

Seeing red

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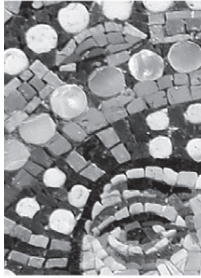
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WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Letter from the General Editor

Dear members of the medieval feminist community,

While *Medieval Feminist Forum* does not have a history of publishing letters from the general editor, I do so now on behalf of the editorial board to inaugurate our move to a new press, Medieval Institute Publications, and to announce a new initiative.

In our 35th year of publication and 22nd year as *MFF*, we are delighted to begin collaborating with an established press on the publication of our biannual issues. Our previous ad hoc arrangements were a labor of love and social justice commitment by too many dedicated feminist medievalists to name—and it is high time that the expertise and insight of our authors join a press with an established cadre of medieval journals in recognition of the centrality of feminist studies to medievalist scholarship.

We extend our appreciation to Theresa Whitaker of MIP who has welcomed our journal and worked intensively on the transition, and to the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship's advisory board who proposed the collaboration. To accompany our new venue we have a new webpage, which serves as the submission portal but also narrates the history of *MFF*, details the parameters for special issue proposals, provides recommendations for student and early career writers who are submitting an article for the first time, and gives guidelines for ethical citation practices.

In celebration of this historic move to MIP, we are inaugurating a new section of our journal: Retrospectives. We invite our feminist founders to compose short reflections on the lessons they learned in the course of their careers, as we cannot fully know how to focus our work as feminists if we do not know what has—and has not—changed in the academy. We welcome submissions from authors who have announced their retirement or have already retired.

We expect to publish one or two Retrospectives per issue, in the order in which they are received. We ask that potential authors follow these guidelines:

- Maximum length of 2000 words.
- Please either anonymize your narrative if specific individuals are still alive, or seek their permission for your representation of any episode involving them.
- While the editorial board will honor the voices of all authors, we retain the right to request revisions so that contributions represent *MFF* values regarding the ongoing challenges of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism.

The editorial board enthusiastically encourages your submissions to *MFF* at MIP, both of Retrospective pieces and of course of original feminist medievalist articles. We look forward to learning from this vibrant community!

Sincerely,
Jes Boon



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Seeing Red: Visuality, Violence, and the Making of Textiles in Early Medieval Enigmatic Poetry

Megan Cavell

Notable for their violent portrayals of textile production, a group of thematically related, enigmatic poems in Old English, Anglo-Latin, and Old Norse provide valuable insights into gender play in the early medieval period.¹ The tenth-century Exeter Book's *Riddle 56*, eighth-century archbishop Tatwine's *Enigmata 11* and *13*, and the traditional Eddic-style poem *Darraðarljóð* together engage in gender subversion that revolves around labor and violence.² Textile-making is

I am especially grateful to Irina Dumitrescu and Emma O'Loughlin Bérat for finding a home for this essay in their special issue, and for their comments, those of the reviewers and of Jennifer Edwards during the editorial process.

1. Enigmatic poetry refers to poems that make use of riddling motifs or are riddles in their own right.

2. On the difficulty of dating *Darraðarljóð* in relation to its historical referents, see Russell G. Poole, *Viking Poems on War and Peace: A Study in Skaldic Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 120–24; and Judy Quinn, "Darraðarljóð and *Njáls saga*," in *Die Faszination des Verborgenen und seine Entschlüsselung: Ræði sār kunni. Beiträge zur Runologie, skandinavistischen Mediävistik und germanischen Sprachwissenschaft*, ed. Jana Krüger, Vivian Busch, Katharina Seidel, Christiane Zimmerman, and Ute Zimmerman (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 299–313, 306–7.

a highly gendered activity historically linked to women, and this constructive process is frequently seen as opposed to the destructive, masculinized violence of warfare.³ This dichotomy simply does not hold in the case of the texts examined here, whose enigmatic nature encourages the questioning of binaries and slippage between categories that have been internalized as natural. Crucially, this subversion is eventually contained through the act of solving and interpreting, a part of the process that is essential to the enigmatic tradition.⁴ And yet, the space for gender play exists, and it demands our attention.

Why is it that enigmatic representations of textile production provide such a space? While emphasizing that violence in contexts other than warfare is relevant to the daily lives of all genders in this period, I argue here that the nature of the feminized labor of textile production—as both communal and highly visible—puts it on par with the masculinized work of warfare. Furthermore, both types of gendered labor feed into a culture of spectacle, making witnessing and sight essential to the way the texts navigate both domains. Through a discussion of textile production's cultural context and close readings of the above texts, I explore their insights into not only warfare, but also criminality and martyrdom, disability, and sexualized violence in early medieval England and Scandinavia. Ultimately, the visceral and highly visual nature of the poetic representations reflects a cultural familiarity with both textile-making and violence that readers with temporal distance run the risk of overlooking.

3. See for example Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work, the First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: Norton, 1994), esp. 29–41. In an early medieval context, the opposition of textile-making and warfare is seen most explicitly in scholarship concerned with women as “peace-weavers.” For an unpacking of this term and its use in scholarship, see Megan Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 280–95; and Peter S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence in Beowulf* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 103–38.

4. It is here that I differ from Jill Frederick's analysis of gender play in Exeter Book *Riddles* 35, 56, 70, and 90, in “The Weft of War in the Exeter Book *Riddles*,” in *Textiles, Text, Intertext: Essays in Honour of Gale R. Owen-Crocker*, ed. Maren Clegg Hyer and Jill Frederick (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2016), 139–52.

TEXTILES IN CONTEXT

Long before large-scale manufacture routed the cottage industry, and even before guilds regulated cloth production, most steps in the lengthy cycle from raw material to finished clothing were carried out by small community or household groups.⁵ Although some of these tasks were undertaken in dedicated spaces—the *dyngja* of Old Norse literature, for example, being a powerfully gendered space into which men may spy, but dare not enter—many of them involved outdoor processes.⁶ The complexity of textile-making in the early Middle Ages meant it was frequently on display.

The work was also varied, with a range of steps that were intricately tied to the farming cycle.⁷ Woolen cloth required the rearing and shearing of sheep, after which the dirty, raw wool went through several

5. Penelope Walton Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England: AD 450–700* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2006), 9–47. As the economic importance of textiles increased, the scale of production also grew. Hence, the list of textile tools in the eleventh-century *Gerefa* may indicate the presence of larger workshops. See Felix Liebermann, ed., *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols. (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1903–1916), 1:455; Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, rev. ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 280; Gale R. Owen-Crocker, Elizabeth Coatsworth, and Maria Hayward, eds., *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles of the British Isles, c. 450–1450* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 3–4 and 229–30; and Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, 44. Similarly, a move in textile-making from separate pit houses to more spacious rooms from the late tenth to twelfth centuries may be related to the growth of one of Iceland’s major industries. See Karen Milek, “The Roles of Pit Houses and Gendered Spaces on Viking-Age Farmsteads in Iceland,” *Medieval Archaeology* 56 (2012): 120–23.

6. The *dyngja* was a building or room within a farmstead, generally containing a sunken floor, that was set aside for tasks associated with textile production. See Karen Bek-Pedersen’s “Conversations in the *dyngja*,” *Cosmos* 27 (2011): 205–33; and *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011), 105–13.

7. For more on these processes and associated tools, see Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, 9–41; Owen-Crocker, *Dress*, 280–315; and Else Østergård, *Woven into the Earth: Textiles from Norse Greenland* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2004), 42–59.

stages including washing and combing before it could be spun. Linen production involved extra steps before spinning: extracting the fibers from the flax required rippling, retting, drying, breaking/pounding, scutching, and hackling. After the harvesting and drying of the flax, the stems were put through a ripple—a toothed comb set in a stand—to remove the pods. They were then left out to rot on damp ground or in a body of water until moisture broke down the hard exterior. This retting resulted in stringy, slimy stems whose resemblance to sinews provides one of many links between textile-making and violent imagery. The slimy stems were then dried over a kiln before the now-brittle rotten parts were pounded away with a wooden tool similar to a club. Following this breaking, the stems were laid over a board and scutched, with a wooden blade sweeping the waste away. In order to ensure that the natural bundles of flax fibers were split, they were hackled by scraping them along a wooden board with metal spikes in it. Thus, long before spinning, the production of textiles required hard labor that could easily bring to the fore associations with violent acts, particularly given the use of pointed, toothed, and club-like tools.

Although some of these initial steps included male participation, spinning and weaving are perhaps most associated with women.⁸ Indeed, spinning with a drop spindle attached at the waistband was a constant activity for many women, which could be undertaken at the same time as other tasks including childcare. Lest we mistake spinning for a non-strenuous activity because of this multitasking, Gale R. Owen-Crocker describes spinning's effects on the body:

We should forget any romantic notions of a tranquil medieval woman at her spinning wheel or embroidery frame. Cloth production was labour intensive. Demands on the spinner produced repetitive strain to the body which is occasionally visible on skeletal remains:

8. Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, 45. Note, however, that the names attributed to weavers in early medieval English manumission documents indicate that male slaves were also textile-makers. See H. H. E. Craster, "Some Anglo-Saxon Records of the See of Durham," *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4th ser., 1 (1925): 189–98, 190; and J. A. Earle, *Hand-Book to the Land Charters and Other Saxon Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888), 257 and 259.

the grooved tooth from whetting flax with saliva, the damaged ligaments from manipulating the spindle.⁹

Weaving the spun thread into cloth was strenuous as well, and involved the setting up of the loom, starter band, and warp. Weaving on a warp-weighted loom involved a great deal of beating, combing, and picking of the fabric so the weave remained tight.¹⁰ One of the tools used for this process was the sword-beater, which could be fashioned from wood, bone, or metal. Among the most fascinating finds for textile scholars has been a beater constructed from a pattern-welded sword, as well as several others likely crafted out of spear-heads.¹¹ Although beating up the woven threads made some space for further weaving, eventually the fabric would reach the limits of the wooden frame. At this point, the finished cloth was rolled or cranked up—particularly heavy work, given the clay weights at the bottom. In order to make the completed cloth less permeable to liquids, it could be fulled, which involved the pounding of water- and urine-soaked fabric until its fibers were sufficiently worked together.

The processes of early medieval textile production involved a great deal of striking and pounding, sometimes with specialized tools that resembled weapons. This work was also so time-consuming that even as late as 1760 (that is, after the introduction of the spinning wheel and

9. Owen-Crocker et al., *Encyclopedia*, 3.

10. For more on this and other loom-types, see Marta Hoffmann, *The Warp-Weighted Loom: Studies in the History and Technology of an Ancient Implement* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964); Owen-Crocker, *Dress*, 286–91; Owen-Crocker et al., *Encyclopedia*, 344–7; and Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, 28–35.

11. Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, 33–34; Brian Gilmour, “Appendix II: X-Radiographs of Two Objects: The Weaving Batten (24/3) and Sword (40/5),” in *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham*, ed. Catherine Hills, Kenneth Penn, and Robert Rickett, East Anglian Archaeology Report 21 (Dereham: Norfolk Archaeological Unit, 1984), 160–63; and Gail Drinkall, Martin Foreman, and Penelope Walton Rogers, “Craft and Weaving Equipment,” in *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Castledyke South, Barton-on-Humber*, ed. Gail Drinkall, Martin Foreman, and Martin G. Welch, Sheffield Excavation Reports 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 292–94.

faster loom technologies), women in agricultural households from Jämtland, Sweden devoted an average of eight months a year to it.¹² While women of higher status were far more likely to engage in less strenuous tasks like embroidery, it is worth noting the resemblance between the (much smaller!) tools of this craft and sharp weapons. Furthermore, Owen-Crocker notes that embroidery remained “a commercial business carried out by both men and women for the luxury market,” a market that relied on quality embroidery for both ecclesiastical and aristocratic contexts.¹³ Given the importance of luxury textiles in signaling status via clothing and decoration, it is not surprising that a great deal of time and skill were devoted to it.¹⁴ Thus, the complex and time-consuming nature of textile production—many stages of which involved physically exhausting processes that left their mark on the body—lends itself well to a metaphorical association with the similarly exertive work that occupied much of the male warrior classes’ time.

Although men were involved in certain aspects of textile production and women were involved in certain aspects of warfare in medieval Europe, the age-old division of the two activities according to gender persists in scholarly discourse.¹⁵ There is certainly something to be said for basing this division in cultural history. In the context of early medieval England, the frequently cited references to a woman belonging *æt hyre bordan* (at her embroidery) in *Maxims I* and to the female

12. Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, 9; and Eva Andersson, *The Common Thread: Textile Production during the Late Iron Age-Viking Age*, trans. Mårit Gaimster, Institute of Archaeology Report Series 67 (Lund: University of Lund, 1999), 7.

13. Owen-Crocker et al., *Encyclopedia*, 3.

14. Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, “Holy Women and the Needle Arts: Piety, Devotion, and Stitching the Sacred, ca. 500–1150,” in *Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe: Gender, Power, Patronage and the Authority of Religion in Latin Christendom*, ed. Scott Wells and Katherine Allen Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 95–125, 87.

15. See James M. Blythe, “Women in the Military: Scholastic Arguments and Medieval Images of Female Warriors,” *History of Political Thought* 22 (2001): 242–69; and Kimberly LoPrete, “Gendering Viragos: Medieval Perceptions of Powerful Women,” in *Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women, Volume 4: Victims or Viragos*, ed. Christine Meek (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 17–38.

line as the *spinlbealf* (spindle-side) versus the male as the *wæpnedbealf* (weapon-side) and *sperebealf* (spear-side) in King Alfred's will imply a prominent recognition of gendered work.¹⁶ Similarly, the famous passage from *Laxdæla saga* in which Guðrún equates her spinning and her husband's killing of Kjartan implies a witty recognition of labor division in medieval Iceland.¹⁷ This example reminds us that violence also occurred in contexts outside of warfare. The killing of Kjartan was the outcome of a feud rather than a battle, and it could just as easily be interpreted as either crime or punishment, or indeed both. Thus, when we are unpicking binaries, it is important to recognize that literature's metaphorical association of textile-making and violence may not reflect a perceived binary opposition that treats weaving and warfare as standing in for construction and destruction respectively. These are perhaps easily paired as labor-intensive occupations dominating a great deal of women's and men's time. Yet, emphasis of differences comes only after recognition of similarities. Indeed, given that the making of textiles ultimately hinges upon the aggressive un-making of raw material, it is not surprising that depictions of such work—to which this

16. George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 159, line 63b; and F. E. Harmer, ed., *Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 19, no. 11, lines 7, 9 and 15. The idea of spear- and spindle-kin is also preserved in a Thuringian law-code's reference to the male and female lines as *lancea* and *fusus*. Claudius von Schwerin, ed., *Leges Saxonum und Lex Thuringorum*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Fontes Iuris Germanici Antiqui (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1918), 61, no. 30, line 25.

17. See Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla saga*, *Íslenzk fornrit* 5 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenszka Fornritafélag, 1934), 154, ch. 49; Jonna Louis-Jensen, "A Good Day's Work: *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 49," in *Twenty-eight Papers Presented to Hans Bekker-Nielsen on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday 28 April 1993*, ed. Jørgen Højgaard Jørgensen and Elmer H. Antonsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1993), 76–84 (repr. in *Cold Counsel: Women of Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson [New York: Routledge, 2002], 189–99); and Nanna Damsholt, "The Role of Icelandic Women in the Sagas and in the Production of Homespun Cloth," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 9, no. 2 (1984): 75–90.

discussion will now turn—are marked by the violent imagery we have come to associate with warfare.

EXETER BOOK *RIDDLE 56*

The Old English riddles of the Exeter Book revel in the exploration of violence in a variety of manifestations. They show us, for example, a woman's defensive action in the face of home invasion (*Riddle 15*) and an enslaved figure's stoic response to his brutal treatment (*Riddle 72*), shedding metaphorical and sometimes heroic light on the quotidian violence that affected under-represented groups in the early medieval world. This critique is, however, undertaken within the safe space of the riddle, a genre that has long been associated with the controlled exploration of taboo subjects.¹⁸ Indeed, Jennifer Neville has argued that riddles employing the “implement trope” permit a subversion of hierarchical lord/retainer relationships that was otherwise unthinkable.¹⁹ Discussing the way the nobleman of *Riddle 50* serves and must be controlled by his people, Neville maintains: “The riddle-form can safely contain such heterodox thoughts; it is perfectly clear that this is a metaphor, not a literal description of a hierarchical relationship.”²⁰ With the solving of riddles, this subversion is contained: the lord who serves and must be controlled is just a cooking fire, the home invasion just an encounter between wild animals, the misery of slavery just another day on the farm. While the fact that the Exeter Book riddles do not travel with solutions allows some debate about their commitment to this containment—examples that

18. Roger D. Abrahams, “The Literary Study of the Riddle,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 177–97, 182; Elli Köngäs Maranda, “Riddles and Riddling: An Introduction,” *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (1976): 127–37, 131; and John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 54.

19. Jennifer Neville, “The Unexpected Treasure of the ‘Implement Trope’: Hierarchical Relationships in the Old English Riddles,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 62, no. 256 (2011): 505–19.

20. Neville, “Unexpected Treasure,” 518.

directly call for a solution certainly indicate the investment of the genre as a whole in this final step of the game.²¹

When it comes to textile production and violence, the relevant Exeter Book riddle— *Riddle 56*—is generally taken to depict a warp-weighted loom in terms of a physical fight:²²

Ic wæs þær inne
 winnende wiht
 holt hweorfende;
 deopra dolga.
 weo þære wihte,
 fæste gebunden.
 biidfast oþer,
 leolc on lyfte,
 Treow wæs getenge
 leafum bihongen.
 minum hlaforde,
 þara flana,

21. I discuss the complexity of this containment in elegiac riddles in particular, in “A Poetics of Empathy? Non-human Experience in the Bovine Riddles of Early Medieval England,” in *Medieval Ecocriticisms*, ed. Heide Estes (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming).

22. Note that the numbering of riddles is an editorial practice and therefore not fixed; I follow Krapp and Dobbie’s numbering here. The most convincing alternative solution is “lathe,” which Hans Pinsker and Waltraud Ziegler support (but do not elaborate upon) in their edition, *Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exeterbuchs*, Anglistische Forschungen 183 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1985), 277–78.

þær ic ane geseah
 wido bennegean,
 heaþoglemma feng,
 Daroþas wæron
 ond se wudu searwum
 Hyre fota wæs
 oþer bisgo dreag,
 hwilum londe neah.
 þam þær torhtan stod
 Ic lafe geseah
 þær hæleð druncon,
 on flet beran.²³

(I was inside there, where I saw a wooden object wounding a certain struggling creature, the turning wood; it received battle-wounds, deep gashes. Darts were woeful to that creature, and the wood skillfully bound fast. One of its feet was held fixed, the other endured affliction, leapt into the air, sometimes near the land. A tree, hung about by leaves, was near to that bright thing [which] stood there. I saw the leavings of those arrows, carried onto the floor to my lord, where the warriors drank.)

In order for us to solve the object speaking in this riddle as “loom,” we must take the struggling creature as the cloth, which is in the process of being woven. The swinging foot may represent the movement of one row of the weighted warp threads or the heddle rod, which would make the fastened foot either the second row of warp threads or the loom posts.²⁴ The turning wood likely refers to a bar holding the com-

23. Krapp and Dobbie, *Exeter Book*, 208. Note that I have followed Craig Williamson’s emendation of line 12a (MS: *þara flan*; Krapp and Dobbie: *þara flana geweore*), in *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 307. All Old English and Latin translations are my own.

24. Erika von Erhardt-Siebold argues for the former reading in “The Old English Loom Riddles,” in *Philologica: The Malone Anniversary Studies*, ed. Thomas A. Kirkby and Henry Bosley Woolf (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1949), 15. Maren Clegg Hyer suggests the latter interpretation in Owen-Crocker et al., *Encyclopedia*, 456.

pleted portion of the fabric, which, as noted above, could be rotated to allow for weaving fabric longer than the length of the loom. John D. Niles has already explored the similarities between looms and devices for hanging or stretching criminals, and this certainly seems to be key to the image of the fabric struggling against the turning wood.²⁵

Perhaps the most important feature for this article's purposes is the reference to both *darobas* (darts) and *flanas* (arrows). These piercing objects may represent the shuttle, sword- or pin-beaters, and notably produce battle-wounds (indicated by the term *heapoglemma*) and deep gashes (indicated by *deopra dolga*). The grammar of lines 4b–6a (*Darobas weron / weo þere wihte, ond se wudu searwum / feste gebunden*) also deserves an explanation, since a direct translation makes the relationship between darts and wood ambiguous. *Darobas* is a nominative plural form governing the verb “to be,” while *se wudu* likely represents a split subject since it is also nominative and the only verb in close proximity is *gebunden*, a past participle. This passage should, therefore, be interpreted as: “darts and the wood [that was] skillfully bound fast were woeful to that creature.” Likewise, in lines 2–3a, although it is grammatically unclear whether the *holt hweorfende* (turning wood) refers to the preceding *wido* (wooden object) that does the wounding or the *win-nende wiht* (struggling creature) who is the victim, the semantic link between *holt* and *wido* makes it more likely that these two elements are in apposition with one another. What we have, then, is a type of violence that involves both piercing and binding. While this poem is clearly placed within the context of heroic society by lines 11–12's reference to a lord's hall, in which the camaraderie of drinking warriors takes place, the fact that the violence targets a bound figure implies torture rather than battle. I have already discussed *Riddle 56*'s imagery and heroic diction elsewhere, particularly probing the association between high-status, woven objects and torture, execution and martyrdom.²⁶ It is, however, worth dwelling on the context of this violent undertaking further.

Just as the bound nature of the riddle victim indicates torture, the fact that the speaker describes the encounter as taking place indoors,

25. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 81–83.

26. Megan Cavell, “Looming Danger and Dangerous Looms: Violence and Weaving in Exeter Book *Riddle 56*,” *Leeds Studies in English* 42 (2011): 29–42; revised in *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*, 17–47.

in a space separate from the activity of the hall (the leavings are then carried onto the hall floor), implies once again that this is not a battle-scene *per se*. We could read the reference to the hall as connoting secular law and order, with the tortured victim a criminal, as suggested by Niles's reading of the *hengen*. In this case, the cloth produced in *Riddle 56* would perhaps be a tapestry or decoration for an actual hall, and the heroic imagery taken at face value. Or, we could read the hall metaphorically, as a church—or even heaven—in which martyrs following the path of Christ's crucifixion are witnessed and received. The riddle's imagery may especially suggest the widely circulated stories of St. Sebastian and St. Edmund's binding to trees and wounding by arrows. In this case, the riddle's cloth would be a tapestry or decoration for display in ecclesiastical contexts, and the heroic imagery both an indication of status and an invocation of the *miles Christi* (soldier of Christ) motif.

Either way, the speaker refers to the lord of the hall as their own lord (*minum blaforde*), while the distance created by the speaker's self-identification as witness rather than participant sets them apart from the drinking warriors. This witnessing also arguably sets the speaker apart from the torturers, but given that various objects are themselves attributed with this role, we need not assume that the speaker is uninvolved in the weaving process. Who, then, might inhabit the perspective of the speaker? There are too few clues in the poem to suggest that a definitive answer is called for, especially considering the performative and enigmatic contexts of riddling, but it is still tempting to suggest that the speaker is a woman in the hall or in the church. She is set apart from the activities of the warrior band or clergy, while her own work (or the work of other women) is simultaneously identified in terms that would be accessible to these male-dominated groups. Indeed, the focus is on the production of a high-status object that is worthy of being presented to a lord—whether in aristocratic or ecclesiastical contexts. This emphasis on object as opposed to producer is not surprising given Old English poetry's fascination with prestige goods. In fact, (metaphorical) weaver terminology only occurs three times in Old English poetry, indicating a greater interest in woven objects or the weaving process than those responsible for producing these objects.²⁷

27 See the instances of the compound *friþuwebba/e* (peace-weaver) in *Beow-*

This can be contrasted to the metal-smith who is mentioned thirteen times in verse.²⁸ Whether we interpret such a difference in terms of the value of gendered labor or in terms of textile production's communal nature—that is, there is no single author of a textile item—what we end up with is a poem that imagines the voyeuristic witnessing of a violent construction process in simultaneously disturbing and celebratory terms.²⁹

TATWINE'S *ENIGMATA*

The voyeuristic narrative perspective of *Riddle 56* sets it apart from the remaining early English riddles that pair textile production and violence, which are both delivered in the first person. These derive from the Latin *enigmata* composed by the eighth-century Archbishop of Canterbury, Tatwine.³⁰ Anglo-Latin *enigmata* form an important part

ulf, line 1942a; *Elene*, line 88a; and *Widsið*, line 6a in Klaeber's *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Vercelli Book*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 68; and Krapp and Dobbie, *Exeter Book*, 149.

28. According to a search of the *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus*, ed. Antonette diPaolo Healey, John Price Wilkin, and Xin Xiang (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2009), accessed December 18, 2018, <http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/pages/pub/web-corpus.html>, *s.v.* *smiþ* and *smið*.

29. Because of their delight in subversion, the Exeter Book riddles are some of the only poems in Old English to provide evidence for types of labor that fall outside the corpus' high-status/male priorities. Hence, we have other types of women's work (such as food production) appearing in *Riddles 25* and *45*, as well as descriptions of enslaved figures at work in, for example, *Riddles 12* and *72*.

30. For further enigmatic references to textiles, see Aldhelm's *Enigma 12* (silkworm), *33* (mail-coat), *45* (spindle), and *86* (ram); Symphosius's *Enigma 17* (spider) and *55* (needle); and Bern *Enigma 43* (silkworms) and *54* (weaver's beam), in Fr. Glorie, ed., *Variae Collectiones Aenigmatum Merovingicae Aetatis*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 133–133A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 133:395, 417, 431, and 505, and 133A:638, 676, 589, 601. The use of textile imagery in a riddle about armor makes Aldhelm's *Enigma 33* an interesting counterpoint to *Riddle 56*, particularly given that it is translated into two Old English dialects: the eighth/ninth-century Northumbrian version is known as

of the early medieval insular riddle tradition, and they far outnumber the surviving Old English riddles of the Exeter Book.³¹ They, furthermore, differ in their overwhelming predilection for the first-person perspective and for traveling with their solutions as titles.³² On the whole, the Anglo-Latin riddles of Tatwine (and his predecessors and contemporaries) appear to be rhetorical experiments fully committed to containing their subversive elements. When it comes to textile production and violence, Tatwine's interest in bringing these topics together is especially indicated by *Enigmata 11* and *13*, which are devoted to the needle. Despite their different perspectives (when compared to Exeter Book *Riddle 56*), both *enigmata* similarly emphasize the visibility and violence associated with the luxury textiles they depict.

The relationship between sight and violence is ironically handled in the first of Tatwine's textile riddles. *Enigma 11, De acu* (on the

The Leiden Riddle and the later West Saxon version appears as *Riddle 35* in the Exeter Book. See Elliot van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Minor Poems*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 6 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 109; and Krapp and Dobbie, *Exeter Book*, 198. Note, however, that these poems' focus on material and function rather than visibility precludes them from discussion here. For more on these poems, see Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*, 47–67; Thomas Klein, "The Old English Translation of Aldhelm's Riddle *Lorica*," *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 48, no. 191 (1997): 345–49; Benjamin Weber, "The Isidorian Context of Aldhelm's "Lorica" and Exeter Riddle 35," *Neophilologus* 96, no. 3 (2012): 457–66; and Frederick, "Weft of War," 142–45.

31. For more on this tradition as a whole, see Mercedes Salvador-Bello, *Isidorian Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2015); and Megan Cavell, Jennifer Neville, and Victoria Symons, "General Introduction," in *Riddles at Work in the Early Medieval Tradition: Words, Ideas, Interactions*, ed. Megan Cavell and Jennifer Neville (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 1–15.

47. Although Andy Orchard makes a case for complicating this easy separation in "Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Tradition," in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. Andy Orchard and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 2:284–304.

needle) particularly emphasizes the construction of the needle as taking place in an inferno:

Torrens me genuit fornax uiscere flammae,
 Conditor inualido et finxit me corpore luscam;
 Sed constat nullum iam sine me uiuere posse.
 Est mirum dictum, cludam ni lumina uultus,
 Condere non artis penitus molimina possum.³³

(A burning furnace brought me forth from its flaming interior; my maker molded me and my weak body one-eyed, but it is certain that no one now could live without me. It is strange to say, unless one blocks up the lights of my face [i.e., eyes], I cannot produce by my art the slightest undertaking.)

That the needle is imagined as a first-person speaker provides us with the opportunity to explore early English approaches to physical impairment and disability, especially when the needle refers to itself as *luscam* (one-eyed) and with an *inualido* (weak) body.³⁴ What is clearly

33. Glorie, *Variae Collectiones Aenigmatum*, 133:178. Note that for line 3, Glorie includes the feminine form *nullam*, despite the clear reference to neuter *nullum* in both manuscripts (Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.V. 35 and London, British Library, MS Royal 12. C. xxiii). For other editions reading *nullum*, see: J. A. Giles, *Anecdota Bedae Lanfranci et aliorum: Inedita Tracts, Letters, Poems, etc. of Venerable Bede, Lanfranc, Tatwin and Others* (London: Nutt, 1851), 28; Thomas Wright, *The Anglo-Latin Satirical Poets and Epigrammatists of the Twelfth Century*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1872), 2:528; Adolf Ebert, “Die Rätselpoesie der Angelsachsen, insbesondere die Aenigmata des Tatwine und Eusebius,” *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-Historische Classe* 28 (1877): 35; and Mary Jane McDonald Williams, “The Riddles of Tatwine and Eusebius” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1974), 120. McDonald Williams notes that “perhaps typographical errors are responsible” for Glorie’s unexplained variant.

34. For a discussion of impairment and the difficulties of defining “disability” in early medieval England, see Christina Lee, “Abled, Disabled, Enabled: An Attempt to Define Disability in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Werkstatt Geschichte* 65 (2014): 41–54.

represented as a disadvantage is turned into an asset when the needle is put to use, a use that, as line 4 indicates, ironically requires full blinding of the one-eyed creature. Note the wordplay on the verb *cludere*, whose transitive form means “to close” or “shut up” and intransitive form means “to limp”; an association is drawn here between two different types of physical impairment. This association is further carried across to the adjectival form, *cluda*, meaning “lame” or “defective,” indicating a distinctly negative and ableist approach to impairment. Thus, in the literal blocking of the needle’s eye with thread, the impaired object is disabled. Yet, as line 3 makes clear, it is through this visual disabling that the needle enacts an art that is essential for humankind. As Christina Lee argues, albeit in relation to religious contexts in which affliction could mark some out as God’s chosen people, “[i]mpairment is not always disabling—it can be an ability, too.”³⁵ The needle’s blinding is similarly portrayed as an ability—as necessary for it to perform its craft; the puzzling and enigmatic nature of this particular text does, however, emphasize that this is not the norm—at least in the highly visual context of the production of textiles and perhaps in lay society more generally.

Enigma 11’s imagery of blinding and weakness, which plays with the necessity of damaging one object in order to construct another, can be further contextualized by other early English depictions of blindness. The putting out of another person’s eyes was sufficiently serious to merit attention in several law-codes.³⁶ Notably, sight—and not just that of the victim—plays an important role in how this injury was penalized. As Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe puts it, “[i]njuries which are visible are more heavily compensated than those which are not seen.”³⁷ This is linked to the fact that eye-gouging was also an acceptable punishment for crimes, as the second law-code of Cnut demonstrates:

35. Lee, “Abled, Disabled, Enabled,” 53.

36. For a discussion of the value of eyes in Germanic law-codes, see Lisi Oliver, *The Body Legal in Barbarian Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 92–94, 137–40, 169, and 248–61.

37. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Body and Law in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 27 (1998): 209–32, 215.

& gyf h[e] ðonne gyt mare weorc geweorht hæbbe, ðonne do man ut his eagan & ceorfan of his nose & earan & ða uferan lippan oððe hine hættian, swylc ðisra swa man wyle, oððe ðonne geræde ða ðe ðærto rædan sceolon; swa man sceal steoran & eac ðære saule beorgan.³⁸

(And if he has wrought a still greater crime, then let someone put out his eyes, and cut off his nose and his ears and upper lip or scalp him, whichever of these is desired, or advised by they with whom the decision rests; thus one shall punish and likewise save the soul.)

O'Brien O'Keeffe notes that mutilated bodies are often inscribed with guilt, and early English authors writing about those innocent of crime could go to great lengths to disavow such associations. Interpreting violently injured bodies is not straightforward: "Mutilation designed for the living body serves multiple purposes. Whatever its function as deterrence, juridical mutilation produces a body about which things may be known. The spectacle of such a body continually announces both crime and punishment."³⁹ As both an action that required mediation by law and as a legal repercussion for crime, blinding was ultimately a method of weaponizing disability in order to force submission. Perhaps the most notable poetic examples include the *Death of Alfred*, which appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* at year 1036, and the apocryphal *Andreas*.⁴⁰ In the first of these examples, a potential heir to the throne is bound and blinded in order to negate

38. Agnes J. Robertson, ed., *The Laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 190, no. 30.5. Note, however, that this particular punishment is rare in England before the Conquest; see Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 31–33.

39. O'Brien O'Keeffe, "Body and Law," 230.

40. For other references to blinding in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, see *s.a.* 933 (C, D and E versions), *s.a.* 1006 (C, E and F versions), *s.a.* 1075/1076 (E and D versions, respectively), and *s.a.* 1086 (E version), in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition: MS C*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, vol. 5 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 87 and 91; *MS D*, ed. G. P. Cubbin, vol. 6 (1996), 49 and 87; *MS E*, ed. Susan Irvine, vol. 7 (2004), 61, 65, 91, and 97; and *MS F*, ed. Peter S. Baker, vol. 8 (2000), 99.

his claim, but only after his enemy variously *sealde* (sold into slavery), *acwealde* (murdered), *bende* (imprisoned), *blende* (blinded), *hamelode* (hamstrung), and *hettode* (scalped) the heir's companions.⁴¹

In the second example, the cannibalistic Mermedonians imprison, blind, and drug victims before eating them:

Swylc wæs þæs folces
 unlædra eafodð,
 hettend heorogrimme,
 agetton gealgmode
 freoðoleas tacen,
 þæt hie eagena gesihð,
 heafodgimmas
 gara ordum.⁴²

(Such was the practice of that peace-less people, the violence of the wretched ones, that they, sword-savage enemies, seized the sight of their eyes, the jewels of the head, gallows-minded, with the points of spears.)

This is the fate that awaits St. Matthew, although St. Andrew rescues him before the Mermedonians invite him to dinner. The act of blinding a person in the literature of early medieval England is, thus, viewed as a drastic action that is intentionally destructive, particularly when the victim is innocent of crime. Furthermore, given that the blinding of an heir to the throne was enough to put a stop to his claim, we may conclude that the blind were not considered able to work as productively as the sighted. The irony of *Enigma 11*'s needle, then, is that it is *only* able to work when blind. The key to the riddle is that the needle's perceived weakness is its strength, a potentially subversive idea that is contained when we solve the riddle and recognize it as no more than an object for human use. Ultimately, *Enigma 11*'s emphasis on the needle's sight and blinding speaks to both the visual significance of textiles and their production, and the injured body as spectacle. Both

41. Dobbie, *Minor Poems*, 24–25, lines 6–10 and 19–20. Note that the variety of bodily attacks may stem from the use of rhyme that governs this passage.

42. Krapp, *Vercelli Book*, 3–4, lines 29–32.

are meant to be seen and interpreted, though their interpretation is especially complicated in a society in which violent disabling could be carried out as a means of punishment.

Less violent, though perhaps more disturbing given its sexual connotations, is *Enigma 13*, which is solved as *De acu pictili* (on the embroidery needle). Perhaps a more appropriate solution to the riddle would be the embroidered fabric itself, since the needle only merits a passing reference, while the focus is on the speaking textile:

Reginae cupiunt animis me cernere, nec non
 Reges mulcet adesse mei quoque corporis usus;
 Nam multos uario possum captare decore.
 Quippe meam gracilis faciem iugulauerat hospes,
 Nobilior tamen ad crescit decor inde genarum.⁴³

(In their hearts, queens are eager to see me, and the enjoyment of my body also delights nearby kings; for I am able to captivate many with my wide-ranging beauty. Of course, a slim stranger has in the past slit my face, yet the beauty of my cheeks grows nobler from then on.)

Singling out the high-status context of embroidery, Tatwine sets the scene in an appropriately royal environment. The delight that these nobles take in their fine fabric is couched in innuendo, signaled by the opening lines' use of *cupere* (to long for or desire), alongside body terminology (that is, *corporis*) and carried across the double meanings of several key terms: *mulcere* (to stroke or delight), *usus* (use or enjoyment), and *captare* (to captivate, seize, or entice).⁴⁴ Together, these elements present another voyeuristic scene, though one that celebrates violence in a very different way.

The casual reference to physical violence in the final lines, in which a *hospes* (stranger) slits the speaker's face in order to increase the fabric's beauty, takes this voyeurism to a new level. In fact, the violence in

43 Glorie, *Variae Collectiones Aenigmatum*, 133:180.

44. See also Mercedes Salvador-Bello, "The Sexual Riddle Type in Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, the Exeter Book and Early Medieval Latin," *Philological Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2011): 357–85, 364.

this image is perhaps stronger than my translation implies: *ingulare's* specific connotations relate to throat-slitting and murder. Although Mercedes Salvador-Bello reads these lines as shifting emphasis so the face that is pierced is the needle's and the "slim stranger" is the thread, the speaker's reference to their increased beauty being tied to their piercing strongly implies that the fabric is the focus throughout the poem, with the needle being the "slim stranger."⁴⁵ This makes sense, given that needles are known for their ability to pierce, while thread is not—though, of course, both readings could be present simultaneously, given the text's enigmatic nature. The focus on bodily *decor* (beauty) also makes it tempting to read the fabric as a feminized figure and the aggressive—even phallic—needle (itself a victim of aggression in the previous enigma) as a masculinized figure. This gendering is perhaps implicit within the association between embroidery and women.

Furthermore, the association of a violent act and embroidery in this poem relates to an assumption about beauty that requires perfect, or at least whole, features. That is, the poem implies that someone whose face is visibly marred is not beautiful. It implies this through its ironic twist: the already alluring figure is made even more beautiful through the cutting of their face. Just as blinding of the worker augments their skill in *Enigma 11*, the incongruity here—that violence inscribed upon the body increases its desirability—is explained away by the solution. This is not a human; it is only cloth.

As with *Riddle 56*, *Enigma 13* includes an aspect of gender that is hiding off-stage. Embroidery was predominantly women's work in early medieval England, so the violent encounter between feminized fabric and needle is governed by a woman.⁴⁶ She could be one of the queens mentioned in the poem, another aristocratic lady or even a nun or abbess (which would, perhaps, make the sexualized imagery especially salacious). Regardless of who she is imagined to be, her work is certainly condoned by queens and kings alike, who voyeuristically look on. The aggression in this poem, though explicitly connected to the objects depicted, is thus also implicitly aligned with the creator of this high-quality fabric. She is an accomplice in the attack on the speaker, a charge that

45. Salvador-Bello, "Sexual Riddle."

46. Owen-Crocker, *Dress*, 308–9.

would be significant were the speaker not an inanimate object. But in solving the riddle, the violent—even deviant—behavior of the embroiderer is contained. The spectacle of sexualized violence is celebrated here, since it signals the communal enjoyment of a high-status object.

DARRAÐARLJÓÐ

Our final poem stems from an Old Norse tradition that presents textile-making women in a variety of literary contexts.⁴⁷ In *Darraðarljóð*, a poem embedded within *Njáls saga*,⁴⁸ the gendered work of textile production and warfare are explicitly inverted to gruesome effect.

Darraðarljóð is not itself a riddle, although it *is* enigmatic. One key rhetorical feature of Old Norse poetry is its use of kennings—circumlocutory metaphorical phrases or compounds in the place of more straightforward nouns—which have themselves been read as riddles in miniature by scholars working within both the Scandinavian and English traditions.⁴⁹ In the opening stanza of *Darraðarljóð*, a kenning is used to riddling effect: the warp threads are referred to as *rifs reiðiský* (the hanging cloud of the loom-beam), obscuring the very act of textile production upon which the poem’s metaphorical power relies. And yet, this kenning is only one feature that marks out *Darraðarljóð* as enigmatic. As the text quoted below indicates, there are a number of terms whose meaning continues to elude scholars even today, and the poetic scene itself takes the form of a mysterious, supernatural event witnessed by a character who seems to have been wholly invented on punning, linguistic grounds.⁵⁰ While this enigmatic poem does not contain its subversive elements by

47. See Joyce Tally Lionarons, “Women’s Work and Women’s Magic as Literary Motifs in Icelandic Sagas,” in *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T. A. Shippey*, ed. Andrew Wawn, Graham Johnson, and John Walter, Making the Middle Ages 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 301–17.

48. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga, Íslenzk fornrit 12* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954), 454–59, ch. 157.

49. John Lindow, “Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry,” *Scandinavian Studies* 47, no. 3 (1975): 311–27; Ann Harleman Stewart, “Kenning and Riddle in Old English,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 15, no. 2 (1979): 115–36.

50. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 129–31; Quinn, “*Darraðarljóð* and *Njáls saga*,” 308.

directly soliciting a solution, as riddles do, its invocation within a saga does suggest a certain element of containment. It asks to be solved by being read symbolically or at the very least metaphorically in order to shed light on the wider saga narrative.⁵¹

The saga places this poem in the context of the Battle of Clontarf of 1014, although it is possible that it originally described a tenth-century battle, with the lack of specific identifiers allowing it to be repurposed.⁵² The complexity of the poem's context is amplified by the reference to a Caithness man witnessing the events of the poem in the prose that immediately precedes it.⁵³ The prose passage reads:

Fǫstumorgininn varð sá atburður á Katanesi, at maðr sá, er Dǫrruðr hét, gekk út. Hann sá, at menn riðu tólf saman til dyngju nǫkkurar ok hurfu þar allir. Hann gekk til dyngjunnar ok sá inn í glugg einn, er á var, ok sá, at þar vǫru konur inni ok hǫfðu vef upp færðan. Mannahǫfuð vǫru fyrir kljána, en þarmar ór mǫnnum fyrir viptu ok garn, sverð var fyrir skeið, en ǫr fyrir hræl. Þær kváðu þá vísur nǫkkurar.⁵⁴

(On the morning of Good Friday, this event occurred at Caithness, that a man called Dǫrruðr went out. He saw that twelve persons rode together to a certain outhouse and there all of them disappeared. He went to the outhouse and looked in through a window which was set in it, and saw that women were inside and had set up their weaving. Men's heads served as loomweights and intestines from men as weft and warp, a sword as the sword-beater and an arrow as the pin-beater. Then they spoke some verses.)

51. Quinn, "Darradarljóð and Njáls saga," 299.

52. See Nora Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 116; and Poole, *Viking Poems*, 122–25 (see 120–24, 139–40, and 150–51 for more on both battles identified as contexts for this poem).

53. This Scottish connection may relate to the link between *Darradarljóð* and the banner from chapter 11 of *Orkneyinga saga*. Bek-Pedersen, *Norns*, 143; and Anne Holtsmark, "Vefr Darradar," *Maal og Minne*, 1939, 74–96.

54. The edition and translation of the prose frame and poem, as quoted throughout, are from Poole, *Viking Poems*, 119.

Unlike the early English riddles, which employ violent imagery in relation to the textile-making process, this Scandinavian poem depicts an encounter with the weavers themselves, as they transform body parts into gruesome cloth.⁵⁵ Although the metaphorical link between severed [*m*]annahöfuð (human heads) and the round *kljána* (loom-weights)—tied so that thread hangs down around them—may seem obvious, the association of *þarmar* (intestines) with the *viptu ok garn* (warp and weft threads) requires some knowledge of the inner workings of the human body. Similarly, the use of an actual *sverð* (sword) and *qr* (arrow) for beaters (as indicated by the terms *skeið* and *hrel*) requires some knowledge of the process of weaving.⁵⁶ This knowledge is confirmed by the poem's opening stanzas:

Vítt er orpit
fyrir valfalli
rifs reiðiský:
rignir blóði.
Nú er fyrir geirum
grár upp kominn
vefr verþjóðar,

55. *Jómsvíkingasaga* includes a remarkable prose analogue, in which Ingibjörg dreams that she is herself an unintentional weaver of grotesque fabric: “Þat dreymði mik, segir hon, ‘at ek þóttumk hér stödd á þessum bæ, en ek þóttumk uppi eiga einn vef. Hann var grár at lit. Mér þótti kljáðr vefrinn ok var ek at at slá vefinn. Þá fell af einn kléinn af miðjum vefnum á bak. Þá sá ek at kljárnir váru manna höfuð ein. Ok ek tók upp þetta höfuð ok kenda ek” (“I dreamed,” she said, “that I was staying here on this estate and I thought that I had a grey-coloured cloth in the loom. It seemed as though the weights were attached to the cloth and I was weaving. When one of the weights fell down behind from the middle of the cloth, I noticed that the weights were the heads of men. I took up that head and recognised it”). N. F. Blake, ed. and trans., *The Saga of the Jomsvíkings* (London: Nelson, 1962), 10, ch. 8.

56. Interestingly, a thirteenth-century Norse *skeið* (beater) from Greenland bears an engraving of two figures carrying swords. Bek-Pedersen, *Norns*, 145; Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 57; and Aage Roussel, *Farms and Churches in the Mediaeval Norse Settlements of Greenland* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1941), 276.

er vinur fylla
 rauðum vepti
 Randvés bana.

Sjá er orpinn vefr
 ýta þørmum
 ok harðkljáðr
 hǫfðum manna;
 eru dreyrrekin
 dǫrr at skǫptum,
 járnvarðr yllir
 en ǫrum ?hælaðr?
 Skulum slá sverðum
 sigrvef þenna.⁵⁷

(Far and wide / with the fall of the dead / a warp is set up: / blood rains down. / Now, with the spears, a grey woven fabric / of warriors is formed, / which women friends / ?of Randvér's killer? / complete with a red weft. // The fabric is warped / with men's intestines / and firmly weighted / with men's heads; / bloodstained spears serve / as heddle rods, / the shed rod is ironclad / and ?pegged? with arrows. / With our swords we must strike / this fabric of victory.)

Apart from their linguistic difficulties, these stanzas offer a remarkably clear depiction of both violence and textile production, which are together voiced by female figures. The stretching of the vertical threads on a loom is present in the kenning noted above—*rifs reiðiský* (the hanging cloud of the loom-beam), which is translated by Russell G. Poole simply as “warp”—as are references to the *vepti* (weft) and the fabric term *-vefr* (compounded once as *sigrvef* [victory-cloth]). Weapons also abound, with *dǫrr* (spears) representing the heddle rods that move the warp threads in order to produce the pattern and weave, and *ǫrvar* (arrows) the shed-rod that maintains the space through which the weft passes. While the weavers are depicted as actively striking the fabric with swords at the end of the second stanza—likely a reference

57. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 116. Note that Poole uses italics and question marks throughout his edition and translation to indicate emendations and his suggestions for terms whose definitions are unclear or contested.

to the beating up of the threads in the completed portion of weaving—it would seem from the first stanza that the fall of warriors contributes to the weaving of the fabric rather than vice versa.⁵⁸ The warp is set up with the *valfalli* (fall of the dead), and *rignir blóði* (blood rains down) as a result.⁵⁹

The descriptive opening lines make way in Stanzas 3–6 for specific details, including the names of several weavers, identified as Valkyries:

Gengr Hildr vefa
ok Hjörþrimul,
Sanngríðr, Svipul,
sverðum tognum:
skapt mun gnesta,
skjöldr mun bresta,
mun hjalmgagarr
í hlíf koma.

Vindum vindum
vef darraðar
þann? er ungr konungr
átti fyrri:
fram skulum ganga
ok í folk vaða
þar er vinir várir
vápnum skipta.

Vindum vindum
vef darraðar
ok siklingi
síðan fylgjum:
þar sá þbragna?
blóðgar randir
Gunnr ok Gøndul
þar er grami hlífðu.

58. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 136–37.

59. See Poole, *Viking Poems*, 144, for an interpretation of the timeline of the poem's events.

Vindum vindum
 vef darraðar⁶⁰
 þar er vé vaða
 vígra manna:
 látum eigi
 líf hans farask;
 eiga valkyrjur
 vals um kosti.⁶¹

(Hildir goes to weave / and Hjörþrimul, / Sanngríðr, Svipul, / with
 unsheathed swords: / the shaft will break, / the shield will shatter,
 / the sword will / pierce armor. // Let us wind, let us wind / the
 weaving of the ?pennant? / ?which? the young king / had before: /
 we must go / and advance into the throng / where our friends / set
 weapon against weapon. // Let us wind, let us wind / the weaving
 of the ?pennant? / and follow the prince / afterwards: / there Gun-
 nr and Gøndul, / who protected the king, / saw ?men's? shields /
 covered in blood. // Let us wind, let us wind / the weaving of the
 ?pennant? / there where the standards / of fighting men go forth:
 / let us not permit / his life to be lost; / the Valkyries have / their
 choice of the slain.)

Whether these stanzas indicate a causal link between the women's weaving and the events of the battle is the subject of debate.⁶² The sword-bearing Valkyries may or may not be responsible for the list of violent actions that follows their naming, but certainly the futurity indicated by their repetitive use of the auxiliary verb *munu* (will) raises the possibility of a speech act. If the named figures in Stanzas 3 and 5 are in fact responsible for the violence, then it seems to be a fairly hands-off involvement. Indeed, the urgency implied by their rushing

60. The meaning of this phrase has been hotly contested. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 125–26, outlines the arguments for taking *darraðar* as a reference to fabric rather than spears, drawing on the work of Holtsmark, “Vefr Darraðar,” 88.

61. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 116–17.

62. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 131–42; Quinn, “*Darraðarljóð* and *Njáls saga*,” 302; Bek-Pedersen, *Norms*, 139–40; Lionarons, “Women’s Work,” 303; Holtsmark, “Vefr Darraðar,” 93; and Klaus von See, “Das Walkürenlied,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 81 (1959): 1–15.

í folk (into the throng) and their protecting of the king at the end of Stanza 5 is at odds with the poem's separation of women and warriors: it is the speakers' *vinir* (friends) who raise swords and fight. The Valkyries follow, see, permit, and choose the slain, as indicated by the verbal forms *fylgjum*, *sá*, *látum*, and noun *kosti*, respectively. They guide and they witness, just as they are themselves being witnessed.

With Stanza 7, interestingly, the poem temporarily shifts from the first-person plural to the singular:

Deir munu lýðir
 lǫndum ráða
 er útskaga
 áðr um byggðu:
 kveð ek ríku gram
 ráðinn dauða;
 nú er fyrir oddum
 jarlmaðr hniginn.⁶³

(Those men will / rule the lands / who dwelt until this time / on the outlying headlands: / I say that death is decreed / for the mighty king; / now the earl has sunk down / before the spears.)

Thus, it is one speaker—*ek* (I)—who announces that death is decreed for the king. The lack of weaving imagery in this stanza is explained in the following one, which emphasizes the completion of the fabric:

Ok muni Írar
 angr um bíða
 þat er aldri mun
 ýtum fyrnask:
 Nú er vefr ofinn
 en vǫllr roðinn;
 mun um land fara
 læspjöll gota.⁶⁴

63. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 117.

64. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 118.

(And the Irish will / undergo grief / which will never fade / in
men's memories; / now the fabric is woven / and the field dyed red;
/ the tidings of men's destruction / will travel throughout the land.)

The completion of this fabric is, notably, seen to coincide with the bloodying of the battlefield. Once again, whether or not they are causally linked or simply metaphorically associated, the process of weaving runs parallel to the process of fighting.

Poole, who links *Darraðarljóð*, Exeter Book *Riddle 56*, and several early Irish analogs, argues that “similarities were perceived between weaving and battle in the type of persons who participate, the implements they use, and the appearance of the finished product. There is of course a distinction between the Valkyries, who have oversight of the fighting in some way, and the warriors, who are mere raw material.”⁶⁵ The use of humans as raw material is in many ways the inverse of the early English riddles, which “prize above all ... the way things turn to the welfare of humankind.”⁶⁶ Niles interprets this riddling tendency in relation to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological work on the representation of the nature/culture binary in terms of the “raw” and the “cooked.”⁶⁷ Perhaps a more useful and relevant metaphor for the nature/culture binary that the textile riddles depict would be the “free” and the “bound.”⁶⁸ Thus, the raw material of created objects must be trapped and (often violently) yoked together through human manufacturing processes. Recognizing the potential violence of that manufacture, *Darraðarljóð* employs humans as raw material, drawing into this metaphor the broader associations of battle and supernatural binding that we find in other Germanic texts.⁶⁹

65. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 138, who discusses Irish analogues at 139–40.

66. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 54.

67. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 54, drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964).

68. Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*, 33–34, 91, 158, and 182.

69. The most prominent example outside of Scandinavia is the Old High German First Merseburg Charm. See Patricia Giangrosso, “The Merseburg Charms,” in *Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John Jeep (New York: Garland, 2001), 112–13.

Not only are *Darraðarljóð*'s fighters raw material in battle, but they also provide material for the making of poetry, as indicated through the final stanzas' emphasis upon the spreading of news and singing of songs:

Nú er ógurligt
um at lítask
er dreyrug ský
dregr með himni:
mun lopt litat
lýða blóði
er ?spár vórar
springa? kunnu.

Vel kváðu vér
um konung ungan;
sigrljóða fjöð
syngjum heilar:
en hinn nemi,
er heyrir á,
?geirljóða fjöð?
ok gumum skemti.
Ríðum hestum
hart út berum
brugðnum sverðum
á braut heðan.⁷⁰

(Now it is fearsome / to gaze around / as blood-red clouds / gather in the sky: / the heavens will be stained / with men's blood / when ?our prophecies? / can ?spread abroad?. // We spoke well / of the young king; / let us sing with good fortune / many songs of victory: / and let him / who listens / learn ?many a spear-song? / and entertain men. // Let us ride out fast / on our bare-backed horses, / away from here / with brandished swords.)

Setting itself apart from the witnessing of violent textile-making in the Old English loom riddle, this poem closes with the active circulation of the bloody result. With the battle-cloth complete, the Valkyries—

70. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 118.

ready for another conflict, if their drawn swords are any indication—ride out. *Riddle 56*, on the other hand, describes the displaying of textile-making's result in a hall. This difference of proud indoor display versus eager community dissemination may hint at the different types of cloth produced—that is, a pennant for use in battle in *Darraðarljóð* versus a tapestry or decoration in *Riddle 56*—and it certainly speaks to the two poems' divergent approaches to similar material. While the Old English poem (along with the Anglo-Latin works) employs the metaphor Textile-making = Violence, *Darraðarljóð* employs the exact opposite metaphor: Violence = Textile-making. That is, rather than invoking the imagery of violence to explain textile-making, the Old Norse example invokes textile-making imagery to explain violence. The two approaches are intricately tied together, but also quite separate. It is therefore fitting that, in the case of the latter, the prose frame sees the destruction of the fabric the Valkyries have just completed:

Rifu þær þá ofan vefinn ok í sundr, ok hafði hver þat, er helt á. Gekk hann þá í braut frá glugginum ok heim, en þær stigu á hesta sína, ok riðu sex í suðr, en aðrar sex í norðr.⁷¹

(Then they tore the weaving down and ripped it apart, each one retaining the piece which she was holding. Then he left the window and went back home, while they mounted their horses and rode six to the south and the other six to the north.)

As the vehicle of the metaphor, the communal *making* of the textile is significant. The object itself—standing in for the spectacle of battle—has served its purpose in pointing toward the now concluded violent encounter that its production enabled, prophesied, or symbolized.⁷² With the act worth witnessing complete, Dørruðr returns home, leaving the saga as he goes.

Uniting the above representations of violent textile-making is their shared emphasis on seeing. Whether this visual focus is relayed in terms of voyeuristically witnessing the violent production process

71. Poole, *Viking Poems*, 119.

72. Bek-Pedersen notes the alternative reading that the torn pieces represent the dissemination of the battle's outcome. *Norms*, 144.

(*Riddle 56*, *Darraðarljóð*, and *Enigma 13*) or in terms of the physical effect of violence, particularly in relation to the eyes (*Enigma 11*), these examples' invocation of spectatorship has implications beyond the acts they depict. This is unsurprising given that medieval textiles were intensely visual creations in their own right, and given that tapestries and embroideries from the period provide visual representations of stories that were in circulation in oral and written forms.⁷³ Some of these stories—like the historical events famously depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry—were, notably, quite violent, but women worked them into their textiles nonetheless. This interrelationship undermines the idea that textile-making and violence are binary opposites. Rather, both constructive and destructive processes could be active simultaneously.

In addition to the visual preservation of (sometimes violent) narratives, the visibility of both violence and textile-making in early medieval societies should be recognized. Battle did not provide the only context for violence, which could also be witnessed in the committing of crimes, physical punishment, torture, and so on, and the violent marking of the body was highly observable and interpretable. So were textiles and textile-making. As a communal activity that drew on many members of the household and took a huge amount of time, this type of production's permeation into literature makes complete sense. In Scandinavian contexts, the confinement of textile-making to the women's *dyngja* made it all the more alluring and mysterious. Its witnessing (for men, anyway) involved taboo-breaking, voyeurism, and perhaps even a hint of danger.⁷⁴

In the end, it is the visibility of textile-making and violence that calls for their equation. The similarities between processes involved in the former and the performance and effects of the latter were recognizable to early medieval writers who only needed to draw them together. Given the industrialized world's tendency toward alienation from the production of textiles, it is not surprising that modern audiences may

73. See, for example, Lena Elisabeth Norrman's discussion of the Swedish Överhogdal tapestries, which she argues tell the story of Sigurðr the dragon-slayer. *Viking Women: The Narrative Voice in Woven Tapestries* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008).

74. See Bek-Pedersen, "Conversations," 205–33.

find an association between this production and violence jarring. Yet, in the early medieval period—and in many places today—the process of making textiles was not an idyllic craft, but a complex, time-consuming and labor-intensive job, which involved nearly as much un-making as making.⁷⁵ Indeed, it would be far more surprising if the breaking and pounding, twisting and striking, binding and stretching of raw material that was witnessed in the daily textile-making of women had not left its cultural mark.

75. I mean this as a reminder not only that non-industrialized textile production is still practiced by a variety of cultural groups today, but also that the fashion industry's practice of outsourcing textile and garment production to factories with little regulation in developing nations impacts exploited workers who are predominantly women. Tragedies like the 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh, which killed over a thousand people and injured twice as many, are evidence of the violence of the textile industry today.