughout various cycles of the discipline's historical development. Walter Benjamin viewed philology as seductive (174-5), while for Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht the philological act of manuscript study was also a physical one that "ties the sensual, tangible presence of objects to an inspiration of the mind and an activation of the body" (18). That delight in language engages something of the body as well as the mind likewise charges the work of earlier wordy thinkers. Edward Said has shown that Vico's philological work "is everywhere a reminder that scholars hide, overlook, or mistreat the gross physical evidences of human activity, including their own" (820). Vico instead grounds his own understanding of language and text in a "more than sensuous dimension" (825), arising from "the overwhelming preponderance of body" (823). As Said concludes, "Vico the philologist found a discipline which is more, rather than less, rigorous for its physical antecedents and beginnings" (826).

Further back, Vico's Neoclassical aspirations for the philological "body" of language find their own classical, physical antecedent in Martianus Capella's fifth-century *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* ("The Marriage of Philology and Mercury"), which provides a graphic account of how the figure of Philologia is forced to generate texts from her body before ascending into heaven for the marriage. Philologia, laboring through nausea and then vomiting, expels from of her body every kind of "converted" text, across a whole range of physical media, including papyrus smeared with cedar oil, books woven of linen, others of papyrus and some even written on linden bark" (2.135-6). This literary effluent is then gathered up by the Muses, as well as various entities of the arts and schools, and used as the basis for subsequent enrichment in various disciplines of cultural production and learning (2.137-9). Philologia's violent fecundity, which through physical malady corporally ejects the material products of language, offers that the pleasure is only one of the ways language connects bodies to texts. Capella's careful detailing of the multiple physical forms that Philologia's textual vomit takes suggests the close affinity between

the content of linguistic production and the technological forms of media, as "for Martianus the physical forms and formats of these material books are literally bound up with the ideas and disciplines that the books contain, transmit and represent" (Eisner 5).

For medieval studies, a milestone for the return to philology is the landmark 1990 *Speculum* issue on "New Philology," edited by Stephen J. Nichols. This collection of essays is remarkable for many reasons, not least of which was a pronounced awareness of how media forms, the physical matter of written language, inform philological concerns. Erich Auerbach (147) believed that print culture from the Early Modern period onward redeveloped philology into a form of technological scholarship driven by a desire for homogeneity and exactitude, qualities which echo larger visualist arguments about typographic effect made at the time by Marshall McLuhan (124-6) and later Walter Ong (117-123), among many others. In his introduction to the *Speculum* volume, Nichols builds upon this argument to recenter the medieval manuscript as object within philology, so that the study of language can rediscover the multiplicity and variance that inhere in the material nature of this earlier media form, and to allow medievalists "to embrace the consequences of that diversity, not simply live with it, but to situate it squarely within our methodology" (9). Nichols' clarion call to understand medieval language within successive modes of material production articulates a media ecology that diachronically spans the historical subject of philology. This ecology smartly closes the circuit begun by Martianus Capella, but flips it, inverting Capella's mythic, generative allegory of Lady Philology's power to produce media forms. Instead, different media technologies themselves engender fundamentally different brands of philology, rendering the discipline, not its product, a thing of plasticity. In the classical, mythic mode, philology *made* objects, but now it is the subject that must be made and remade by objects – a compelling notion, as this very attention to media can further reimagine philology in relation to medieval material.

What new or forgotten forms can philology then assume? The "New Philology" makes another significant claim, albeit more implicitly, that in the media ecology of print and manuscript, the body opposes the machine as the mode of language production. The automated technology and fixed production of the printing press stands in stark contrast to the variance, the *mouvance* that innately determined the language of medieval texts produced and then reproduced by the different hands of different scribes. Working through a straightforward model of technological determinism, New Philology splits philology into two strands of pre-modern and modern, where the former embodies the vicissitudes of the body, and the other, the inhumanity of the machine. Today, posthuman approaches to culture question this modern segregation of human bodies and technological machines, identifying instead increasingly porous boundaries between the two. Communicational media, the external, material systems through which information passes between human senders and receivers, have figured significantly in this reassessment of bodies and machines. N. Katherine Hayles's redefinition of the human body as part of "a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" may be taken as emblematic (3). As fervent notions of the *modern* body so carefully defined and distinguished it apart from modern machines,

medievalists now take inspiration from posthuman bodies to see how their premodern counterparts may profoundly overlap technologies of communication.[1]

What remains largely unexplored is how aspects of medieval language can play a central role in the relations of bodily action and representational or communicational media. As Ong has observed, in the medieval period Latin became a "school language," undergoing a "sound-sight split" (113). In its catalogue of liturgical practices, the Anglo-Saxon *Regularis Concordia* records the existence of a sophisticated system of monastic signals and supporting material technology of bells, cymbals, gongs and wooden instruments, designed to inform monks of where they should be, when they should be there, and what they should be doing. The *Regularis Concordia* only casually describes operation of this system, usually content to give the generic *facto signo* for many of the points where such an acoustic event occurs, as the knowledge of these signals are not textually significant, and would have largely circulated outside the documentary record. In contrast, a surviving vernacular, Old English translation of the *Concordia* (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 201) obsesses over the individual features of such a system or sounds; it translates the generic into the sharply detailed, noting instead of the bare *facto signo,* that here a wooden *formellan* (board) is struck, there a hand bell, or a *cimbalum* (cymbal, or maybe gong) is rung (Hill 119-122). At one point, the translation provides us with what just might be the most charming *hapax legomena* in the Old English corpus: the *scocnylle*, the shoe-bell, that is, the bell that rings to tell monks when it is time to put on their shoes:

> *. . . and siþþan heora rædinge georne rædan oð scocynlle, þam gehyredum hi gescogen and gehwlyce oðre þinge æfter regules þeawe gefyllen*
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> (Zupitza 10).

> . . .and after (the litany) they should eagerly consult their reading, until the shoe-bell is heard, when they put on their shoes and each other thing after the rules complete.

If language must always be a form of codification, as Raymond Williams terms it (Spiegel 61), than what other encodings of human discourse might it contain? The *scocnylle* has barely survived in the written record, though it must have had a more robust existence outside the parchment page. A deep reading of *scocnylle* is at first trivial – a tiny unpacking of a tiny Old English word that appears exactly once in the written documentation of the language and is not, on the face of it, all that sensual to begin with. But across its compound structure, *scocnylle* also documents the interoperation of bodies, technological media and sound in early medieval communities. As Joyce Hill remarks on this and the other rare, vernacular words for Anglo-Saxon mechanisms found within the *Regularis Concordia*'s Old English translation, "one cannot help but wonder if what we have here is a glimpse of a particular semantic specialisation practised in some, if not all monastic communities" (122). The *scocnylle* is more than a word – it is an object, a non-graphic technology of communication. Its sound is a physical trigger within a somatic-media ecology, marking a place in a carefully ordered ritual of liturgy and worship; it

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[1] Analogously, see Evans, "Our cyborg past," and Seaman, "Affective Posthumans."

calls the medieval body to action, prompting it to replace (or remove, presumably) a part of its own covering in the process of faith.

It is doubtful we will ever know, exactly, what the *scocnylle* sounded like. The word as written was the only technology available to record its early medieval sound, and then only the idea of its sound. The oldest sounds we can still hear today in some form are less than two centuries old. Significantly, these sounds were originally recorded for future reading, not listening. In the late 1850's, Édouard-Léon Scott invented the phonautograph in order to visually study the nature of sound waves. Scott's phonautograms ("automatic sound writings") were recorded graphically, marked on lamp-blacked paper by a hog's bristle attached to a vibrating membrane (Sterne and Akiyama 545). In 2008, historians of the First Sounds project digitized the phonautograms, re-injecting a simulacra of life into Scott's lines on the page, and made those silent graphics aural, albeit in a much degraded form ("First Sounds").[2] The recovery of such "visual sounds" is an instructive one for how we might begin to conceptualize the relationship between language and sound in Anglo-Saxon texts. Anglo-Saxon criticism rarely considers the dynamic function of sound in literary texts, outside an imagined vocality/orality of a *scop*, or the *hynian* and *dinian* of Old English battle poetry. Largely, our inability to "hear" medieval sounds in the literature is part of the visualist framework that necessarily dominates the mediation of the past. We have many things we can still look at from Anglo-Saxon England, and we have almost nothing we can still hear with our ears – medieval sound was *a priori* ephemeral.

Our work as critics of the past is ocularcentric, and the material record of the past is one, as the childish saying goes, to be seen and not heard. Media historians by and large have played along with such sentiments. McLuhan notes that the visual and homogenizing experience of print culture led to "the relegation of auditory and other sensuous complexity to the background (125). McLuhan also consigns aural/oral culture to the role of primitivist magico-religious Other – an alterity necessary to showcase the "inexorable rise of Newtonian sight" that drives the formulation of the modern, typographic man, while Ong, one of the "ear's great apologists," likewise (if more ruefully) argues for the hegemony of the visual in the Enlightenment that becomes our presumed critical heritage (Schmidt 46). As auditory historians like to point out, the bias of the ocular goes deeper than material survival and the rise of the modern visuality. We have a horizon of expectation – itself a fittingly visual metaphor– for expressions of the past that presume the incisive, insightful authority of the eye. Or, as Leigh Eric Schmidt coyly writes with regards to the dominance modern sight over other senses, "the presence of the contemporary at the historian's table has created not only resonance, but also an excess of clarity about the past." Plato's flickering shadows on the wall are deeply ingrained in our collective intellectual consciousness, Schmidt reminds us, but seldom acknowledged is the fact that Plato's cave also contained echoes as well as shadows – acoustic lower forms of spherical harmonies (41-2). Likewise, we are well served to remember that sound remains a foundational aspect of language – and one that in the premodern period was pervasive in written forms, contributing to their unruly and variegated qualities.

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[2] Sound files of the digital reconstructions may be heard at: http://www.firstsounds.org/sounds/scott.php

Still, new turns in philology have remained largely rooted in visualist views of past languages, and the past in language. In his introduction to "The New Philology," Nichols perceptively seeks broader understandings of representational forms in medieval manuscripts, as "philological practices that have treated the manuscript from the perspective of text and language alone have seriously neglected the important supplements that were part and parcel of medieval text production." Predictably, the variance found within a manuscript's internal media forms is ocularcentric: "visual images and annotation of various forms," and "graphic examples of systemic rivalry" among "the visual scene or laying out the narrative thrust of a verbal text" (7). That the desire for new philological approaches to medieval studies reproduces its own visual foundations is uncontroversial – the communicational and material nature of the surviving documentary record of medieval language, along with the critical conventions of its study, all but requires it. But Derridean notions of the *logos* aside, the ways in which human bodies physically produce sound remains basic to the study and understanding of language; the phoneme, after all, served as the vital atom for the last "new philology" of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And sound finds other ways into surviving medieval documents. Like Édouard-Léon Scott's phonoautograms, we need to think about sound being semasiographically recorded – that is to say, think beyond orality to how nuances of auditory culture are still recoverable from the visual record of language.

In a related discipline, Richard Brilliant's recent art historical work on graphic synesthesia in the Bayeux Tapestry explores how the auditory violence of warfare becomes visually manifest in the textile through "compositional devices full of jagged energy and irregular rhythms" (76). Brilliant's reading of the march-to-battle scenes in the textile considers how visual images encode the aural:

> As these groups increasingly feature the clumping together of men and horses, the visual suggestion of individualized, or localized sound gives way to the chaotic cacophony of the sounds of battle for which a different repertoire of multiple, interruptive and spiky elements appear, typical both of the mêlée of battle and the violence of conflicting volumes of noise (76).

Brilliant finds the evocation of the sensory in the way the Tapestry's linear dynamics create "a visual impression that could rightly be called 'noisy' (78). Viewed in this manner, a durative visual record for the medieval (and modern) eye can trace back to more ephemeral, but no less real, phenomena for the ear. The sonically visual confusion of war in the Bayeux Tapestry compares to that great and violent textual moment of blind aurality in *Beowulf*, where the Danes of Heorot are prevented from seeing Beowulf fight Grendel. After leaving the hall, as *nipende niht ofer ealle, scadu-helma gesceapu scriðan cwoman, wan under wolcnum* (649-651a: "a darkening night came over them all, deep shadows gathered, black under clouds"), the Danes literally are left in the dark, forced to hear, not see, the ensuing struggle, in a passage framed by an envelope pattern of sound-words *dynede* ("dinned") and *hlynsode* ("resounded"):

> *Dryhtsele dynede   Denum eallum wearð*

ceasterbuendum   cenra gehwylcum
eorlum ealuscerwen   yrre wæron begen
reþe renweardas   reced hlynsode (767-780)

The noble hall broke into a din;   to all of the Danes
– the city-dwellers –   to each bold one,
it was like the ale-sharing of men;   both were enraged
the fierce hall-wards;   the hall resounded.

Interpretable stimuli to the brain occur within a sensorium, a living *locus* of sensory and perceptive play between the modes of physical expression and impression. In the human sensorium, sound can be felt, vibrantly so, and even seen, just as sight can inform smell and, more well known, that smell can inform taste (Schmidt 52). Denied their eyesight, the Danes re-interpret the sounds as part of a different experience, imagining the sights and sounds of the familiar social exchange of friendly ale-sharing they want, not the violent destruction they fear. The linguistic noise of *Beowulf* and the graphic noise Bayeux Tapestry are not simply representational moments where one sense of perception representationally stands in for another. In the medieval *frisson* of the visual and the auditory, physical senses are not quarantined from each other, but combined.

The textual record reveals how sound and body charged Anglo-Saxon sensory space with all kinds of meaning. Air was an environment of spiritual, moral and corporeal contention: the *gaest* of Old English and the *spiritus* of Latin connected in the airy breath of the soul, while *ylfa gescot* ("elf-shot") of Bald's Leechbook translated evil and sickness from air to body (Hall). Peals of bells dominated the air in no uncertain terms, filling it manifestly with some version of the harmony of the spheres – a neo-Platonic echoing of the *Verba Dei*. In the Bayeux Tapestry, again, the scene of King Edward's funeral visually records precisely such a moment: The hand of God reaches down, past the bell towers of Westminster to Edward's shrouded corpse. In the image register, attendants silently ring oversized, almost grotesquely so, hand bells to signal the procession, and in the border below, a single, pattern-breaking wolf textures the imagined sonic register with a lonely, mournful, but mute howl (Foys, panels 68-9). The dog has lost its master, and the country its king – it is a powerful moment in the Tapestry, more so for the skein of sight, sound and silence that the episode's inscription, *Hic portatur corpus Eadwardi regis as ecclesiam . . .* ("Here the corpse of King Edward is carried to the church . . .) can only introduce.

Sounds of Silence
A medieval network of sight, sound, body and words also inheres within the physical language of monastic silence. The early eleventh-century *Monasteriales Indicia* is a brief Old English text of hand signals that codify the communicational practice of silence in Anglo-Saxon Benedictine monasteries, where restraint from speaking permeated the daily routines of the order. In silence, communication among community must still happen, and the Benedictine *Rule* also made provisions when words were forbidden, monks might still speak by signs. In the early medieval version of the *Rule*, the mandate for silence

during meals notes: *Et summum fiat silentium . . .si quis tamen opus fuerit, sonitu cuiuscumque signi potius petatur quam voce* ("There should be absolute silence . . .if anything is still needed, it should be asked for with the sound of some kind of signal instead of the voice").[3] When the presence of *sonitu* as a descriptor of silent hand signals is noted, it is usually explained away as metaphoric, since, in the word of one commentator, "signs make no noise".[4] But *sonitu* remains a part of these signs and the space of their embodied performance, and should not be dismissed so awkwardly as a textual, rhetorical strategy. In the *Rule*, *sonitu* denies its absence by structuring how these silent signs are conceived, recognizing that bodies sound in ways other than the spoken, that the limbs of one's body can replace the voice as the functional source of communication. Signs *always* make noise. Silence is a transcendental signified, an illusory ruse always supplemented by sound it seeks to absent. Even when our mouths are closed, our bodies will still make sounds, and our ears will always hear something, even if it is the rushing of our own blood through our own bodies – a sound of silence, incidentally, that bodies will also feel in its physical vibrations. And yet at the same time, the *sonitu* of these quiet signs traces the outlines of the words they replace, allowing that even in silence, the sound of words imbricates other acts of physical expression. Modern translations of the *Rule* often do not hear this sensory dialectic, and remove the medieval *sonitu* in a symptomatic and ocularcentric act that imagines such signs as completely, if impossibly, silent.[5]

The system preserved in the *Indicia* was longstanding in English Benedictine houses, in use from at least the tenth to fifteenth centuries (Banham 7-13). The Old English version occurs in manuscript compilation of prayers, homilies and monastic material that also happens to contain interlinear OE glosses of both the *Regularis Concordia* and *Ælfric's Colloquy*.[6] The list presents a straightforward set of 127 items covering signs for mass vestments, types of books, objects used in mass (e.g. chalice, candles), penance (e.g. scourge), various items of food/drink, places (e.g. dormitory, privy), clothes, common objects (e.g. comb, scissors) and writing implements. The sign for *fyld stol* ("folding stool") provides a representative sense of their format:

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[3] *Rule*, Section 38, *De Ebdomadario Lectore* ("The Reader for the Week) 134. See also section 6 of the *Rule*, *De Taciturnitate* ("Silence"), and section 42, *Ut Post Completorium Nemo Loquatur* ("Nobody is to Speak After Compline"). The Latin here derives from Bruce Vernarde's edition and translation of St. Gall MS 914, an early ninth-century manuscript of the *Rule*.

[4] Sidwell, 12, n.7. See also Vernarde's similar note (263, n.56: "since there is to be complete silence, the sound must be metaphorical"). Bruce, 60-61 discusses the possibility that the use of *sonitu* in the *Rule* derives from an earlier practice of auditory signals and perhaps sound-making devices communicate. The hand-signals in the *Monasteriales Indicia,* however, indicate *sonitu* in medieval England refers to less overtly auditory phenomena.

[5] E.g. Boniface Verheyen's popular 1949 English version: "If, however, anything should be wanted, let it be asked for by means of a sign of any kind rather than a sound" (Chapter 38, "Of the Weekly Reader"); or a French version of the *Rule* accessible through the Order of Saint Benedict's website: "Pourtant, si on a besoin de quelque chose, on le demande par un signe plutôt que par la parole." (38. "Le Lecteur de Semaine").

[6] British Library Cotton MS Tiberius A.iii (97v-101v).

Gyf þu meterædere fyld stol habban wille oþþe oþrum men þonne clæm þu þine handa togædere and wege hi þam gemete þe þu dest þonne þu hine fyldan wylt

If you want a folding stool for the mealtime reader or anyone else, then clasp your hands together and move them in the way that you do when you want to fold it.

(Banham 30-31)

The list also includes signs for when something is desired, or is not, directions for sitting or standing, and signs for monks of specific rank or station. Such signs are a baseline for somatic communication; they can be both adapted to circumstance, and integrated into a wider and intuitive system of gestural motions (e.g. pointing, nodding) to allow for a range of non-linguistic communication.

As a work of written words describing silent physical gestures to supplement spoken words, the *Indicia* documents a complex constellation of expressive, sensory, linguistic and divine associations. As writing can archive extra-linguistic functions of sound, it can also archive a record of silence, one that here records a different register of Anglo-Saxon existence. As Debby Banham has pointed out, the *Indicia* is remarkably unique in its representation of Anglo-Saxon monastic life (14); it does not derive from either the spare and generic rhetoric of monastic rules, or, as is the case of Ælfric's *Colloquy,* a fictionalized and juvenile perspective. Only in this textual formulation of a mode of hushed somatic communication do we find such particular quiddities of the Anglo-Saxon monastic day preserved, common details that stand in marked contrast to the more generalized rules for monastic life set forth in the Benedictine Rule. In the written language of these signs we have a corollary to the vernacular gloss of *scocnylle* from *Regularis Concordia*, more traces of embodied and alternative modes of meaning, though here generated by a muted body, not an audible bell. But bells, too, ring within the *Monasteriales Indicia.*

In the very first section of the *Indicia*, we find body, sound, material media and words complexly layered in an invocation of the ever-present sensorium. The *Indicia* opens with seven signs for a descending hierarchy of monastic stations, from abbot to sacrist, followed at the end by a sign for *wæt be cycean tæcan* - "anything about the Church" (Banham 22-23). Three of these signs involve gestural variations of bell ringing. To indicate the deacon, one signs *mid hangiendre hande do swilce he gehwæde bellan cnyllan wille* – "with hanging hand, as if one would ring a (hand) bell." To indicate the sacrist, a bigger bell is needed, and one *sette his twegen fingras on his twa eagan and do mid his handa swylce he wille ane hangigende bellan teon* – "puts his two fingers to his two eyes, and makes with his hand as if pulling a hanging bell." In silence, the monks still express the mechanical and divine soundscape of their existence that is their spiritual, earthly and daily identity – the monastery bells that speak even when mouths may not. The final sign that uses a bell, for *gyf þu wæt be cyrcean tæcan wille* - if you wish to indicate anything about the church, is unique to the Old English version of the list, as the formulation does not appear in all surviving early medieval sign lists on the Continent, or in later medieval English lists (Banham 50). While the earlier two signs articulate bells of smaller size - hand and hanging bells, the sign for church enlists a traditional church

tower bell, the biggest bell in existence. This sign for the church functions as a divinely engineered hybrid of Augustinian multimedia and its transcendent, silenced ideal. To indicate *wæt be cyrcean tæcan*, one:

> *do þu mid þinum twan handum swycle þu bellan ringe. and sete þinne scytefinger to þinum muþe and hine syððan up ræs.*

> "Make with your two hands as if you were ringing a bell, then put your index finger up to your mouth, and then raise it up."

In this sign, the hands first reach up and ring the tower bell, pulling sacred sounds, an acoustic gesture of the *verba Dei,* down from the sky. The second half of the gesture – *and sete þinne scytefinger to þinum muþe and hine syððan up ræs*—then encodes both silence *and* voice. The index finger first seals the mouth, the standard, shushing sign for silence we still use today. It then converts the silence; the finger releases the mouth and guides the prayers of the Church it daily makes heavenward. The action closes the aural circuit begun with the aerial ringing of bells with earthly supplication. In these soft signs, mouths still work, bells still ring, and the ears, ever open, still hear.

*Hring*ing Words
The auditory ecology of bells, bodies, words and silence also substantively informs the linguistic form and poetic function of the eighteen-line Exeter Book Riddle 59:

> *Ic seah in healle hring gylddenne*
> *men sceawian, modum gleawe,*
> *ferþþum frode. Friþospede bæd*
> *god nergende gæste sinum*
> 5 *se þe wende wriþan; word æfter cwæð*
> *hring on hyrede, hælend nemde*
> *tillfremmendra. Him torhte in gemynd*
> *his dryhtnes naman dumba brohte*
> *ond in eagna gesihð, gif þæs æþelan*
> 10 *goldes tacen ongietan cuþe*
> *dryht(en) dolg, don swa þæs beages*
> *benne cwædon. Ne mæg þære bene*
> *æniges monnes ungaful lodre [ungefullodre]*
> *godes ealdorburg gæst gesecan,*
> 15 *rodera ceastre. Ræde, se þe wille,*
> *hu ðæs wrætlican wunda cwæden*
> *hringes, to hæleþum, þa he in healle wæs*
> *wylted ond wended wloncra folmum.*

> I saw in the hall a golden ring, men looking with clever minds, wise in spirit. He who turned the band asked for peace from the saving God for his guests/souls (*gæste*). Then the ring spoke words to the hearer/herder (*hyrede*); it named the

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savior of those who did good. To them the mute one brought his Lord's name clearly into the mind, and into their eyes' sight – if (one) knew how to understand this noble gold's token, the Lord's wounds, (and how) to do as the round treasure's wounds said. The prayer of any selfish man will not help the soul seek God's royal burg, that heavenly city. Read/report (*ræde*), he who wishes, how the wounds of this wondrous ring could speak to men, when in the hall it was rolled and turned by the hands of a spirited one.

When critics comment on this riddle, it is almost always to affirm the commonly accepted solution of "chalice."[7] The standard approach to this riddle is also an unabashedly visual one, prompted by its opening lines of a doubled vision, a gaze nested within a gaze: *Ic seah in healle hring gylddenne, men sceawian* - "I saw in the hall men looking at a golden ring" (1-2a). The enigma of a riddle is usually considered solved once the dualistic play between the figural and the literal is explained. Here the golden ring in the hall, turned and passed by men, is a ring we would expect to find in a *healle* – a treasure, an object of secular gift economy. Then the mechanism of the riddle "converts" this *hring* to a spiritual ring – the circular lip of a golden chalice, whose transubstantiated wine becomes the blood, and whose engraved surface becomes the silent wounds of Christ that still speak (11, 16), understood by a wise one, a priest, and explicated to his congregation. The ring in the hall becomes the chalice in the church; its speech is the performance of the mass, and its worshipful reception. This is a good reading, but it is also largely a deaf one.

Recently riddle scholarship has begun to shift from the singular focus on identifying *the* answer to Old English riddles, instead investigating the semantic overlaps which occur within such enigmatic texts – a move that also asks that critics expand their understanding of how, exactly, language functions in such texts. To use Patrick Murphy's term, this new mode of criticism highlights the relationships of meaning between the *proposition* of the riddle's object – its qualities and function as described by the poetic text – and a range of possible solutions (Murphy 35-40). In such study, identifying *the* solution of a riddle is only the beginning (and not a necessary one at that) of understanding the rich function and meaning of its language. In the case of Riddle 59, its language encourages, demands even, that it be understood in registers other than visual. Its closing, imperative formula departs from the standard imperative of *saga hwæt ic hatte*, "say what I am named," but instead requires the audience, *ræde, se þe wille, hu ðæs wrætlican wunda cwæden* – "advise if you will, how these wondrous wounds spoke" (15). *Hu* is sought here, not *hwæt* – *how* exactly, does this wondrous speaking happen? The riddle's visual aspects may open it with a double gaze, but they do not then dominate it; instead, they are in constant dialogue with its aural features. The poem "rings out" its meaning - literally, as the word *hring* is the first word to describe the riddle's subject, and then becomes the lexical touchstone throughout, at lines 1, 6, and 17. Likewise, the ring and its wounds speak, *cwædon*, three times (5, 12, 16), while the audience hears (*hyrede* 6, with a possible pun of hearer and shepherd). In this context, the closing command, *ræde*, with its split meanings of both counseling and reading, functions as an amalgam of speech and sight. Both meanings of *ræde* work equally well here: the inscriptions of the

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[7] E.g. Williamson, 313; Krapp and Dobbie, 357; Bitterli, 129; Muir, "Riddle 59, "Sources and Solutions."

chalice, and the words of the riddle itself, must be read and understood, while the command that the reader articulate (*ræde*) how these wounds could speak (*cwæden*) answers the doubled gaze of the riddle's visual opening with a similar framing of sounds within sounds.

Though the ring speaks (5: *word æfter cwæð*, 12: *cwædon*) the enigma of the riddle is that it is also mute (7: *dumba*), silent but speaking to both mind and eyes (7, 9). The mute speaker is a convention also found elsewhere in the riddles, most notably for the present discussion in Riddle 48, another "chalice" poem, which also describes a *hring* that is silent yet somehow speaks (Okasha 61-2). The silent speech is easily explained as a clever formulation of reading, as the object "speaks" visually, both to its audience inside the riddle, and to its readers outside. Yet the heavy presence of sound, and sound acts, within the language of the work remains, not wholly explained away into absence (or silence) by visual tropes. Mutely speaking rings in Riddle 59 compound visual, auditory and soundless expression into an expressive, sensory ecology that recalls the silent bells of the *Monasteriales Indicia*. The word *hring* itself functions an ideal locus for the convergence of such signification, revealing a bit of early medieval *philologia* in the process – an Anglo-Saxon fascination of how one word can produce a range of meaning both within and without its own textual register. At its most basic level, the graphic *hring* still documents the sounds of its spoken counterpart, sounds themselves resonantly suggestive of the physical phenomena the word signifies. Though we may only approximate any Old English pronunciation, the broad parameters of the language's sound may be still plausibly reconstructed (Hogg 10-51), and show the phonetic composition of the *hring* likely embodied a sonorant, explosive character. *Hring* begins with an aspirated /h/ before a sonorant /r/ (a hallmark of Old English words for aspects of sound) and ends with a nasal /ŋ/ followed by the back plosive /g/ - a resonant utterance ranging across the mouth and suggestive of the sound it signifies.

The *hring* of the Riddle 59 is written as a noun, a material object, a silent object. But the verb *hringan* also means what we would expect it to mean – the sound, the clashing, jingling, crashing, noisy reverberation of the air, the resounding phenomenon that enters our ears, and our bodies (Bosworth-Toller 567). The noun *hring*, as in the formation *bel-hringes* (the ring of a bell), as attested in the Old English gloss of the *Regularis Concordia*, represents not a round object, but a round <u>sound</u> (*Dictionary of Old English*: "bell-hring"). In surviving corpus of Old English poetry, the round sound of *hring* becomes even more capacious, at times encompassing a sensorium of Anglo-Saxon sounds, sights and bodies, a nexus located deep within physical and emotional expression. We see this in several poems of the *Vercelli Book*, where the phrase *wopes hring* ("a ring of tears") occurs numerous times.[8] A passage from *Christ II*, for example, describes the grief-stricken state of the apostles after Christ's ascension and return to heaven:

> Gewitan him þa gongan   to Hierusalem
> hæleð hygerofe,   in þa halgan burg,
> geomormode,   þonan hy god nyhst
> up stigende   eagum segun,

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[8] See also *Elene* l.1132, *Guthlac*, l.1313, *and Andreas* l.1281, in Krapp, *Vercelli Book*.

hyra wilgifan.   þær wæs wopes hring,
torne bitolden;   wæs seo treowlufu
hat æt heortan,   hreðer innan weoll,
beorn breostsefa. (ll. 533-540)

To Jerusalem, the holy city, went the valiant heroes, sad of heart from the place
where with their eyes they had but now beheld their God ascending, the giver of joy.
A *ring of tears* gushed forth; their true love, hot in their hearts, was overwhelmed
with grief, burning within their breasts.

Nineteenth-century philological discussions of the meaning of *wopes hring* were divided
as to its meaning. In earliest, Grein (106) describes the phrase as a manifestation of sound
(*sonus*), as does Grimm, who elaborates the meaning as *fletus intensissimus, quasi
circulatim erumpens* ("an intense weeping, as if erupting in circles") (130). But Bosworth
takes issue assigning an acoustical dimension to the phrase, arguing that it "is not
applicable to sound . . . though, [perhaps] there is the same extension of meaning as in the
cases of *hlimme*, *hlynn*, *hlyde*, where words denoting a stream or torrent are connected
with words denoting sound." Bosworth continues that Grimm's parsing of circular,
erupting tears "seems to give the meaning, though the connection with *hring* is not very
evident" (561). But here, the earliest philological treatments are surely right - the phase is
precisely applicable to sound - not as sound alone, but as the visual, textual, somatic and
auditory senses in such outpourings of grief cannot be quarantined from each other. The
apostles leave the place where they last saw Jesus with their own eyes (*eagum segun*),
and then also the realm of the simply visual, as they then produce the tears, heat, and
sounds of a human bodies torn by grief. *Wopes hring* is the ringing of tears, the sound of
crying, the wracked chest heaving, the staggered breath gasping as the pain of loss cycles
into and of the body. It is a moment of the Anglo-Saxon *sensorium* in full effect – a
moment of high emotional affect in which the wrung out body, literally and poetically
rings out. We know this to be true because off the page, we've all cried like this at some
point in our lives. When we've done so, we not just "cried our eyes out," as the visualist
expression goes – we've cried our mouths out, and we've cried our bodies out. *Wopes
hring* is the sensual and sensory potential of words made manifest. On the page, modern
eyes are more unfeeling than the medieval text. As modern readers, we've mostly
forgotten how we cry, though the Old English words, significantly, haven't.

The wracked, ringing body returns us to the final lines of Exeter Riddle 59, where the
wounds of the ring/chalice also evoke a physical body. In the riddle, the inanimate *hring*
of the riddle silently rings out in speech, and the wounds of the round object speak (11-
12: *swa þæs beages benne cwædon*). At the end of the poem, the demand upon the reader
to identify the process - the *hu* ("how") - by which the wounded *hring* speaks, ties this
speech to another physical act in the hall, how the *hring* was *wylted ond wended /
wloncra folmum* (18: "rolled and turned by the hands of spirited"). The wounds of this
wondrous, wound-erous *hring* speaks to men, in the hall, rolled and turned in the hands
an energetic man – most obviously the passing of the marked chalice, the sacrificial and
therefore bleeding cup - before the faithful. But within this language, the answer to the
riddle does not fix or stabilize its meaning; variation – *mouvance* – remains in play on the

physical and sensory level. The *hring* that arises from the rolling and turning of hands likewise evokes the bodily labor required to ring a church bell, just has the language of the *Monasteriales Indicia* specifies that one with *twa handa* or *hangiendre hande* sign for a deacon, a sacrist, or anything about the church. In the media and sensory ecology of the poem, this one word, *hring,* connects a host of objects, sounds and physical acts of community and worship.

Reading such moments with philological care, as mediations between medieval language and modern expectations, we have the opportunity to expand our understanding of the sophisticated layers of the Anglo-Saxon sensorium and forms of media that the language of Old English texts record. The object of this Riddle 59 acts like a bell, as it acts like a ring, as it acts like a chalice. It rings. It is ring-giving. It is the ring-like, blood-touched rim of a chalice. It is the tool that informs as media as it performs as faithful ritual. It is a *wopes hring*, a wounded body crying. It is the mute tolling of a monastery bell, silently heard in mind of the reader, sacralizing the space of the hall. In such moments, the visual language of works like Exeter Riddle 59, the *Monasteriales Indicia* and others produces more than visual, textual meaning. Medieval words have the potential to be phonautographic in meaning, transmitting in their visual patterns of linguistic inscription "waves" of medieval sound, sense and materiality – if we attune our own modern selves to them. In the vernacular of Old English texts, physical sensuality appears particularly pronounced in places, suggesting that its users' fashioned different indices of language and physical phenomena than those that have dominated the modern world. Such moments qualify the heavily visualist framework of language through which we predictably study and reconstitute the medieval past, and philologically call, *sotto voce*, for more than lovely words.

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