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Old English Poetry and Its Legacy

Edited by

Robert E. Bjork

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Editor

Robert E. Bjork

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About the Editor

Robert E. Bjork

Robert E. Bjork is a Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, a Corresponding Fellow of the English Association (UK), and Foundation Professor of English at Arizona State University, where he has taught since 1983 and where he was Director of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS) from 1994 to 2018. His primary research areas are Old English poetry, modern Swedish literature, and biomedical writing, in which fields he has published widely. He serves on several editorial and advisory boards as well as being the Academic Director of Arc Humanities Press. His most recent book is *Old English Studies in Scandinavia, 1733-2021: Nationalism, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Philology* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., forthcoming).

Preface to “Old English Poetry and Its Legacy”

This collection of essays was originally assembled in honor of John D. Niles, who has long been a major voice in Old English studies. As a member of the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley, where he taught from 1976 to 2004 (and is now Professor Emeritus of English), and subsequently at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he taught from 2001 to 2011 (and is Professor Emeritus of Humanities), he has gained recognition as one of the premier scholars in the world in that field, and his work has had and continues to have a transforming impact on the profession. This book celebrates his numerous and varied achievements, ones that range across specialties from orality and literacy studies, to textual and manuscript studies, to anthropological approaches to literature, to comparative folklore and mythology, to material culture and archaeology.

Niles’s interest in oral narrative, for example, led him to conduct extensive fieldwork in Scotland, where he has studied the storytelling and singing practices of Scottish traveling people (or tinkers) in particular. Just published in September 2022 from the University of Mississippi Press is one result of that study, *Webspinner: Songs, Stories, and Reflections of Duncan Williamson, Scottish Traveller*, a book based on over a hundred hours of tape-recorded interviews with Williamson that Professor Niles undertook in the 1980s. Niles arranges selections from those interviews into a cohesive self-portrait of a single gifted tradition-bearer, incorporating songs and stories alongside a commentary and other scholarly aids, including photographs, to contextualize Williamson’s words. The result is a fascinating look inside an ancient and vanishing culture in which oral narrative plays a central role.

Before *Webspinner*, Professor Niles published a study that draws his fieldwork on the oral culture of the Scottish travelling people into a book of wide horizons. *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999; paperback edition 2010) bristles with often brilliant insight, bringing together as it does seemingly disparate and unrelated disciplines while shifting its focus from the poetry of ancient Greece, to that of early medieval England, to modern Scotland with its ballad traditions. This intersection of times and regions underscores the cohesive social power of language in all three cultures, in each of which storytelling is at the center of the culture itself. What distinguishes humans from other creatures, Niles argues, is the narrative impulse: the need and the ability to tell stories, with their infinite contrary-to-fact capabilities. The phrase *homo narrans* is therefore perhaps a better descriptor of our species than is *homo sapiens*.

As captivated as Professor Niles is by the Scottish Travellers and oral poetics, he has anchored his scholarly career on study of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, which has long been a centerpiece of Old English literary studies, and he has written, edited, or co-edited five books relating to that poem. The first of these, *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1983), is a comprehensive study of the poem’s context, structure and style, and interpretation. The poem’s context includes (1) the dimension of the marvelous, the importance of which Professor Niles highlights, regarding Grendel as a liminal being between human and spirit or demon; (2) Germanic poetics, which informs the whole of the poem through traditional formulaic language and alliterative meter, thus fostering the art of apposition and the use of poetic compounds; (3) the world of Latin Christian literature, which, he argues, influenced the poem chiefly through Christian vernacular writings rather than directly through Latin; and (4) the temporal, with Niles arguing that the poem can most probably be dated to the second quarter of the tenth century, when Danish incomers and native Anglo-Saxons were relatively at peace, integrated into a hybrid Anglo-Scandinavian

society that could have comprised a mixed audience for a poem of this character, composed in the English language but set in ancient Scandinavia. Professor Niles's discussion of style and structure illuminates the poet's oral-formulaic system of composition; the poet's creative use of compound diction within that formulaic system; and the equally adept manipulation of ring structure in the poem, with the fight with Grendel's mother functioning as the poem's mythic center. The style and structure of the poem are thus barbaric, Niles maintains, in the sense that art historians have used that term to refer to the abstract, non-naturalistic character of Germanic and Celtic art. Finally, for Niles, the interpretation of *Beowulf* involves consideration of how temporal interdependencies (whether mythic, legendary, or historical) function in the poem, mediated by the narrator's impersonal voice and the presence of listening audiences, whether we think of the imagined audience inside the poem or a real audience hearing the narrative unfold. The poem's interpretation likewise relies on the concept of reciprocity, crucial to the gift-giving economy that is put on frequent display. Ultimately, Niles argues, it is the failure of the Geats in the poem to reciprocate Beowulf's resolute, heroic conduct – they act with cowardice instead – that leads to their projected demise, not the hero's purported pride.

Fourteen years after publishing the acclaimed *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition*, Professor Niles joined with me in producing *A Beowulf Handbook* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), which I invited him to co-edit. Designed to serve the needs of any reader of the poem, from those with only a casual interest to seasoned scholars, this collection of eighteen essays by various hands addresses virtually all areas of critical concern. These include the poem's possible date, provenance, author, and audiences; textual criticism; prosody; diction, variation, and the formula; rhetoric and style; sources and analogues; structure and unity; Christian and pagan elements; digressions and episodes; symbolism and allegory; social milieu; the hero and the theme; the relevance of archaeology; gender roles; theoretical approaches; and the poem's translations, new versions, and illustrations. Each chapter begins with a chronology of scholarly work on that topic, then explores the history of the topic and the current state (in 1995 or so) of that discussion. Professor Niles contributed a brief introduction to the volume and a substantial chapter on myth and history.

Another decade passed before Professor Niles's next major contributions to *Beowulf* studies appeared, and there were two of them: *Beowulf and Lejre* (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and Brepols, 2007) and *Beowulf: An Illustrated Edition* (Norton, 2007). The first of these books gives substance to an inference that scholars had long made on the basis of the poem's sources and analogues: namely, that the action of the first part of the poem can be associated with the village of Lejre on the island of Zealand, Denmark, the reputed site of the ancient court of the Skjöldung dynasty of Danish kings. Commissioned for this publication was an English translation of a book written by the archaeologist Tom Christensen of Roskilde Museum concerning excavations that he had directed at Lejre in the years 1986–1988 and 2004–2005. The first round of these excavations yielded evidence for two massive timber halls, one built on the foundations of the other, amidst smaller outlying buildings, all of them dating from the period circa 680–990 CE. In the second round of excavations, the foundations of a third, somewhat smaller, hall were unearthed a short distance away. This one was found to date from roughly 550 CE, or very close to the time to which, on other grounds, scholars have ascribed the quasi-historical setting of *Beowulf*. Niles's chief contribution to this substantial book, which he prepared in collaboration with Professor Marijane Osborn of the University of California, Davis, was to develop the implications of these discoveries for the interpretation of *Beowulf*, probing how an English poem of this character could have had its origins in legends originating at these Danish halls.

Professor Niles's related 2007 publication, *Beowulf: An Illustrated Edition*, puts some of this newly acquired archaeological evidence to use while helping readers visualize the material world of the poem. Working with Seamus Heaney's best-selling translation of *Beowulf*, which was first published a few years previously, Professor Niles accompanies Heaney's translation with more than a hundred full-page images illustrating the Iron Age world depicted in the poem, a world of mead-halls, Viking-style warships, armor, swords, spearheads, goblets, gold jewelry, and serpentine imagery. His substantial Afterword, "Visualizing *Beowulf*," reviews a range of archaeological discoveries that illuminate how an early medieval audience may have conceived of the scenes and artifacts that the poet calls to mind.

While producing his two books from 2007, Professor Niles was also busy working on another large *Beowulf* project, one that had its beginnings in the year 2000. Professor R. D. Fulk, who had contributed the chapter on "Textual Criticism" for *A Beowulf Handbook*, had acquired the rights from D. C. Heath and Company to revise and reissue Friedrich Klaeber's magnificent scholarly edition *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, the third edition of which was published in 1950, almost three decades after the first edition of 1922. Five decades had passed since the third edition had appeared, and it was clear that a revision was long overdue. Professor Fulk then invited Professor Niles and myself to join him in the daunting undertaking of revising such a venerated work and incorporating into it the fifty-some years of scholarship that had accrued since Klaeber had last revised it. We agreed with alacrity. After much discussion and planning, the three of us settled on our individual tasks and estimated that we could complete the revision in about three years. It took eight. The end result of our labors, *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, fourth edition, was published by the University of Toronto Press in 2008, bringing the third edition into alignment with current scholarship while at the same time preserving those features of Klaeber's work that had made it the standard edition of the poem, essential for students of literature as well as for linguists, historians, folklorists, manuscript specialists, archaeologists, and theorists of culture.

While deeply occupied with *Beowulf* as the central text in Old English literary studies, Professor Niles at the same time immersed himself in the study of other Old English poems, producing a number of articles that were then published, in revised form and with supplements, in two books issued by Brepols press in Belgium in its series *Studies in the Early Middle Ages*. The first of these volumes, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (2006), focuses on Old English texts that have proven resistant to interpretation, most of which come from the Exeter Book anthology of Old English verse. These include riddles; poems that are riddle-like such as *The Wife's Lament* and other elegies; and poems that contain runic letters or passages of unclear relationship to the rest of the text, such as *The Husband's Message*, *Juliana*, and *Guthlac B*. The result is a deeper understanding of how the original audience for these texts engaged with them as puzzles that require the active participation of the listener – or reader – in a contest of wits. To demonstrate how this interaction may have taken place, Professor Niles provides detailed analysis of several specific Exeter Book riddles while also offering answers to the whole set of approximately ninety-five riddles. Significantly, he presents those answers in Old English, the language of the riddler, in order to emphasize that the proper solutions to these examples of complex linguistic word-play are often words, not just things.

Complementing this volume examining the enigmatic dimension of the earliest English literature is Niles's essay collection *Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts* (2007). This book focuses on the role that heroic poems such as *Widsith*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *Beowulf* may have played in Anglo-Saxon society, particularly during the tenth-century period of nation building. The people of early medieval England adapted to their changing environment partially by means of their tradition of heroic poetry, he argues, maintaining that the makers of this verse encouraged their audiences to

regard themselves in terms of the tightly knit *comitatus* of the past, even though the reality of their social situation had become something quite different and more complex. In this same book Niles develops an argument as to how a poem of the character of *Beowulf* could have evolved from its origins in oral tradition, first being recorded through an act of dictation, then being transmuted into a hybrid written form that was neither wholly oral nor wholly literary in character, but rather a fusion of both.

Professor Niles's interest in the poems of the Exeter Book culminated in 2019 with the publication by the University of Exeter Press of his monograph *God's Exiles and English Verse: On the Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*. As surprising as this is to say, this was the first book-length critical treatment of the most important collection of English poetry to have been made before the late Middle Ages. Professor Niles examines the structure and design of the Exeter Book, the relationship of its constituent parts to one another, its major and minor themes, its leading stylistic features, and its possible uses in the society that produced it. The anthology was deliberately shaped, he concludes, during the tenth-century Benedictine Reform, possibly in Glastonbury or in one of that monastery's dependencies, to promote the adoration of God while fostering the composition of poetry in the vernacular, both for its own sake and for its educational value in the cosmopolitan monastic culture from which the book emerged. He reinforces the latter point by appending a list of Latin genre terms corresponding to specific poems in the *Exeter Book*, thereby implying basic continuity between Latinate and vernacular poetics in a bilingual milieu.

The last aspect of Professor Niles's extensive array of intellectual interests that I will touch on here is the history of scholarship on Old English literature and early medieval England. One manifestation of that interest is his book *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity* (University Press of Florida, 1997), which he co-edited with Allen J. Frantzen following a conference on the subject that Professor Niles and the Old English Colloquium of the University of California, Berkeley, hosted in March 1994. The first eight essays in the volume address aspects of medieval, Renaissance, and nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-Saxonism, which the editors define as "the process through which a self-conscious national and racial identity first came into being among the early peoples of the region that we now call England and how, over time, through both scholarly and popular promptings, that identity was transformed into an originary myth available to a wide variety of political and social interests" (p. 1). Beginning with the writings of Bede and Gregory the Great, the myth extends into the early English laws, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and King Alfred's Preface to the Old English translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, including the reception of that text well into the Renaissance. The popularity of the myth of Anglo-Saxon origins carried over into nineteenth-century Scandinavia and North America and the postbellum South, likewise influencing the historical fiction of that period. Concluding the volume is Professor Niles's essay "Appropriations: A Concept of Culture," which advances the idea that "culture is chiefly produced through a complex series of purposeful appropriations either of the past or of someone's present property (whether material, linguistic, or intellectual in nature)" (p. 205). This is an idea that underlies the next book of his to be discussed.

In *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066-1901: Remembering, Forgetting, Deciphering, and Renewing the Past* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), Professor Niles constructs a meticulously detailed and illuminating history of the complex notion of Anglo-Saxon identity from the ninth century to the year 1901, the year of Queen Victoria's death. Though often amusing, the book is as authoritative and compelling as his many other contributions to the field, offering a thorough account of the history both of Old English linguistic and literary studies and of the study of early medieval England generally. It is replete with over fifty illustrations including images of manuscripts, artifacts, paintings, and a cartoon

from *Punch* on the occasion of the 1901 King Alfred Millenary. It also incorporates fifteen vignettes, or short essays, that pertain sometimes tangentially to the chapters in which they occur, dealing for example with the Tremulous Hand of Worcester and his manuscript annotations, with Milton's possible knowledge of the Old English poem *Genesis B* when composing his portrait of the rebellious Satan of *Paradise Lost*, and with Thomas Jefferson and his program of instruction in Old English as part of the education of responsible citizens. The book is thus an engaging one that appeals to a broad audience, from lay readers who simply want to know something about the cultural phenomenon known as "Anglo-Saxonism," to novices in the study of early medieval and modern England, to established scholars in the field of Old English and cultural historians interested in modern uses of the past.

Published one year after that book was a sequel, *Old English Literature: A Guide to Criticism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), which traces the evolution of Old English literary studies through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Niles first points out some of the biases that distorted early twentieth-century critical assessments of Old English verse, then highlights leading examples of more recent criticism from J. R. R. Tolkien to the present, tracing dominant themes in that criticism while calling attention to evolving trends. This book too is meant for both novices and seasoned scholars. While calling attention to the enduring importance of Old English verse and prose in modern literary studies, it analyzes shifts in its critical reception over the past hundred years and more.

Professor John D. Niles's contributions to Old English studies and the study of early medieval England have thus been prolific, multifaceted, and of enduring value. While the foregoing survey mentions a number of his books, it does not tell the whole story of his scholarship. Notably, a book forthcoming in early 2023 is expressive of the unusual range of his interests: this is *Medical Texts from Early Medieval England, Volume 1: The Old English Herbal, Lacnunga, and Other Texts*, co-edited with Maria A. D'Aronco, to appear in the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library as the first of a two-volume set. This will be the first comprehensive edition and translation of Old English medical texts in more than 150 years. Also worth note is a web site that he launched in the fall of 2022, "Scottish Voices," featuring audio recordings, video recordings, and still photos derived from his extensive program of field research with traditional singers and storytellers in Scotland. This can be consulted at <https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AScottishVoicesColl>. Left outside the present discussion are Niles's scholarly articles or chapters, over sixty in number; seven additional collections of scholarly essays that he has edited or co-edited; two books of verse or prose that he has translated from other languages; some three dozen book reviews, scholarly notes, and encyclopedia articles; and a chapbook of original poems. An up-to-date list of those publications can be found on his website at <https://dept.english.wisc.edu/jdniles/>.

What follows in this book are eight essays, each one of which refers to at least one of Professor Niles's works and each one of which significantly advances the field to which Niles has chiefly dedicated his remarkable career. Each is also prefaced by an abstract of its content, which is why I don't rehearse that information here. I hope you enjoy them.

Below is the list of contributors:

Tiffany Beechy is a formalist working in early medieval poetics and a professor of English at the University of Colorado Boulder. Her work of late has focused on comparative historical poetics and the poetics of compilations, notably the intertextuality of the manuscripts of *Solomon and Saturn*. Her most recent book, *Aesthetics and the Incarnation in Early Medieval Britain: Materiality and the Flesh of the Word*, is forthcoming from Notre Dame.

Francis Leneghan is Professor of Old English at the University of Oxford, and a Fellow of St Cross College. He is the author of *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020) and co-editor of *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature: From the Conversion to the Reformation* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017) and *Ideas of the World in Early Medieval English Literature* (Turnhout; Brepols, 2022). He has published widely on Old English prose and verse and is currently co-editing a volume of essays on writing associated with King Alfred.

Hugh Magennis is professor emeritus at Queen's University Belfast, where he had previously been head of the School of English and director of the Institute of Theology, among other positions held. He has published widely on Old English and related literature, specializing particularly in saints' lives, translation, and poetic tradition. Among his publications are the Cambridge University Press volume *The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, the D. S. Brewer monograph *Translating Beowulf* (both 2011), and, most recently, the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library edition and translation *Anonymous Old English Lives of Saints* (2020) (with Johanna Kramer and Robin Norris). Hugh Magennis is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy and a Fellow of the English Association.

Patrick J. Murphy is Professor of English at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He received his PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2007, with a dissertation directed by John D. Niles. He is the author of *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (2011) and *Medieval Studies and the Ghost Stories of M.R. James* (2017), both published by Penn State University Press. His current project is a work of graphic nonfiction, *A Comics History of the English Language*, which he is in the process of both writing and illustrating.

Marijane Osborn is an emeritus professor in the English Department at UC Davis. She has been writing for many years about place in Old English poetry and other literary works (by R.L. Stevenson, Steinbeck, C.S. Lewis, etc.), but she is particularly interested in interdisciplinary co-writing, as in *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Northern World* with Gillian Overing (Minnesota 1994), and *Beowulf and Leire*, edited by J. D. Niles (ACMRS Press, 2007). She has published more recently on places referred or alluded to in *Deor* (JEGP 2019), in an inscription on the Franks Casket (PQ, 2019), and in *The Wife's Lament* (in the essay in this volume).

Jacob W. Runner is an Assistant Professor at Kanazawa University where he teaches English, Latin, and Comparative Literature. He holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature (English/Japanese) from the University of Nottingham and an M.Litt. in Mediaeval English from the University of St Andrews. His research interests include: the literatures and language histories of English, Japanese, and Latin; scripts and orthographies; narratology; and multilingualism.

Lisa M. C. Weston is Professor of English at California State University, Fresno. She has written and presented on topics including Old English magical texts to the textual culture of early medieval monastic women. Her current research focuses on intersections of literacy, gender and sexuality in Old English and Anglo-Latin texts. Publications include *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England* (2004; co-edited with Carol Braun Pasternack) and a chapter on "Saintly Lives: Friendship, Kinship, Gender, and Sexuality" in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature* (2013). "Chaste Bodies and Untimely Virgins: Sexuality, Temporality, and Bede's Aethelthryth" will appear in the forthcoming *Feminist Approaches to Early Medieval English Studies*.

Jonathan Wilcox is Professor of English and Collegiate Fellow at the University of Iowa, where he specializes in medieval literature and culture. Since *Ælfric's Prefaces* (Durham, 1994), he has published widely on Old English homilies and manuscript studies, including, most recently, "The Wolf at Work: Understanding Wulfstan's Compositional Method," in *Manuscripts in the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Cultures and Connections*, ed. Claire Breay and Joanna Story (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2021), 141–53. He also publishes on early medieval English culture more broadly and is currently completing a book on Old English humor.

Robert E. Bjork
Editor



Article

Objects That Object, Subjects That Subvert: Agency in Exeter Book Riddle 5

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Abstract: A sequence of Old English riddles from the Exeter Book allow an implement to speak. This article focuses on one example, Riddle 5, generally solved as either a shield or a cutting board, to show how each interpretation gives voice not just to an inanimate object but also to a non-elite member of early medieval English society—either a foot-soldier or a kitchen hand. The two solutions come together because the two answers are captured in a single Old English word—“bord”—and also because the two interpretations resonate in parallel ways, creating sympathy for down-trodden members of society who rarely get so much attention in the surviving poetic record. This article argues that Old English riddles provide an enduring legacy of social critique crafted through humor.

Keywords: Old English poetry; Old English riddles; Exeter Book; Riddle 5; shields; cutting boards; prosopopeia; agency; social critique; humor

1. Introduction

Riddles are wonderful. Recent essays by Dailey (2013), Ramey (2017, 2018), and Rhodes (2020) have all emphasized the wonders to be had in the Old English riddles, which so clearly revel in what is *wratlic* (wondrous). Not least of these wonders is giving voice to the non-human (explored in Orton 2014, 2015, and Paz 2017), thereby bringing the non-living to life (see Hayes 2008). Simultaneously with animating the inanimate, riddles can also give voice to non-elite humans, who rarely get to speak within the corpus of surviving Old English poetry. By engaging with this characteristic in a martial riddle from the Exeter Book, I will explore the surprising contribution Old English riddles can make to questions of social justice.

The Exeter Book riddles are a sequence of short enigmatic poems in Old English, preserved in three blocks in Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fols. 8–130. An appealing and accessible edition, translation, and commentary is provided on the website *The Riddle Ages* (Cavell 2020), while scholarly editions of the riddles abound.¹ I will draw here from the text of Muir 2000, who edits the complete series of Exeter Book poems, using the riddle numbering made conventional by the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records and *The Riddle Ages* website.

The Old English riddles of the Exeter Book have been the subject of much outstanding and ingenious scholarship, not least from the honoree of the present collection, John D. Niles. Niles has presented a cogent standard for solving any Old English riddle (Niles 1998) and has provided a useful compendium of credible solutions in the riddles' own language of Old English (Niles 2006, chp. 4). Niles's recent study reading the Exeter Book as a whole provides a context for any reading of poems within the collection (Niles 2019). In addition, much of Niles's scholarship has provided a model for interpreting Old English poetry in relation to the surviving material record (see, inter alia, Niles 1980, 2007), and the present essay will build on such exemplary methodology.

One distinctive feature of a sequence of the Exeter Book riddles has been termed by Neville 2011 as the implement trope, where “the interaction between a human and an inanimate object (often a tool) is described metaphorically as a relationship between

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a lord and a servant or thegn,” and which thereby reveals “the foundational principles of a hierarchical society.”² Neville sees such riddles as ultimately exposing the lack of reciprocity in such hierarchical relationships, but she holds back from suggesting that such riddles present an enduring critique. I want to go further in this essay, suggesting that the deployment of humor in animating a subservient object creates sympathy for the downtrodden user of that object in a way that inverts hierarchies and enables a powerful and lasting social message.

While this essay will center on Riddle 5, a similar technique is evident in a number of martial riddles.³ Riddle 23, for example, describes with a certain pride the deadly work of a manifestly dangerous *wraetlic wiht* (wondrous being, line 2a). This riddle has a clear solution since “bow” is lightly anagrammatized in the opening line,⁴ but its wonder is to draw the audience into sympathy with a speaking subject that is usually merely an object, and one that can boast about how it is highly skilled, even as it is also deadly. The riddle closes with a paradox:

Nelle ic unbunden ænigum hyran
nympe searosæled.

(Riddle 23, lines 15–16a)

Unbound I will not obey any, unless skillfully tied up.

This suggests that the serving and speaking subject has some choice over the matter of obedience and contains an implied threat by the speaker of insubordination if treated wrongly, despite the expectation, or even necessity, of constraints. Cavell (2016, pp. 179–84) shows how the binding here paradoxically suggests both hostile bondage and cleverness and artistic skill, while Boryslawski (2004, p. 137) hints at the carnivalesque power of such a paradox to invert hierarchies. Through the paradox, the bow gets to articulate both a self-confident claim to its own agency and artisanal mastery and a making visible of the repressive hierarchical structure dependent on a threat of physical binding. In the inevitable slippage from the impossible-and-therefore-comic non-human agent to the adjacent non-elite human, the archer who uses a bow is given a voice to point to the repressive nature of the structures of a military hierarchy, even as he claims agency and mastery of a craft. What appears to be a playful obfuscation of a military weapon, made manifest through an easy linguistic trick, turns out to empower a rarely heeded foot-soldier who gets to make his own bid for sympathy.

The sword of Riddle 20 is even more clearly and cleverly self-confident about his abilities and picky about his service, even as this high-status weapon so clearly collocates with the elite male who wielded this object that I do not want to pursue it here, except to suggest that the same characteristics are probably visible in the fragmentary Riddle 71 (possibly another sword, possibly a spear, possibly something else completely), where the self-confident speaking subject, the red-clothed possession of a powerful one (“rices æht, reade bewæfed,” line 1), sometimes causes a person who carries gold to weep “for minung gripe” (6a, “on account of my grip or attack”).⁵ Because of the fragmentary nature of the text, it is not clear if the implement is imagining the grief of a person engaged with the business end of this tool (in which case the red clothing of line 1b is presumably the victim’s blood) or the one holding the grip (in which case the red clothing is probably gold, adorning either the implement or the “[g]o[l]dryhtne min . . .,” if that is what is concealed in the lacunae of line 9), with a resulting suggestion that the implement’s skills are paradoxically unsatisfying for the user.⁶ This is another object claiming agency by boasting of its deadly skill and probably establishing a critique of the one it serves in the process.

The attitude I am suggesting for these riddles is most clearly visible in a non-martial example, the wondrous Riddle 21 (plough), which ends:

Fealleþ on sidan
þæt ic toþum tere, gif me teala þenap
hindewardre, þæt biþ hlaford min.

(Riddle 21, lines 13b–15)

What I tear with my teeth falls onto the side,
if he serves me well from behind, that one who is my lord.

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The downward-turned nuzzler of the earth accomplishes fecund success if the human who imagines himself in command (hlaforð min) but who occupies the hindmost position and who is earlier described as the improbable “weard æt steorte” (line 4b, the guardian at the tail) is not, in fact, in a position of independent control but rather “me teala þenaþ” (14b, serves me in a satisfactory manner). By voicing such an attitude, the subservient subjects of these riddles revel in their own craft skills and undercut their masters, hinting at both the brutality and the ineffectualness of top-down control.

2. Riddle 5

To clarify that claim, I will focus on the example of Riddle 5 and suggest that the two most-favored solutions each demonstrates the rich resonance between non-human and non-elite agency and that there is added power in viewing the two interpretations in tandem. In both readings, giving voice to the wonders of an object gives voice, in turn, to a non-elite member of society, and both readings present a criticism of the neglect of those at the bottom of society. The two readings combine to suggest a particularly effective critique of unthinking hierarchy.

The riddle in its entirety reads as follows:

Ic eom anhaga iserne wund,
bille gebennad, beadoweorca sæd,
ecgum werig. Oft ic wig seo,
frecne feohtan. Frofre ne wene,
þæt mec geoc cyme guðgewinnes, 5
ær ic mid ældum eal forwurðe,
ac mec hnossiað homera lafe,
heardecg heoroscearp, [h]ondweorc smiþa,
bitað in burgum; ic abidan sceal
laþran gemotes. Næfre læcecynn 10
on folcstede findan meahte,
þara þe mid wyrtum wunde gehælde,
ac me ecga dolg eacen weorðað
þurh deaðslege dagum ond nihtum.⁷

I am a solitary being, wounded by iron,
damaged by a sword, tired of battle-deeds,
wearied by edges. I often see battle,
a fierce fight. I do not expect comfort,
that any help may come to me in the battle strife,

before I completely perish among people [*or* in the flames],
 but the leavings of hammers beat me,
 the terribly-sharp hard-edged ones, the handiwork of smiths,
 they bite me in the strongholds; I must await
 a more hostile meeting. I have not ever been able to find
 in the places of people one of the clan of doctors,
 one of those who would heal my wounds with herbs,
 but the injuries of the edges have increased on me
 through death-blows by day and night.

In the opening, the speaker refers to being wounded by iron, damaged by a sword, wearied by edges, in the context of battle-deeds, and in lines 7–9a to being beaten and bitten by the leavings of hammers, terribly-sharp hard-edged ones, the handiwork of smiths (periphrases that build up the crafted stature of an attacking weapon)—all conjuring a defensive posture in a battle context. The subsequent description emphasizes the lack of doctoring and so suggests the speaker gets destroyed with use and ultimately discarded rather than repaired. This has suggested to many modern critics the solution “shield,” a solution neatly laid out by Williamson (1977, pp. 146–48). If it is a shield, we should not be thinking of an elite example like that of Sutton Hoo,⁸ where the high-status weaponry serves as an enduring metonymy for the high-status individual buried in such style but rather the more humble quotidian examples. These would be circular shields, made of light woods with a metal boss, strap, and some sort of reinforcement around the rim, which survive in furnished graves, and which are well illustrated in later manuscripts.⁹ Possible confirmation for this solution comes in the s-rune at the end of the text, which some critics have seen as standing for the Old English word *scyld* (shield), although others have seen this as a clue to an answer in Latin (*scūtum*), or as referring to the following riddle, which is generally solved as *sigel* (sun).¹⁰ An equally possible shout out for this sense of Riddle 5 is the Old English word *bord*, a frequent term for shield in poetry.¹¹

In reading this riddle as describing a shield, the riddling wonder comes from the prosopopoeia that gives voice and a hint of agency to a material object. That object, now as subject, expresses a certain attitude: on the one hand, of pride in doing a job well (note the *oft* of line 3b); on the other hand, of a certain injustice:

Frofre ne wene,
 Þæt mec geoc cyme guðgewinnes, 5
 ær ic mid ældum eal forwurðe,
 I do not expect comfort,
 that any help may come to me in the battle strife,
 before I completely perish among people [*or* in the flames].¹²
 (lines 4b–6)

This complaint gets spelled out at more length in the concern about doctoring in lines 10b–12:

Næfre læcecynn 10
 on folcstede findan meahte,
 þara þe mid wyrstum wunde gehælde,
 I have not ever been able to find
 in the places of people one of the clan of doctors,
 one of those who would heal my wounds with herbs.

The paradox, as Williamson explains (1977, p. 147), is that the riddle subject is more enduring in battle than expected of a person, and so it is an object that cannot be easily killed, but it will still finally be discarded, and so it is an object that cannot be easily cured.

A reading of “shield” may have added resonances within a Christian culture. Salvador-Bello points to the image of the shield of faith, popular from Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians (6:16), to motivate a reading of the shield as a possible allegory, matching a reading of the subsequent riddle’s description of “the sun” as another Christian allegory (Salvador-Bello 2015, p. 300). The ultimate destruction of the shield in the riddle might call to mind Psalms 45:10, where the Lord is imagined as ultimately destroying weapons of war, “and the shield he shall burn in the fire.”¹³ This particular shield, though, seems both proud of its enduring resilience and yet resentful of the ingratitude shown to it, despite all its abilities, and so more likely projects a secular context.

A speaking implement conjures up a human behind the object, in this case, the warrior carrying the shield. Such a soldier presumably *could* receive the doctoring ministrations of the leechy-clan—but likely did not. And so, a lowly object complaining at the prospect of being discarded conjures up a lowly human making the same complaint. The ghostly presence of a non-elite shield-bearer complaining of his fate as sword-fodder gives a spectral voice and sympathy to the member of a group not usually represented in surviving heroic literature, in stark contrast with the imagined eagerness of the loyal fighters at Maldon to fight to the death as portrayed in *The Battle of Maldon*.¹⁴ A riddle about disposable boards of wood carries more punch as a riddle about disposable people, the foot-soldiers crucial to early medieval battle formation, who are not usually given such realistic voice and the opportunity to object to their fate.

Such possibilities are enriched by considering an alternative solution that calls for a more metaphorical interpretation of the clues, namely that they add up to a cutting board or chopping block, a reading ably presented by Pinsker and Ziegler in their edition (Pinsker and Ziegler 1985, pp. 155–56) and described by Neville (2007, pp. 131–33) and others. As Olsen (2020) demonstrates, this takes the same inputs as the shield solution but performs their conceptual blending in a domestic rather than a martial space. In reading the speaking object as a chopping board, the attacking sword and edges are metaphors for meat-cleavers or paring knives, used in the metaphorical battle of daily food preparation, which is here built up in mock-heroic terms. As with the shield, the wounds are the scars and fractures left from such use, and the lack of doctoring reflects the low status of the implement receiving such cuts, which, for all its durability, will ultimately be discarded. Riedinger (2004, pp. 33–34) gives additional support for such a reading by pointing to the emphasis on the edges of the attacking pieces, while Tigges (1994, pp. 100–1) suggests the duality of the *wyrtum*, which could be vegetables chopped in the kitchen for culinary use or the herbs of healing remedies. Riedinger also shows how the playfulness works at the level of technique, since the resonances of the formulas mislead an audience to think in the martial terms of heroic poetry. The final half-line makes better sense with this solution, since food preparation would likely occur both in hours of light and dark, whereas battles tended to pause for the period of darkness (as seen, for example, in the events around Ravenswood in *Beowulf*)¹⁵.

The low-status versions of such domestic supports are unlikely to survive, since a cutting board or chopping block used in the kitchen would have been readily discarded. The manuscript containing this riddle may itself have served the function, most likely in the scriptorium, in view of the pattern of damage on the opening pages of the Exeter Book.¹⁶ More normally, though, a chopping block was probably made of wood, and as such it would probably have been called a *bord*, which is the prosaic word for a plank or board of wood, as well as the poetic word for a shield.¹⁷

A speaking cutting board conjures up one who uses a cutting board almost as much as a speaking shield conjures up one who uses a shield, although the transference is less straightforward since the contiguous human is probably doing the chopping and hence the wielder of all those edges rather than the target. Nevertheless, it is an obvious metonymy to

associate a lowly kitchen implement with a lowly kitchen worker. Later medieval romances are full of the mistreatment of such scullery workers—usually in surviving stories a hero incognito who gets buffeted and beaten as the cook’s assistant, such as Havelok the Dane in his humble phase or Sir Gareth as the Fair Unknown with the Fair Hands in the kitchen.¹⁸ When not a hero in disguise, such a modest figure might well not expect comfort or help from the clan of doctors for all that effort expended by day and by night on the fundamental work of food preparation.

3. Conclusions

Riddle 5, then, conjures up two pairs of doubled readings—shield and (lowly) soldier and cutting board and (lowly) kitchen hand—all animated by the clues and by a potential solution as OE *bord*.¹⁹ These two solutions overlap in a surprisingly practical way in a representation of the Norman Conquest in the Bayeux Tapestry, where shields serve as possible cutting boards set up as improvised trestle tables for a feast organized by William’s invasion force.²⁰ I want to bring the two doubled readings together to emphasize the power of their social critique.

In the martial reading, a material object, a shield, becomes a subject not because it has the expressive skills of language but because it is unable to get the doctoring it needs, its only agency is to perform its allotted task with skill and to complain, thereby matching a later foot-soldier-servant, Thersites in Shakespeare’s retelling of *Troilus and Cressida*, with his lament about his master: “He beats me, and I rail at him. O worthy satisfaction! Would it were otherwise: that I could beat him, whilst he rail’d at me.” (*Troilus and Cressida*, Act 2, scene 3). Presenting a speaking/feeling/complaining shield is funny because wood and metal do not do those things, and the humor briefly empowers a non-elite human who thereby gets on the poetic record to speak, feel, and complain. To the extent that the speaker elicits the audience’s sympathy, the riddle crafts a critique of the disposable nature of such a non-elite foot-soldier.

Something similar happens with the kitchen reading. Here the cutting board gets to make the complaint and thereby to elevate the status of the lowliest of scullery activities—the chopping up of the produce for the cooking process²¹—by lamenting the disposable nature of the piece of wood at the base of such quotidian but fundamental activity. The presentation is comic both because an inanimate object is getting to speak, feel, and complain and because a humble object elevates its status by portraying itself in mock-heroic terms. But, as the audience knows, chopping boards cannot speak, feel, and complain—it is the food preparer, the kitchen hand, the scullery-person who has a vocal apparatus and a sensitive body and a mind, even if that lowly individual never gets the opportunity to speak out in the surviving early medieval record. The scullery-hand here gets to ask for sympathy at being so easily cast aside in a critique that perhaps can be the more readily heard by an elite audience of poetry listeners because of the playful framing and presentation through humor.

The resonances between these two readings play on in many ways. I am suggesting that Riddle 5 is not just a shield, although it is that, but also a chopping board, and it is not just shield and chopping board, but also the foot-soldier and kitchen-worker who use those implements. And the paradoxes are not just that soldiers kill people while cooks feed people (even as soldiering gets treated to a higher level of discourse than cookery); not just that a single speaking voice may be occupying two differently gendered positions (if an early medieval soldier is likely to be male and a food chopper is likely to be female); not just that lowly people are like the objects that they work with (an idea present in many of the implement riddles); not just that such lowly humans may feel as cast aside as disposable objects (although that is a powerfully skewering critique)—but, rather, that riddles enable the speaking of the otherwise unsayable and that their indirection makes direct critique possible, and their humor enables the broaching of serious issues.

Niles’s reading of the Exeter Book as a whole plays up the community-building inclusivity of the Christian themes that run through the sequence of poems (Niles 2019,

chp. 7, and passim). In an earlier reading of a single poem within the collection, Niles brings to life the power afforded the otherwise-disempowered female persona of *The Wife's Lament* through her ability to curse (Niles 2003). The present essay is in harmony with such readings as I am suggesting the power of humor in these riddles to give voice to the least privileged in society. A society of disposable people is a problem at any time, but texts that can skewer the issue—edgy humor that can show the danger of edges—is a contribution that riddles can make that suggests such modest poems are always worth further discussion.

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Notes

- 1 (Williamson 1977) is an exceptionally useful edition, albeit using slightly different riddle numbers, while the most recent edition and translation is Orchard (2021). Translations from Old English in this essay are my own. A version of this essay was delivered at the International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England 2021 conference, with thanks to the organizers and audience.
- 2 (Neville 2011, pp. 506, 508); Neville includes Riddles 23 and 73 in her grouping, but not Riddle 5.
- 3 These were examined as a group by (Irving 1994) and (Stanley 1995), and my reading picks up on the insight of the former, in particular.
- 4 (Rudolf 2012) sees the misspelling *agof* for *agob* = *boga* as a deliberate obfuscatory archaizing and sees the form of the opening letter in the manuscript as suggestive of a bow, thereby making less arbitrary the connection between sign and thing.
- 5 DOE, s.v. *gripe*, suggests “attack” for this usage, but “grip, grasp” for the word more generally. (DOE, forthcoming)
- 6 The hint of sexual braggadocio in line 2 also aligns with sword of Riddle 20.
- 7 (Muir 2000, I: p. 290), but emending line 8b alongside other editors to restore alliteration and sense.
- 8 Illustrated by the British Museum (British Museum n.d.).
- 9 See, for example, the fighting personifications in the Illustrated Prudentius: British Library, Cotton MS, Cleopatra C. viii, fol. 18v, freely available among the British Library’s Digitised Manuscripts (British Library n.d.), or the exploits of the Nine Kings in the Illustrated Hexateuch, British Library, Cotton MS, Claudius B. iv, fol. 24v, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_claudius_b_iv_f024v (last accessed 20 December 2021). On shields, see (Dickinson and Härke 1992) and (Owen-Crocker 2011, pp. 215–18).
- 10 (Niles 2006) gives *scyld* for Riddle 5 and *sigel* for Riddle 6.
- 11 DOE s.v. *bord*, sense 1 “shield, buckler (in poetry).” (DOE, forthcoming)
- 12 The form *ældum* in line 6a could be a spelling of *ylдум* (people) or of *æled* (flame).
- 13 My thanks to Dietter Bitterli and Max Ashton for pointing to that connection at the ISSEME conference.
- 14 *The Battle of Maldon*, lines 255–59, does give voice to the “unorne ceorl” (humble freeman) Dunnere, but only to ventriloquize the elite ideology of dying for his lord.
- 15 *Beowulf*, lines 2922–98; see (Fulk et al. 2008, pp. 260–61). Night-time violence might be less likely to feature a shield.
- 16 Exeter Book, fol. 8r. See the digital images in (Muir 2006).
- 17 DOE s.v. *bord* has “table” as sense 3 and “wood, plank, board” as sense 4. (Murphy 2011, pp. 68–70) also builds up the punning solution, *bord*. (DOE, forthcoming)
- 18 *Havelok the Dane* is ed. (Herzman et al. 1997); “The Tale of Sir Gareth” constitutes Book IV (or Book VII in Caxton’s organization) of Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*.
- 19 Less convincing as a possible solution, in my opinion, is “whetstone” as suggested by (Sayers 1996) as this moves to high-status martial overtones.
- 20 Scene 42–43 on the Official Bayeux Tapestry Digital Representation (Bayeux Museum n.d.).
- 21 Much cooking involved boiling multiple ingredients, presumably chopped up, in a pot; see (Banham 2004).

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Article

The Manuscripts of *Solomon and Saturn*: CCC 41, CCC 422, BL Cotton Vitellius A.xv †

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† Full digital facsimiles are freely available for all three of the manuscripts that are the focus of this article. For Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 41, see <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/qd527zm3425>; for CCC 422, see <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/fr610kh2998>; for BL Cotton Vitellius A.xv, see https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_vitellius_a_xv. For ease of reference, in parker.stanford.edu, one simply enters the shelf number in the search field. Note that for CCC 41, one would enter “041”.

Abstract: Reflecting John D. Niles’ recent codicological reading of the Exeter Book, this essay advances a comparative reading of the three manuscripts containing Old English *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues. These manuscripts attest that the *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues were “serious” texts, twice attending the liturgy and later (12th century) joining high pre-scholastic philosophy. They further reveal a shift in the use of poetry over time. The earlier dialogues evince an “Incarnational poetics” that is distinct from but nevertheless comparable to the “monastic poetics” of the Exeter Book, while the later, prose dialogue has taken a less performative and more encyclopedic form.

Keywords: *Solomon and Saturn*; codicological reading; Incarnational poetics; compilation; monastic poetics; Old English; wisdom; medieval dialogue

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Recently, John D. Niles has advanced a codicological reading of the [Exeter Book \(1936\)](#), the most extensive and varied extant collection of Old English verse ([Niles 2019](#)). Whereas traditionally its poems have been taken piecemeal, or by genre (for example, the 95-odd riddles), Niles argues for a broad unity to the compilation, governed by a “monastic poetics” capable of bending even deeply traditional poetic tropes towards orthodoxy for a powerful didactic and contemplative effect. Such a collection, Niles explains, reflects the context of the tenth-century Benedictine reform, and he locates it specifically with St. Dunstan and Glastonbury, circa 970 (pp. 40–61).¹ The present essay will consider another compilation of Old English verse that has also been attributed to Dunstan, the so-called *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*.² Not only are the dialogues rich fodder for a codicological approach, they also, unusually for vernacular verse, afford an opportunity for intercodicological comparison (as they exist in more than one manuscript). The varied contexts for *Solomon and Saturn* span the period from before the Benedictine Reform to the aftermath of the Norman Conquest, and thus, rather than appearing as a snapshot in time, synchronically, as the Exeter Anthology (See also [Muir 2000](#)) (as Niles terms it) does, the dialogues of *Solomon and Saturn* invite a historical perspective. Specifically, they allow us to think about the uses for esoteric learning in the “wisdom tradition”, and perhaps the role of poetry in the same, over time.

Codicological readings are indeed an area of promise in recent research, from Andy Orchard’s (1995) study of the *Beowulf* manuscript to Arthur Bahr’s (2013) *Fragments and Assemblages* (the latter a study of compilations from the later Middle Ages). Again and again, scholars returning to the context of a manuscript discover not the chaos or ineptitude that they were taught governed—sadly—many a medieval collection, but instead a rich, profoundly local, often idiosyncratic logic. Discerning such logic demands the work not

of the traditional disciplines alone, such as source studies, exegesis, or codicology, but a multivalent approach to both reading and history.³ Bahr, for example, adopts Walter Benjamin as his methodological lodestar for an expanded reading praxis of later medieval compilations, considering the compilation from the past, those responsible for its making, and those eyes under which it has passed on its way to the present as constituting an ever-shifting “constellation” (pp. 12–15). Early-medieval manuscripts have generally been approached from a more historicist (and less theoretical) perspective, but that may be slowly changing. Orchard’s approach to the *Beowulf* manuscript is ultimately literary-critical, whereas more recently, Mittman and Kim (2013) have considered that manuscript’s version of *The Wonders of the East* from a much more theoretical perspective (one which nonetheless rather isolates the text from its manuscript fellows). Niles’ treatment of the Exeter Book is exegetical at core, whereas that of Brian O’Camb combines cultural studies, manuscript studies, literary criticism, and historiography. My comparative approach to CCC 41, CCC 422, and BL Cotton Vitellius A.xv, the manuscript witnesses to *Solomon and Saturn*, will emphasize semiotics in reading both text and compilation (echoing Bahr’s approach to constellated form).

The claims for Dunstan’s compiler-authorship of both the Exeter Book and the *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* could present a testable hypothesis. Do the monastic poetics of the Exeter Book also characterize, for example, the poetics of the fullest collection of *Solomon and Saturn* texts, in CCC 422? Do they appear similar enough to justify shared authorship or compilership? I am not certain I wish to approach the question with such positivism. A single author can, after all, have distinctive phases, for one thing, and different authors can form a school characterized by a single style. I am more interested in ways to read and understand compilations themselves. Niles’ treatment of the Exeter Book as a coherent “work”, one that harnesses pre-Christian form and themes for Benedictine contemplative purposes suggests a coherent “strong reading” of that codex—the first such attempt. My own “strong reading” suggests that the *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues display in their earliest compilations a poetics distinct in some respects from the orthodox emphasis on transcendence that characterizes Niles’ reading of the Exeter collection. The *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues evince a poetics more bound up with liturgical language and its sacrality, and with esoteric learning in the Irish tradition. Since there are three manuscript witnesses to *Solomon and Saturn* in some form, I try to read the differences among them in a context of historical difference, though ultimately my remarks on literary history will remain speculative and limited to the manuscripts I have considered.

Only in the last few decades has much interest been shown in the *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*.⁴ Their exuberant Irish “symptoms”, lack of commitment to either orthodoxy or verisimilitude, and failure to be either heroic or lyric poetry (or even to pick either verse or prose) long relegated them to the outer darkness, where exegetical and historicist criticism disdain to tread.⁵ At the same time, the earliest of the dialogues, in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 422 (Part I, mid-tenth century (Anlezark 2009, pp. 1–4; Budny 1997, p. 645; Ker 1957, p. 119)), is also noteworthy as the earliest extant text in the fascinating and expansive European Solomonic dialogue tradition. Against the gleeful obscenity of this tradition’s later reflexes, the Old English dialogues, however unruly, read like edicts of the Pope—or the *sententiae* of his very pious grandmother.⁶ This is to say that the Old English dialogues are relatively tame, their nonconformity (to modern expectations) and heterogeneity coming in the form of formal experimentation and wide-ranging allusiveness rather than in the form of inversion. Nevertheless they should be seen in the diachronic context of probing and questing that gave rise in some times and places to riddles, in others to poetic contests, in others still to satirical challenges to state and ecclesiastic power.

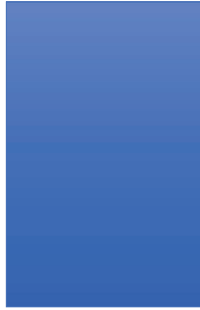
In all the Old English *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues, the biblical King Solomon, renowned for his wisdom, engages in questions and answers with a learned foil from the pagan world whose name, *Saturnus*, alliterates with his own. Many have read this “Other” as not only Solomon’s adversary but also a kind of villain, erring in his approach to wisdom (wanting to gobble books, for example) and thus demonstrating for a monastic

reader how not to engage in learning.⁷ On the other hand, others, including myself, have argued that *Solomon and Saturn's* ostensible contest (they “flytan”, or contend, according to *Solomon and Saturn II*, and Saturn joyfully admits defeat in a short fragment in the same manuscript) is more cooperative and complementary than adversarial.⁸ This is indeed an ethos inherited, as I argue, from the Irish poetic contests investigated by Charles D. Wright (2013) and John Carey (1996). Nancy Mason Bradbury has argued for a similar complementarity in the subversive and class-conscious late-medieval/Renaissance *Solomon and Marcolf* as well. In the latter, much later Latin dialogue, Solomon offers authoritative gnomic statements, and Marcolf inverts each one, answering high sententia with, as Jan Ziolkowski puts it, the language of the barnyard (Ziolkowski 2008, p. 3). The grotesque peasant Marcolf displays a wily street sense, which Solomon’s authority overcomes only by the assertion of power. Thus, according to Bradbury, it is clear to a reader that the two contestants each possess legitimate knowledge of a sort. The “low” is able to reveal vulnerabilities in the “high”, even if ultimately the status quo is restored. And Marcolf articulates the earthy truths of our shared physical existence that transcendentalizing traditions since Plato have sought to avoid.⁹ In his insistence on the sublunary real and on speaking its truths to power, Marcolf stands with one leg in the late-medieval fabliaux and one on the Elizabethan stage. In some ways, then, the vulgar peasant Marcolf is an avatar for the earlier Saturnus, particularly in Bradbury’s approach to complementary “rival wisdoms”.

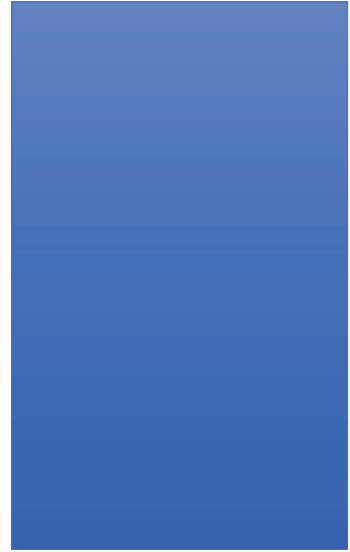
In *Solomon and Saturn*, the two contestants’ complementarity is pronounced, and they are much less starkly opposed. Both are sages, learned in books, though Solomon may possess a key that Saturn knows he lacks. For example, Saturn seeks the liturgical knowledge enshrined in the Pater Noster and probes the philosophical insights of Christian learning. As I mentioned above, Saturn is unfazed in being bested by Solomon—he was after enlightenment, not supremacy—and by the twelfth century and the *Prose Solomon and Saturn* (in Cotton Vitellius A.xv) if one may take a long view, any pretense of drama between the two interlocutors gives way to the encoding of catechetical-encyclopedic knowledge for its own sake. *Solomon and Saturn's* questions and answers have baffled (and delighted) readers for decades, as they range from displays of highly literate *grammatica* to explorations of metaphysical paradox that often seem to dip into reservoirs of mythic or folkloric tradition. These dialogues are fascinating in their own right; they represent a truly long and significant tradition in early-medieval European literature; and their manuscript witnesses include the *Beowulf* manuscript itself (BL MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv). Appended early to the liturgy (speaking of canonicity), and appearing thus in *two* extant manuscripts, as I will discuss below, the dialogues end up, on the other side of the Norman Conquest, in a pre-scholastic compendium of Christian philosophy (the Southwick Codex of Cotton Vitellius A.xv), which in turn is appended, in the Renaissance, to the *Beowulf* compilation’s monstrous wonders. Having begun their literary history as poetic explorations of a mystery, as I will argue, by the time of the Reformation, they are drained of their *Logomystik* and have become curiosities in the cabinet of the Cotton library.

CCCC 422, also known as the Red Book of Darley, is, as I mentioned above, the codex with not only the oldest but the fullest collection of *Solomon and Saturn* material, comprising the four texts edited by Daniel Anlezark as *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*. This manuscript comprises two parts, which were bound together at least by the twelfth century, which is also when the Southwick Codex of the *Beowulf* manuscript, containing the latest *Solomon and Saturn* dialogue, was copied.¹⁰ The bulkiest by far is Part II, a very idiosyncratic eleventh-century breviary, as Mildred Budny and Christopher Hohler have observed, containing mass texts, sometimes with music, but also prognostics, formulae for ordeals, and calendrical/computistical materials.¹¹ Budny notes that it was apparently made in an episcopal center, but was most likely meant for, and certainly ended up in, a more provincial locale (p. 646). The book is very small and portable, particularly when compared to the much larger and grander CCCC 41 (which contains only a fragmentary *Solomon and Saturn I* (ll. 1–93), in its margins on pp. 196–98):

CCCC 422
194 × 129 mm (Budny 645)
7.6 × 5.1 in.



CCCC 41
352 × 216 mm (Budny 501)
13.9 × 8.5 in.



The book would thus have been useful to a parish priest in performing his duties, which seem to have spanned both the strictly orthodox and what used to be called “popular” practice.

Part I of the manuscript, the mid-tenth-century *Solomon and Saturn* material, has been dismissed as “flyleaves”—26 pages of flyleaves, which Budny notes with a skepticism I share (pp. 647–48). The two quires appear to have been excised from a prior compilation (given their acephalous and atelous nature) and bound, between 1060 and 1200, with Part II.¹² The contents of Part I are: *Solomon and Saturn I* without its beginning and the *Solomon and Saturn Pater Noster Prose* without its end (due to a missing leaf), both of which center upon the power of that prayer; then the poetic fragment that may or may not be the proper ending to *Solomon and Saturn II* followed by *Solomon and Saturn II*, with two missing leaves and one page that has been erased and overwritten with an excommunication formula in Latin.¹³

A modest amount has been written over the past three decades attempting to address the meaning of these texts and individual cruces as separate entities, while recently, Heide Estes has argued that they form one prosimetric whole.¹⁴ I have recently argued, and reiterate in a forthcoming book, that the *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues are unified by a concern with the enigma of the Logos, participating in an early “Incarnational poetics”, a term I take from Cristina Maria Cervone (2012). This is important because an Incarnational poetics relates the two parts of the manuscript to one another, the *Solomon and Saturn* texts to the liturgy. However, the Logocentrism of the CCCC material, to borrow and reframe a term from Jacques Derrida, is, by design, obscure (we are in a tradition of deliberate, learned-devotional obscurantism not unlike that which Niles detects in the Exeter Book riddles). The first two texts treat the wonderful qualities of the Pater Noster, which is not merely an example of magical or incantatory speech, but the actual words of the Word, with a special relationship to the Incarnation. Solomon instructs, for example, that “the palm-twigged Pater Noster unlocks heaven, delights the holy, mollifies the lord, fells murder, quenches the devil’s fire, kindles the lord’s” (“Ðæt gepalmtwigede, Pater Noster / heofonas ontyneð, halige geblissað, / Metod gemiltsað, morðor gefylleð /

adwæseð deofles fyr, dryhtnes onæleð”) (*Solomon and Saturn I*, ll. 39–42, [Anlezark 2009](#), p. 66).¹⁵ Such power could, perhaps, be an attribute of an “ordinary” incantation, if that is not an oxymoron. Yet the Pater Noster is “palmtwigged”, a lexical clue that associates it specifically with the person of Christ.¹⁶ More importantly, the Pater Noster is the prayer that Christ offers in the course of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, as an example of how to pray (Matt 6: 9–13). Later codified as liturgy, its words are the uttered words of Christ, who is the Word that was made flesh in the Incarnation, according to the Gospel of John (John 1: 1–14). Given Christ’s status as Word, there is a special relationship between words Christ spoke—red-letter words in later print practice—and the mystery of the Incarnation, a relationship important to both early and late-medieval Incarnational poetics. In *Solomon and Saturn I*, for example, the very letters of the Pater Noster come alive and do battle against the devil and thus participate in the power of Christ himself, a sacramental status made clear in the *Pater Noster Prose*, where the Pater Noster stands in for the Son.¹⁷ The last stage of a shapeshifting contest in which the prayer is pitted against the devil, for example, ends with the devil in the form of death, matched, or rather trumped, by the Pater Noster in the form of the lord (“on Dryhtnes onlicnesse”), whose salvific feat, after all, was to rise from the dead ([Anlezark 2009](#), p. 72). The Pater Noster, further, has unmistakably divine properties, with a golden head and silver hair, and a heart twelve thousand times brighter than the heavens ([Anlezark 2009](#), p. 74). The Pater Noster dialogues in CCC 422 convey that the Pater Noster is a sacramental form of words, with a particular, participatory relationship to the Word.

Solomon and Saturn II has similarly Incarnational underpinnings, treating all manner of ontological questions only to arrive at the nature of the Eucharist:

Swilc bið seo an snaed aeghwylcum men
 selre micle, gif heo gesegnod bið,
 to ðycgganne, gif he hit geðencan cann,
 ðonne him sie seofon daga symbelgereordu. ([Anlezark 2009](#), p. 90, ll. 227–30)
 [Thus is that one morsel, if it be blessed, much better for any man to ingest, if he
 can conceive it, than a seven days’ feast.]

Again, it is not overtly obvious that the poem has turned to the Eucharist with this passage, but rather implicit in context as well as in form. As I have elucidated elsewhere, the passage is part of a broader, tripartite exploration of substances that are at once physical/quotidian and spiritual in nature. First water (interrupted by a missing leaf), then bread, and finally light are given parallel phrasing that sustains the duality and ambiguity of these substances and does not resolve them into one valence or the other. Water is both the water that runs upon the earth and the water of baptism. Bread is just crumbs dropped on the floor, but it also, mysteriously, nourishes the soul. Light has “Christes gecyndo” (Christ’s nature) and both the form and the efficacy of the holy spirit, but it can also burn up your barn in the form of fire. The irreducible duality of these substances is related, as the poem makes explicit (“Christes gecyndo”), to the dual nature of Christ. Christ is both God and human, ineffable and effable, a profound paradox Augustine explored most fully in *De Trinitate* ([Augustine 1991](#)). As Vivien [Law \(1995\)](#) and Michael [Herren \(2011\)](#), in particular, have explained, early Insular esoteric writers such as Virgilius Maro Grammaticus and “Jerome” the cosmographer (technically, he is recorder of one Aethicus Ister, just as Adomnán recorded the otherwise unknown Arculf) seem to have made paradox their discursive foundation, drawing on both Irish poetic tradition and Christian exegesis.¹⁸ Texts in this branch of the Insular “wisdom tradition” are often playful, reflecting their exclusive audience, but their playfulness has tended to obscure from modern readers their profound philosophical premises. As Law avers, behind the elaborate and polyglot verbal surfaces lay always the Word (pp. 25, 57). The relationship between that ultimate, divine Logos and uttered words manifest in the world was the object of endless fascination. Bringing together not only the Irish and patristic traditions but also the manifest ambiguities of

English poetry, texts such as the Old English *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* may be seen alongside the Old English and Anglo-Latin riddles in exploring paradox in a forum of dialogic challenge. Whether in the voice of an object demanding to be named or in the voices of two figures debating the nature of fate and free will, these texts ask the hardest questions of their time in a form that, as I have said elsewhere, resists resolution, allowing two to remain two, even though Saturn, for example, is evidently happy in his defeat.¹⁹

In this light, against this background, in which the *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* are playful but serious products of a tradition whose fundamental object of inquiry is the Logos, it becomes possible to consider how the dialogues were seen as fitting to conjoin to a portable breviary. Part II of CCC 422 contained all manner of materials useful to a parish priest, including the liturgical language central to the performance of the mass. The Benedictine reform seems to have produced not only renewed monastic rigor and the commitment to orthodoxy that would find such vigorous expression in the person of Ælfric of Eynsham. It also gave rise, according to Niles and O’Camb, to a vernacular monastic poetics that we see evident in the compilation of the Exeter Book. The *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues represent a slightly earlier iteration of such a poetics—perhaps best seen as a prototype or progenitor—drawing on earlier traditions of Insular learning (Anlezark, again, dates them around 930). They are mixed in terms of genre, and it would behoove us to recall that a dialogue in mixed verse and prose is of course rather the standard form for an important philosophical text in the early Middle Ages. This is the form of Boethius’ (1962) *Consolatio philosophiae* and it is also the form of Martianus Capella’s (1983) *De nuptiis*. In CCC 422, Part I, we might see a prosimetric exploration of the Pater Noster and the sacramental Word behind it, a fitting preface to the breviary that follows as a way of exploring the nature of its liturgical language. The joining of the two parts of the manuscript took place likely in the wake of the Conquest, again, between about 1060 and 1200. The dialogues, as I have suggested, represent a venerable Insular tradition of learning, and they were perhaps valued as such, in a way similar to the reverence Elaine Treharne has traced in the copying of older hands in the Southwick Codex of Cotton Vitellius A.xv. The book certainly carried cultural cachet, as someone in the sixteenth century noted along with its special name the fact that it was long “held in reverence” in its Derbyshire community, with the power to cause madness in the swearer of a false oath.²⁰ I do not think that Part I of CCC 422 constituted flyleaves, but rather a way for an English priest to think philosophically about the nature of the liturgy he performed and its relation to the Word it embodied. Even if he did not himself possess learning enough to plumb the depths of the texts themselves, they may, again, have stood for something for him, a tradition of learning that was fading.

This spatial relationship to a heftier bind-fellow is shared by my second manuscript (I am not moving chronologically), the “Southwick Codex” of the *Beowulf* manuscript, Cotton Vitellius A.xv, adjoined to the more illustrious “Nowell Codex” after the medieval period. This step-sibling to *Beowulf*’s book of monsters, as Andy Orchard has put it, is rarely discussed, though Elaine Treharne’s (2016) recent essay will no doubt prompt renewed attention. Southwick’s *Solomon and Saturn* dialogue is later than the others and was edited, by virtue of extensive shared material, with the Old English *Adrian and Ritheus* by J. E. Cross and Thomas D. Hill. It is tucked into the middle of the Southwick compilation, in a structure you see repeatedly in early English manuscripts as well as early English texts: more conventional material on the outside, and what I have called, somewhat irreverently, “party in the middle”—more eclectic or less orthodox material in the center. In Southwick, we see the Old English translation of Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, followed by the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, then the prose *Solomon and Saturn*, and finally the first nine lines of a homily on St. Quentin. One way of looking at this ordering is to recognize that the more Roman- or continental-aligned material, Augustine and St. Quentin, is at the edges, and the more Irish-related, apocryphal material is tucked into the center—“party in the middle”. The peripheries may be seen in this light as “protective”, forming a cover for the more heterodox matter within. As I say, this is a structure attested elsewhere in the corpus; it characterizes

the accreted language of the *Æcerbot* charm (the text itself, not its placement in the codex) in BL Cotton Caligula A.vii, for example, and also the final manuscript I will discuss, CCCC 41.²¹

However, this is not the only way to imagine the Southwick compilation, and maybe not the best one, either. For this appendage to the *Beowulf* compilation's *liber monstrorum* may perhaps be considered generically, as a *liber dialogorum*, in which *Solomon and Saturn* joins other dialogues in probing the outer limits of a philosophy rooted in doctrine. For all three long texts in the compilation, the *Soliloquies*, the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, and the *Solomon and Saturn*, feature that ancient form of learned display, the dialogue. I will give a short description of each and then consider why a twelfth-century compiler might have brought them together. Augustine's text, as adapted by the Old English translator, is a discourse between the soul and reason, in which the soul cannot quite come to a satisfactory understanding regarding its own immortality and in particular, the continuity of consciousness from one life to whatever is next. It considers fundamental questions about the human mind and human existence within a Christian ontology. The *Gospel of Nicodemus* embeds multiple dialogues, first between Pilate and various "players" in the Passion story, and then between Satan and Hell as they anticipate the arrival of the harrowing Christ. That is, the only part of the Passion excluded from this account is the crucifixion. *Nicodemus'* multiple dialogues, then, consider the circumstances that led to the Lord's death and that followed from it. Given that dialogue is an ancient way of interrogating the facts of the world, it seems fitting for a learned Christian dialogue to consider the pivotal event in salvation history in this way, exploring conditions before and after, ramifying outward from the crux, the central event fixed by doctrine.

In a similar spirit, then, we can see the *Prose Solomon and Saturn* considering the fundamentals of scripture, the ontologies behind all sorts of biblical facts—they have been called "trivia", but for a believing Christian they are far from trivial. For while this late, highly schematic *Solomon and Saturn* dialogue has none of the drama of the poetic texts in CCCC 41 and 422, it evinces an Isidorean, Irish-inflected encyclopedism that grounds all of life in the authority of scripture. Like Aldhelm's riddles, *Solomon and Saturn's* dialogue broadly concerns the theme of creation and its relation to scriptural authority, and its arc overall is from the creative act of the Logos to the bread of life that sustains us in the world. The first five questions concern God's creation of the world. Where did God sit when he made the heavens and the earth? What was the first word that came from God's mouth? What is God? Why is heaven called heaven? The question about God's first word is particularly fascinating, as the answer is not simply "fiat lux", but rather, "fiat lux, et facta est lux" (Cross and Hill 1982, p. 25). His words at Creation, but also his words in the form of the scriptural account of Creation. God spoke the Scriptures themselves, hinting at the recursive action of Christ as manifestation of the Godhead in the world.

The last two questions in the text recapitulate the whole and its grounding of life in the letter of the Word, for Saturn asks who invented writing, and then how many kinds of books there are:

Tell me the kinds of books and how many there are.

I tell you, the books of the canon are 172 in all; just as the number of peoples and just as the number of disciples excepting the 12 apostles. A man's bones are 218 in total number. A man's veins are 365 in all. A man's teeth are, in all his life, 32. In 12 months there are 52 weeks and 365 days; in 12 months there are 8700 h. In 12 months you must give your serving man 720 loaves besides breakfast and lunch.

[Saga me hwæt bockinna, and hu fela syndon.

Ic þe secge, kanones bec syndon ealra twa and hundseofontig; eall swa fela ðeoda syndon on gerime and eall swa fela leornyngnihta buton þam xii apostolum. Mannes bana syndon on gerime ealra cc and xviii. Mannes adder þa beoð ealra ccc and v and lx. Mannes toða beoð on eallum hys lyfe ii and xxx. On xii monðum

beoð ii and l wucena and ccc daga and v and lx daga; on xii monðum beoð þu sealt syllan þinon ðeowan men vii hund hlafa and xx hlafa buton morgemetten and nonmettum.]. (Cross and Hill 1982, p. 34)

The answer to this last moves from the authoritative books of the canon to the peoples of the earth to the bones in the human body to the teeth in one's mouth and the weeks, days, and hours in a year, finally to arrive at a year's provision of bread. Surely this last answer may be seen and has been seen to fly off the handle into banal, trivial enumeration. And yet here a question about the written word has led to the literal, physical bread of life. Is it trivial and superficial, or is it esoteric and profound? What is the relationship between the bread that sustains us physically and the bread of Christ's body? This was—forgive me—a consuming question for centuries of Christian thought. More broadly, Augustine had asserted that scriptural meaning was full of difficult puzzles, and later writers extended this sense to the enigma of the very world. It is striking that the place in *Solomon and Saturn II* in CCCC 422 where the eucharistic "morsel" is compared to a feast (discussed above) abuts questions of similar polyvalence concerning these same substances of water and then light/fire, specifically associated with the *gecyndo* of Christ. Here in Southwick, the question about books and bread similarly follows questions about light and water. I think there is a meditation here about the sacramental substance, the nexus of writing, divine light, the water of baptism, the bread of life.

At the least, within Cotton Vitellius A.xv, if the Nowell Codex depicts matters of lands far away and long ago, Southwick's contents display a complementary curiosity, reaching outward into the limits of the known, to the borders of doctrine and received truth. The composite Vitellius manuscript itself crosses an important disciplinary boundary, the great divide of 1066, with 11th-century Nowell representing the before time, and the 12-century Southwick the after. Belying the self-obsessed Insularity that modernity has sought to inscribe in the "Anglo-Saxon", both parts of Cotton Vitellius A.xv join one another across the Conquest in gesturing outward, in both time and space. Southwick's collection of a prosaic *Solomon and Saturn* with not liturgy (holy language itself) but learned dialogues connecting scriptural authority to the wider world demonstrates *Solomon and Saturn's* continued relevance as a tradition, as well as perhaps the fading or dying back, at that time, of poetic vernacular language vis a vis sacramental-liturgical power.

I move now to the third and final *Solomon and Saturn* manuscript, having saved the most complex for last. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 41, an eleventh-century compilation, takes only a fragment of the *Solomon and Saturn I* poem, and deploys it in a marginal position, not at the front, as in CCCC 422, but in the actual margins of the main text, where it joins an exceedingly varied collection. The interaction in these margins between liturgical language and the poetic *Solomon and Saturn I* fragment is rich and fascinating, as I have argued elsewhere and will discuss below.²² The marginalia appear to be a compendium devoted to the textual mystery of the Word, revealed variously through the varied genres assembled. That such a compilation "shadows" a copy of the Old English Bede—the manuscript's main text—further suggests a moment in late pre-Conquest Britain in which the revelation of sacred history in a local context has absorbed and syncretized multiple textual traditions. The Latin *Historia* has been Englished, and, as I will discuss, edited for a tighter English focus. This English history is then surrounded by pieces and groupings—fragments and assemblages, to quote Bahr—that point inward from the outer edges toward a peculiar Incarnational formulation. Thus, many streams of learning and cultural influence, from Irish liturgy to folk medicine to apocrypha, join with such authoritative textualities as Bede's. *Solomon and Saturn I* is, in this arrangement, but one part, fragment *qua* fragment, of a heterogeneous whole.

CCCC 41 contains the most eccentric recension of the Old English Bede, a version Sharon Rowley considers to have originated in the southwest of England in the first half of the eleventh century (private communication related to work in progress). Mildred Budny notes that this version excises extensively, cutting out what does not pertain centrally to England, making it a nativist adaptation—the Brexit Bede. The manuscript, as I have said,

is huge compared to CCCC 422 and Cotton Vitellius A.xv. Not that portable at all, at 14x8.5 inches with almost 250 leaves. It was designed with big ambitions, but left unfinished, as Budny and others note well. Perhaps it is in part because of the massive size and unfinished state that someone began to write in the margins. A further feature, however, is the unique metrical colophon at the end of Bede's text, which calls attention to the book and to further, future writing in a way that certainly gestures toward and may have invited what I have called the "shadow manuscript" in the ample margins:

Bidde ic eac æhwylcne mann
 bregorices weard þe þas boc ræde
 and þa bredu befo, fira aldor,
 þæt gefyrðrige þone writre wynsum cræfte
 þe ðas boc awrat bam handum twam
 þæt he mote manega gyt mundum synum
 geendigan . . . (CCCC 41, pp. 483–84, lineated acc. to [Robinson \(1981\)](#), pp. 12–14)
 [I also ask every man, ruler of a realm, who may read this book and take up its
 (cover)boards, lord of men, that he prosper the writer with delightful skill who
 wrote this book with his two hands, that he may finish many yet with his hands
 . . .]

As I say, though Fred [Robinson \(1981\)](#) saw the "I" as in the voice of Bede, scribal hands do seem to bear the focus here, and may have set the marginal hand in motion. In any event, the marginal writing that wraps, sometimes all the way around, the main Bedan text, is readable as some kind of whole, a contemplative, unorthodox, readerly journey, from liturgical outer edges inward toward a sacramental core. I have called it a shadow manuscript, and a shadow, I think, is an instructive image. The shadow is marginal or peripheral, dependent upon the opacity of a body. But it can also loom and conceal, recalling the shadow or cloud that was a favored image for the concealed presence of the divine, from Classical tradition through early Christian exegesis. Such concealment-cum-revelation, specifically of the mystery of the Incarnate Word, is precisely what, as I argue, CCCC 41's shadow manuscript performs. It is the covering that allows Christ to be visible in the world.

In these extensive marginalia, we have the same structure of authoritative outer edges surrounding a more surprising core, as mass texts similar to those in CCCC 422 populate the opening pages and those near the end, while the center contains the most interesting things, including the fragmentary beginning of *Solomon and Saturn I*, but also numerous apparent "mashups", in Latin and Old English, from exorcisms to healing formulas to homilies. Karen Jolly has done much to bring these texts into view as Christian, not "pagan survivals", as an earlier generation of scholarship would have done, and I further argue in forthcoming work that these marginalia together form a compilation devoted to the contemplation of the enigmatic Word. The textual "mashups", echoing the "mashup" that joined Christ's two natures, offer clues along a path of Incarnational revelation, with the name of the Lord, the *nomen sacrum*, in a mashup at the physical and spiritual center, embedded in a cluster of four apocryphal or "unreformed" vernacular homilies. Here is the mashup at the center:

Dextera dni fecit virtutem **dextera** dni exaltavit me non moriar sed vivam &
 narrabo opera dni [Psalm 117/118: 16–17]

Dextera glorificata est in virtute **dextera** man' tua confringit inimicos & per/pro
 multitudine_magestatis tue contrevisti adversarios meos misisti iram tuam &
 commedit eos [Ex 15: 6–7]

Sic per **verbo veritatis** amedatio sic eris in mundissime spiritus fletus oculorum.
 tibi gehenna ignis

Cedite. a capite. a capillis. a labiis. a lingua. a collo. a pectoribus ab universis. conpaginibus membrorum eius ut non habeant potestatem diabolus ab homine isto. N. de capite de capillis. nec nocendi. nec tangendi. nec dormiendi. nec tangendi. nec insurgendi. nec in meridiano. nec in visu. nec in risu. nec in fulgendo [illegible digraph—Ac?] effuie.

Sed **in nomine domini nri ihu xpi** qui cum patre & spiritu sancto vivis & r_ ds_ in unitate spiritu sancti per omnia secula seculorum (CCCC 41, p. 272)

[The **right hand of the lord** has created strength. The **right hand of the lord** has exalted me. I shall not die but live and tell the works of the lord.

The **right hand** is glorified in strength. Your **right hand** destroys enemies and through the greatness of your majesty you have confounded adversaries; you have sent your anger and consumed them.

As through the **word of truth** from a lie, so will you, unclean spirit of weeping of the eyes (?), be through yourself in(to) the pit of fire.

Depart from the hair, from the lips, from the tongue, from the neck, from the chest, from all the joints of his limbs, so that the devil may not have power over this man, N, of the hair of the head not of harming, nor touching nor rising at noon, nor in seeing nor in laughing nor in flashing, and flee,

But in the **name of our lord Jesus Christ** who with the father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns god in the unity of the Holy Spirit in every age forever] (tr. mine)

This mashup is made up of multiple parts, from scriptural excerpts to exorcism formulas. Christ as the “right hand” is invoked four times, which is to say, as the sensible instrument of the godhead in the created world. *Verbum* is then connected to the parts of the human body, evoking the Incarnation, and finally the name itself appears. This mashup, it seems clear to me, is an embodiment of the central Christian mystery, the Word that was made flesh. As I say, it is at the heart of the compilation.

How does *Solomon and Saturn* participate in this scheme? This manuscript, CCCC 41, is the only witness to the beginning of *Solomon and Saturn I*, as CCCC 422 only bears the end, and the two agree remarkably in their overlap, despite a century between them.²³ The work that the *Solomon and Saturn I* fragment is doing in this compilation, I argue, is to introduce the metonymic quality of the Pater Noster and its words (and letters) as they relate to the Logos, the Incarnational goal or prize that we just saw at the center of the compilation. These words of the Word form a signpost on a journey toward the Word, breaking off at the cruciform. T. in the letter-battle sequence, gesturing towards the finding of the cross, which is what eventually follows in the compilation (in the form of an Office for the Invention of the Cross, on pp. 224–25), after a series of formulas for finding what has been lost, on pp. 206–8.²⁴ Thus, after *Solomon and Saturn I*, there are cattle theft mashups with teasing tags *qui quaerit invenit*, which lead in to the finding of the cross. After the revelation of the holy name in that central mashup, subsequent texts meditate on the signs of the continued presence of the Word in the world after the Ascension, including a mashup with the famous SATOR formula (p. 329) which joins Christ’s natures as creative force, word, and ultimately human flesh—a shared nature with ongoing redemptive power. One can thus see in CCCC 41’s mashup textuality an extension or even apotheosis of the prosimetric variety of CCCC 422’s dialogues. In CCCC 41, words participate in the mixed or conjoined and enigmatic nature of Christ, revealing him just as his body did when he came into the world.

At the end of both the main text and the marginal, Incarnational shadow that I have adumbrated here, CCCC 41 discloses a final manifestation of the Word. Here, after the hapax metrical colophon, taking over the space of the main text, is an Old English homily on the Passion and Ascension, and here, carefully imbricated in that text, are two images. (see Figure 1).

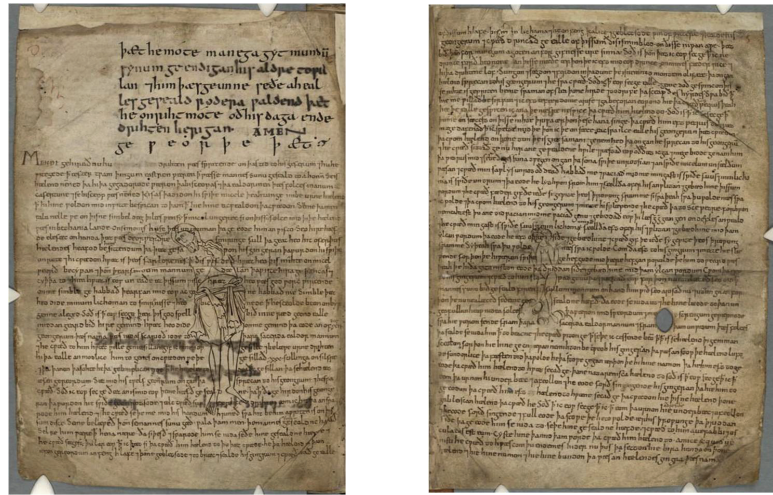


Figure 1. CCCC 41 (pp. 484–85).

Most commentators have dismissed these images as having no part in the writing and thus no real role in a semiotics of the spread. But I argue that they are both Christ, first crucified, then glorified and ascending. If we recall that Christ is the Word made flesh, the incompleteness of the images becomes legible in the sense that the images function as “part” of the passion homily’s text, blending into that text in a mutually constitutive tableau. The partially visual, partially textual spread bodies forth in yet another way the central tenet of Christian theology. We see the Word that was made flesh as both word and flesh—that is, word and image—on the literal flesh of the page. In CCCC 41, *Solomon and Saturn* participates in an extremely heterotextual Incarnational poetics, beyond the prosimetrum of CCCC 422 and fundamentally different from the semiotic and compilational principles of the Southwick Codex of Cotton Vitellius A.xv.

What all three manuscript witnesses of *Solomon and Saturn* share, it seems to me, is that these dialogues represent ways “in” to deeper knowledge of authoritative writing or doctrine. Just as Saturn’s questing figure seeks dialogue with the iconic and authoritative Solomon, the dialogues seek to know the special power of the liturgy, the weird metaphysics of the sacrament, the equally weird historical “reality” of scripture and textuality of history, the enigmatic duality of a god who became a man, whose nature could be further revealed by the enigmatic properties of words. Their modes of knowing are hybrid and their assertions heterodox, but Ælfric’s acerbic disapproval of such things should not so readily win our acquiescence. First composed perhaps in the first third of the tenth century, the dialogues of *Solomon and Saturn* were adjoined to the liturgy by the eleventh century and reiterated in a more rarefied, encyclopedic form in the twelfth. We may see in this trajectory a familiar process in historical linguistics and perhaps in history itself, by which what begins as a potent form is gradually drained of its force. In the case of the *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, this power was related to the divine itself, to the mysteries of a Word that had spoken creation and had even infused that creation through its incarnation. The joining of *Solomon and Saturn*’s potent poetics to the liturgy in both CCCC 422 and CCCC 41 speaks to the eleventh century’s continued recognition of the dialogues’ special nature—an aura that persisted even into the Renaissance in the case of CCCC 422. By the twelfth century, the dialogues are rewritten and recontextualized. No longer themselves performative of certain esoteric truths related to the Word, the utterances of the *Prose Solomon and Saturn* of the Southwick Codex instead refer. Still, they explore the nature of the sacramental substance, in ways remarkably similar to the poetic *Solomon and Saturn*.

The poetics of enigma or poetics of the Incarnation that scholars of later medieval English writing have recently emphasized as a peculiar feature of the period should perhaps be reconsidered as having a longer history. What the three manuscripts of *Solomon and Saturn* suggest is that poetic experiments related to the Word were part of the literary landscape of the earliest phases of Christianity in Britain, and that subsequent stages of reform and upheaval may have cast these experiments in different lights and made necessary first new contexts and eventually entirely new forms. I would suggest as an avenue for future research some comparative work regarding the “monastic poetics” that Niles and O’Camb identify in the later-tenth-century Exeter Book and the Incarnational poetics I have described in CCC 422 (Part I, early tenth c.) and CCC 41 (eleventh c.). Do these compilations represent mostly chronological development, or do they suggest geographic and/or socio-cultural distinctions? Seen together, do they arbitrate in any way the disagreement between Niles and O’Camb regarding the probable origin and compiler-authorship of the Exeter Book? The CCC 422 *Solomon and Saturn* compilation certainly strikes a less “reformist” pose, suited perhaps to its earlier date but perhaps also to some aspect of its geographic origins, though I do not have a fully formed opinion of what those may be. Does the Incarnationalism and strict “localism” of CCC 41 reflect a recalcitrance or resistance to reformist sensibilities? An admiring response to monastic poetics? Regardless, an impulse to encounter the divine in the form of poetic words should perhaps be recognized as a basic one that asserts itself again and again in the English tradition, despite frequent disapproval from authority.

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Notes

- ¹ Brian O’Camb, from whom Niles takes “monastic poetics”, differently locates the manuscript in Winchester, with Æthelwold (O’Camb 2009a, 2014), “Bishop Æthelwold”, p. 257, *inter alia*; see also *Toward a Monastic Poetics* (O’Camb 2009b, pp. 1–26).
- ² The dialogues’ most recent editor, Daniel Anlezark, advances the theory of Dunstan’s authorship (pp. 49–57).
- ³ Certainly the laconic nature of the evidence, including the limitation of the written record to monastic scriptoria (i.e., there were no secular clerks offering copying services to the public) as well as the vicissitudes of time (the 1731 Cotton fire) in addition to the silence of medieval writers on whole topics of keen interest to us (such as vernacular metrics and literary aesthetics or such cultural issues as, say, sexual habits, or how people trained their dogs), might mean that multiple approaches are warranted, since any one might afford a new insight into the mostly-obscure landscape of the past, and, conversely, help avoid the fallacy of building up an entire model of a time based on one slender view alone—the classic problem of the blind men and the elephant.
- ⁴ In addition to Anlezark’s 2009 edition, see (Estes 2014; Major 2012; Olsen 2007; Powell 2005; Wade 2018; Beechy 2017, 2015).
- ⁵ See Anlezark (2009, pp. 12–41, esp. 14–15), for discussion of genre and sources as well as the reception history of the texts.
- ⁶ For the wider Solomonic dialogue tradition, see (Ziolkowski 2008; Bradbury 2008; Hansen 1988).
- ⁷ See, for example, Major, Olsen, Powell, and Wilcox.
- ⁸ See (Estes 2014; Beechy 2017).
- ⁹ See Lockett, Bynum, and my forthcoming *Flesh of the Word: Materiality, Aesthetics, and the Incarnation in Early Medieval Britain* (Notre Dame).
- ¹⁰ See (Anlezark 2009, pp. 1–4; Ker 1957, pp. 119–21; Gneuss and Lapidge 2014, pp. 118–19; Budny 1997, pp. 645–66).
- ¹¹ See (Hohler 1972; Budny 1997, pp. 645–46, 651–52).
- ¹² See (Budny 1997, pp. 647–48).
- ¹³ See Anlezark for description of the manuscript and collation/foliation, pp. 1–4. See also Budny (1997).
- ¹⁴ In addition to the recent work already cited, see also several articles by Hill (1988, 1993, 2005), O’Keeffe (1991), O’Neill (1997), Wilcox (1991), and Wright (1993).
- ¹⁵ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. For the adjective *gepalmtwige*, see (Beechy 2015) and *Flesh of the Word*, where I argue that it is a complex Incarnational metonym, linking multiple scriptural and homiletic references to their physical historical realities during the life of Christ.
- ¹⁶ See (Beechy (2015, p. 304, *inter alia*).
- ¹⁷ I discuss the Trinitarian aspects of the *Pater Noster Prose* in *Flesh of the Word*, chp. 4.

- ¹⁸ See Beechy, *Flesh of the Word*, chp. 4.
- ¹⁹ See (Beechy (2017), pp. 147–48, *inter alia*). The Poetic Fragment, adrift because of a lost leaf, proclaims both Saturn’s defeat and his joy:
 hæfde ða se snotra sunu Davides
 forcumen and forcyðed Caldea eorl.
 Hwæðre was on sælum se ðe of siðe cwom
 feorran gefered. Næfre ær his ferhð ahlog. (ll. 6–9, Anlezark 2009, p. 78)
 [Then had the wise son of David overcome and refuted the noble Chaldean.
 Nevertheless he was joyful who had come for this purpose, traveled far. Never
 before had his heart laughed.]
- ²⁰ See (CCCC 422, p. 586). See also (Budny 1997, p. 646).
- ²¹ For a fuller discussion of the structure of the *Æcerbot* charm that I am referring to, see (Beechy 2010, pp. 87–89).
- ²² See *Flesh of the Word*, chp. 5.
- ²³ It is now possible in the Parker Web online interface to compare two manuscripts. See “Comparing Manuscripts”. *Solomon and Saturn I* occupies pp. 196–98 of CCCC 41, and pp. 2–6 of CCCC 422.
- ²⁴ Note that there is extra space in the line after the -T-, as well as an additional line left blank, judging from the previous two pages containing the text, each of which uses three lines of the bottom margin. Ending at -T- certainly appears to have been intentional, barring an incomplete exemplar, which seems unlikely given CCCC 422’s complete ending and the close correspondence between the two versions.

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Article

An Unseen Eighth Rune: Runic Legacy and Multiliteral Performativity in Cynewulf's *The Fates of the Apostles*

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Abstract: The four Old English poems containing the runic Cyn(e)wulf 'signature' have continuously provoked debate as to the characters' intratextual function and proper interpretation. While the prevailing view is that they are predominantly logogrammatic instantiations of traditional runic names, a case has nevertheless also been made for alternative words indicated by initialisms. Referencing both of these lines of reasoning in conjunction with a semiotic literary methodological stance, this article evaluates a single Cynewulf poem (*The Fates of the Apostles*) and its particular inclusion of runes amongst the bookhand alphabet characters. The assessment demonstrates the poem's multiliteral destabilization of associative boundaries between different scripts, as well as between perceived boundaries of orality and legibility. In doing so, it identifies in the text an unseen 'eighth rune' that is semiotically operative.

Keywords: old English poetry; runology; Vercelli Book; Cynewulf; semiotics; Multiliteralism

1. Introduction

Four instances of the runic name “𐌸𐌆𐌿𐌸𐌿𐌹𐌸𐌿” (Cyn(e)wulf) survive within different Old English religious poems divided between the Exeter and Vercelli Books (Exeter, Cathedral Library 3501; Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare CXVII). This rare inclusion of a personal name allowing for 'authorial' attributions has captivated generations of scholars, despite an elusive identity and the broader inapplicability of modern conceptions of authorship. The polygraphic manner of insertion amidst the surrounding lines of Latin alphabet bookhand, moreover, has prompted wide-ranging debates as to the characters' intratextual function and their proper interpretation. While the specific forms of implementation differ between *Christ II*, *Juliana*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, and *Elene*, the prevailing conventional view is that the runic insertions function logogrammatically, instantiating traditional runic names (e.g., Birkett 2014a, 2017a, pp. 70–75; 2017b; Elliott 1953a, 1953b, 1991; Page 1999; Symons 2016, pp. 85–120). A case has, however, been made that the runes may represent alternative words indicated by initial letter (Niles 2006, pp. 285–306). By drawing upon both of these divergent lines of reasoning and approaching the text from a semiotic literary perspective, this article will offer a reassessment of *The Fates of the Apostles* and its runic 'signature' passage. First, I shall demonstrate how the poem multiliterally subverts the associative boundaries between the distinct scripts in use and also between orality and legibility. Second, I will construct an argument that rather than primarily marking a separation, the destabilization of expectations and boundaries achieves an integrative effect. As a concluding result, I shall identify the relevance and semiotic operation of an unseen and hitherto unremarked 'eighth rune' in the passage.

At just 122 lines, *The Fates of the Apostles* of the later tenth-century Vercelli Book (fols. 52^v–54^r) is the shortest of the surviving Cynewulf poems by a considerable margin. Not unlike the Exeter Book's hagiographical *Juliana*, certain early commentators were less than forgiving of the work's literary merit and deemed it to have “attracted more attention than many critics thought it deserved” in the wake of its recognition as a work associated with Cynewulf (Bjork 2013, p. xvi).¹ This underappreciation for *The Fates of the Apostles* stems

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largely from its textual format, since in terms of structure the poem has much in common with Latinate passionary lists. It describes in concise fashion the evangelical achievements of Christ's twelve apostles in the early days of the Church and relates the manner of their deaths. For example, the poem gives a concise summary of Peter and Paul's martyrdom on four lines:

“Sume on Rome-byrig,
frame, fyrd-hwate, feorh ofgefon
þurg Nerones nearwe searwe
Petrus ond Paulus.”

“Notable men in Rome,
bold, warlike, gave up their lives
through Nero's cunning treachery,
Peter and Paul.” (Bjork 2013, pp. 130–31, ll. 11b–14a; subsequent citations of the poem and Modern English translations are also drawn from Bjork's edition, unless otherwise noted)

It then transitions briskly to an account of the disciple Andrew.

In terms of direct source material, similarities and parallels have been noted between *The Fates of the Apostles* and continental martyrologies including the works of Florus of Lyon, Usuard of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and Ado of Vienne, but according to an investigative reassessment pursued by John McCulloh, there is no positive, single source that can at present be identified (McCulloh 2000; see also Allen and Calderand 1976, pp. 35–39). Cynewulf may have collated information from multiple discrete sources or, as McCulloh alternatively theorizes, taken inspiration from a now lost passionary collection made up of writings by different individuals (McCulloh 2000, pp. 82–83). Either supposition aligns with the indications given by the poem in its opening lines:

“Hwæt. Ic þysne sang sið-geomor fand
on seocum sefan, samnode wide”

“Listen. Journey-weary, I devised this song
in my sick heart, gathered widely” (Bjork 2013, pp. 130–31, ll. 1–2; emphasis mine)

The Fates of the Apostles itself has not always even been viewed as independent from the work which directly precedes it in the Vercelli Book, *Andreas*. Occasionally in the past, both were taken together as a single larger work ascribed to Cynewulf, but more recent analyses of meter and diction highlight discrepancies between the two and link *The Fates of the Apostles* with the other signed poems (Fulk 2001; Orchard 2003). That said, *Andreas* does share commonalities with the ‘Cynewulf canon,’ including twice as many corresponding poetic formulae as the work with the next highest frequency (*Guthlac B*—also theorized possibly to be an unsigned Cynewulf poem), suggestive of “either unity of authorship or conscious literary borrowing in one direction or other” (Orchard 2003, p. 287).² The orthodox contention is that the *Andreas* poet was more likely the borrower (Krapp 1906; Orchard 2003; Schaar 1967), but the opposite direction of influence has nevertheless also been proposed. Puskar (2011) emphasizes discordant notions of authorship and argues that the manuscript evidence points toward the scribe of the Vercelli Book perceiving *Andreas* and *The Fates of the Apostles* as a single work. Puskar further speculates that Cynewulf might not have functioned as the original poet in a modern sense, but could very well have compiled, rearranged, combined, and added to texts already in existence as part of the creative process. While it is not my intention here to provide a comprehensive resolution to the debate, these conflicting hypotheses bear mentioning if for no other reason than the fact that such paratextual elements inarguably hold sway over perceptions of the poem as a whole, over perceptions of its polygraphic epilogue, and especially over perceptions of ‘Cynewulf’ as an internal poet figure.³

2. Naming Names

From the top of folio 54^r of the Vercelli Book, the poet figure reveals himself by gesturing within the text's discourse and by lacing individual runes into the lines of Latin alphabet character text beginning from line 98. The relevant portion of the manuscript is now marred, but still generally decipherable, and edited as follows:

“Her mæg findan fore-þances gleaw,
 se ðe hine lysteð leoð-giddunga,
 hwa þas fitte fegde. ƿ þær on ende standeþ;
 eorlas þæs on eorðan brucaþ. Ne moton hie awa ætsomne,
 woruld-wunigende. Ʀ sceal gedreosan,
 Ʊ on eðle; æfter tohweorfan
 læne lices frætewa, efne swa ƭ toglideð
 þonne ƭ ond ƭ cræftes neotað
 nihtes nearowe; on him † ligeð
 cyninges þeodom. Nu ðu cunnon miht
 hwa on þam wordum wæs werum oncyðig.”

“Here one wise of forethought,
 one who delights in poetic songs, can discover
 who composed this song. ƿ stands at the end;
 men enjoy that on earth. But they cannot always
 be together, dwelling in the world. Ʀ must pass away,
 Ʊ in the native land; after that the transitory adornments
 of the body will disperse, even as the ƭ vanishes
 when the ƭ and ƭ exercise strength
 with labor in the night; † lies upon them,
 the service of the king. Now you can know
 who has been made known to people in these words.” (Bjork 2013, pp. 136–37,
 ll. 96–106)

As with other instances of the signed Cynewulf canon, this polygraphic implementation of manuscript runes operates at several interrelated semiotic levels and demands a certain level of proficiency with both scripts.⁴

First, there is a fundamental differentiation between scripts that is immediately perceptible to the eye. The verse unambiguously indicates that here may be found “*hwa þas fitte fegde*”. Attention is drawn to the presence of a poet persona, and the isolated individual runic letters can be arranged to provide the proper name ‘Cynewulf.’ Moreover, the runes’ size and angularity visibly set them apart from the remainder of the surrounding Latin alphabet characters, meaning that even the wynn rune (ƿ) of the signature would appear distinct from the more rounded wynn (P) employed throughout as a normal, ‘unmarked’ character of the book hand alphabet. This visual juxtaposition and differentiation between two operative sets of linguistic symbols imbues script choice itself with semiotic function. That is to say, in addition to functioning as a linguistic medium conveying the words of the poem, the recognition that one script has been used in place of another produces supplementary emblematic values that are bound up with the linguistic content.

These emblematic values can be associative or emotive in nature, as indeed Tom Birkett reminds us, “scripts represent cultural signifiers as well as practical technologies” (Birkett 2017a, p. 13). Moreover, auxiliary multiliteral signification is made possible because the runes are not mere visual adornments. Each rune denotes a word that contributes to the narrative, alliteration, and scansion of the line in which it appears. General scholarly

consensus is that the runes should be interpreted as logograms that indicate traditional runic names. Thus, for example, the following initial rendering can be produced:

hwa þas fitte fegde. ƿ ((f) = FEOH) þær on ende standeþ
who composed this song. (WEALTH, PROPERTY, etc.) stands at the end

Such a neatly coherent treatment is not possible in every case, however.

On one hand, the readings of ƿ (f) = *feoh* (wealth, property, cattle); ƿ (w) = *wynn* (joy, delight); † (l) = *lagu* (water, sea); and † (n) = *nyd* (need, affliction) are comparatively less problematic, in that they indicate more commonplace Old English words that accord with the sense of the passage. ƿ (c), ƿ (y), and particularly ƿ (u), on the other hand, are altogether thornier to unpack.

In terms of name values, one does not begin from a place of great assurance. For ƿ (c), the name suggested by the *Old English Rune Poem* is “*cen* (torch),” a word that is exceedingly rare in Old English—to the point that it is even difficult to be certain whether it is Germanic in origin—and which is also not cognate with the name given by the later Icelandic and Norwegian rune poems (“*kaun* (sore, ulcer)”) (Page 1999, p. 69). ƿ (y) is doubly troublesome. It is a newer letterform encountered in the expanded English *futhorc*, and the name proposed for it, “*yr*,” has an elusive description that prompts a number of possible meanings for the word. These include “saddle,” “horn,” and “bow”—the last of which options Ray Page calls the “most tempting” for the links it may confirm to the Scandinavian rune glossed “*ýr* (yew, bow, bent bow, etc.)” (Page 1999, p. 76). Alternatively, Michael Barnes suggests that the shape of the ƿ (y) rune seems to reflect the creators’ realization of the sound’s relationship to ƿ (u) and ƿ (i), and that the name given to the character (“*yr*”) is “most readily explained as an adaption of *ur* [. . .] *yr* is of uncertain meaning in Old English, if indeed it has any meaning at all” (Barnes 2012, p. 39).

The reading and translation of:

þonne ƿ ((c) = CEN) ond ƿ ((y) = YR) cræftes neotað nihtes nearowe
when (TORCH) and (SADDLE/HORN/BOW) exercise strength with labor in
the night

in *The Fates of the Apostles* is perhaps a bit less jarring than in other Cynewulf poems,⁵ though it is still somewhat dissonant. In response, certain early commentators were especially driven to search for replacement c- and y- words, and John Niles more recently picks up such treatments and puts forward a renewed case for Cynewulf’s use of initialisms rather than “slavish fidelity to the textbook names of the runes” (Niles 2003; 2006, p. 301). For *The Fates of the Apostles*’ problematic ƿ (c) and ƿ (y) runes specifically, Niles proposes “the two antonyms *cēnþu* ‘boldness’ and *irgþ* or *irgþu* ‘cowardice’” as potential options that align thematically with the passage and Cynewulf’s overall pattern of transposing the language of heroic verse to religious narratives (Niles 2006, p. 303). More than “one specific application,” however, Niles’s pivotal contention is rather for “a mode of interpretation” and “the principle that *there exists no list of ‘correct’ rune-names that one can consult to decode Cynewulf’s signatures*” (Niles, p. 304, Niles’s emphasis). This critical suggestion is one that I believe to be undervalued, especially as Niles explicitly does not suggest that it is *never* the conventional name.

Indeed, Kenneth Sisam’s foundational assertion remains true and highly relevant; the attested runic names must serve as the starting point and standard against which any critical interpretation of the Cynewulf runes is judged (Sisam 1953, pp. 18–20).⁶ Yet across the board, exceedingly few modern commentators are willing to uphold the hardline stance of Ralph Elliott, who argues:

“In the first place, there must be some evidence justifying the substitution of any other word for the rune-name and its accepted meaning; the mere fact that some other word beginning with the same letter makes acceptable sense does not appear to constitute a sufficient criterion. In the second place, there must be consistency” (Elliott 1953a, p. 50)

Consistency seems an entirely defensible principle, but Elliott's conservative approach produces an altogether less than convincing explanation for the \mathfrak{N} (u) rune, since construal with its name from the rune poem—"aurochs, ox, bison, etc."—produces an undeniably cryptic reading.⁷ Elliott's own resolution draws on the possibility that, "with [the older meaning of aurochs] there also remains the earlier symbolic significance of 'male strength'" (Elliott 1953a, p. 52). The concept of masculine strength would afford a reasonable interpretation of the line, but Elliott's rationalization for metaphorical extension has met with a large degree of justified skepticism (see (Elliott 1991) for a renewed defense of his views against the challenges made by Page and others).

The more common, if in some ways less defensibly consistent, interpretation of the rune is that it represents the homonymous pronoun correlating to Modern English "our," i.e., "ure on eðle," rendered by Birkett as "'u' (our) 'w' (joy) [from the previous line] in the native land" (Birkett 2014a, p. 780). This reading is attractive, because of the comprehensible senses it produces not only here in *The Fates of the Apostles*, but also in *Christ II* and *Elene*. Yet, while the sense offered is certainly acceptable, it is intensely problematic strictly in terms of audible detectability. Even if one is made appropriately aware of the presence of runic names in the passage, otherwise unguided listeners face a taxing multilayered challenge. They must link a common pronoun with a homonym that is associated with a rune, all while maintaining an overall awareness of the poem's narrative, a mental list of common and uncommon rune names already successfully extracted from the recited text, and an alert ear listening closely for runes still to come. Beyond the high degree of literacy and textual awareness this necessitates, the implications of such a substitution render a daunting auditory task a nearly impossible one.

If, indeed, "ure (our)" is the correct interpretation, then surely deviation from conventional names would further hinder one's capacity to detect the runes in a purely aural setting. Even if a listener could make the necessary leaps to arrive at its being a runic letter in the name Cynwulf, this homonymous substitution disrupts the stability of a listener's interpretative framework in much the same way an entirely arbitrary substitution would. The audience must suddenly question whether similar substitutive processes will continue to take place or have already been taking place without their recognition. Doubt is cast on the previous rune words which a listener had theoretically been able to extract successfully. This demonstrates the difficulty—if not impossibility—of untangling the signature from the polygraphic epilogue without some form of non-verbal indication or visual confirmation. It also reveals that the aesthetic result of the signatures is far more than simply a request for remembrance and prayers.

3. The Poet's Involvement

Had preservation of Cynwulf's name been the sole purpose, then an alternative method could have easily been taken to convey his name efficiently to both reader and listener, such as perhaps the use of an acrostic, unbroken alliteration, or a simple colophon; even if Cynwulf refrained from such direct means, Victoria Symons additionally points out that if the goal truly had been only to elicit prayers, then at least electing to employ a uniform epilogue would seem better suited to that purpose (Symons 2016, p. 90). Instead, Symons presents the convincing case that,

"Rather the Cynwulf poet uses these embedded runes in order to explore the material nature of the written word and its ability to function as a visual symbol, and to remind readers of the necessity of correctly interpreting what is read. These epilogues are designed primarily for the benefit of the reader's reflection rather than the poet's posterity." (Symons 2016, p. 85)

This reflective aspect is an essential component for understanding the Cynwulf poems' intratextual use of runes, but it is beneficial to extend the consideration. Elsewhere, Symons contends that "Readers of these passages are relied upon to bring to the verse a shared understanding of conventional rune names which is then subverted, through substitutions and metaphors, in ways that test the flexibility of runic letters as written

signifiers” (Symons 2016, p. 98). This too is persuasive, and yet a reduction of the runes to little more than embellishing visual symbols with linguistic associations is unhelpfully limiting, and I would argue that it is likely overly informed by modern monoscriptal writing perspectives (on the broader subject of historical and contemporary linguistic contexts that exceptionally and routinely use multiple scripts, see first (Bunčić et al. 2016)).

The signature runes possess a different status and function than the Latin alphabet letters of the text, but this is not in and of itself atypical for polygraphic writing more generally. Nor, I would highlight, is it even particularly idiosyncratic with respect to the Old English context, where the paleographical record displays a deliberate and patterned hierarchy of letterforms “of various degrees of formality, allowing scribes to adapt their handwriting to suit the status of their texts or the space available” (McKee 2014, pp. 423–24; see also Brown 2011).⁸ The runic signature epilogues should thus be approached and viewed as elements that contribute to the overarching aesthetic aims of their respective texts. While the insertion of runes does create a visual disruption, in none of the Cynewulf poems is it a sudden break with what has come before. For clarification, the most revealing place to turn is to the poem itself.

The signature passage is not simply a personal, first-person epilogue that has been clumsily appended to a poetic listing of the apostles. Exploration of the poem’s themes and overall format sheds light on what is revealed by the runes and on their multiliteral implementation. Daniel Calder succinctly summarizes how,

“Cynewulf’s own personal cares (conventional as they may be for a medieval Christian) define the themes of the poem—both in the narrative and the runic conclusion [. . .] In the iterated prayers one item in particular, noted above, is repeated—the journey to an unknown land (91b–95b, 108b–113a). Faced with genuine terror about this journey, Cynewulf finds its parallel and consolation in the journeys of the twelve apostles.” (Calder 1975, p. 222)

Even more conspicuously than in the other signed works, Cynewulf’s personal involvement in *The Fates of the Apostles* is no hastily appended afterthought. It is woven into the fabric of the poem in such a way that the inclination to spell out his name after those of the apostles seems altogether intuitive, as Elliott (1991, pp. 232–34) and numerous previous commentators have recognized. James Boren highlights particularly how Cynewulf’s first-person segment “functions in the same relationship formally and thematically as do the personae of the apostles”; the poet not only effects structural and thematic unity through the repetition of rhetorical patterns over the course of the poem but also successfully “identifies himself with the apostles” (Boren [1969] 2001, p. 61).⁹ Constance Hieatt further observes a thirteenth corresponding occurrence which somewhat spoils the apostolic symbolism of Boren’s twelve, but which nevertheless reinforces the general validity of the pattern (Hieatt [1974] 2001, p. 71).

Though we can discern little about Cynewulf’s biography and historicity, it is hard to overstate his importance in figural terms, since he serves a central, intratextual function as a poet persona. I would also suggest that, in this role as a rhetorical device, the poet figure helps first and foremost to facilitate reader reflection and to allow for easier identification with the righteous characters contained in the main narrative. The poet strives to affiliate himself with the figures of the apostles and then unmistakably extends this same affiliation to the discerning reader on lines 96–98a, 107–9. He achieves this through: (1) explicit hints aimed at “one wise of forethought, one who delights in poetic songs”; (2) second-person address; and (3) direct first-person entreaty. This ties in with the poem’s structure of interconnected images and metaphors which, as Hieatt writes, “suggests progression which goes something like ‘Christ > saints > poet > reader > humanity > God?’” (Hieatt [1974] 2001, p. 76). It chimes too with Dolores Frese’s assertion that, “By employing a similar verbal pattern for apostolic and poetic activity, Cynewulf relates the reader, the poet, and the entire Christian brotherhood in a kind of poetic communion of saints” (Frese 1975, p. 320).

I would likewise contend that the polygraphic inclusion of runes further accentuates this ideological affiliation by associatively reemphasizing the significance and applicability of the poem's message for a reader of the vernacular in Early Medieval England. The runes' emphasized distinctiveness and their lingering relevance as cultural symbols in the period tantalizingly suggest ties to layered notions of linguistic and sociocultural heritage, origins, and identity management. These complex and charged topics are ones which modern commentators would do well to engage with carefully and self-reflectively, not only because of the high potential for incendiary and racist misappropriation,¹⁰ but also because of the equally high potential for scholarly reductivism.

In Robert DiNapoli's estimation, for example,

By using runic characters, Cynewulf also affirms the esoteric lore of his native Germanic heritage even as he *bids it farewell*. He uses the cultural associations of the runic alphabet here to locate himself with a poignant exactitude on the mental watershed that divides the Anglo-Saxon poet's pagan past from his Christian present and future. (DiNapoli 2005, pp. 160–61; emphasis mine)

However, I wish to argue precisely the opposite. In actuality, Cynewulf defies one-dimensional categorical expectations and blurs conventional boundary lines between cultures, traditions, and languages, as even the runic signatures appear to have a blended literary pedigree. Just as they can be related to 'native' Germanic maker inscriptions and riddling traditions, they have conversely been linked also to acrostic techniques from within the spheres of medieval Latin poetry (Birkett 2017a, pp. 70–75; Christie 2003, p. 132; Gleason 1992).

The Fates of the Apostles is unique even among the signed Cynewulf canon in that the runes are not encountered in proper name sequence as one reads through the poem. They appear in the order: F, W, U, L, C, Y, N. This shuffling combined with the indicative hints that precede and follow the runes led Elliott to assert that: "There is, however, more of the traditional riddle than in either Christ II or Elene" (Elliott 1953b, p. 195). The reader is indeed encouraged to decipher and puzzle out the intratextual anagram, but I am entirely wary of associative interpretations of the runes themselves as intrinsically cryptic or as "ambiguity incarnate" (DiNapoli 2005, p. 161). Instead, I would suggest that DiNapoli's view and similarly divisive preconceptions are more than likely informed by modern cultural perspectives on cryptic 'heathen' runes and misrepresentative of on-the-ground realities in the contexts of Early Medieval England.

Quite to the contrary, not only has it been surmised that the Church and monastic institutions could well have played a hand in a seemingly deliberate runic reform that took place earlier from around the late seventh century (Parsons 1999), Birkett has advanced a convincing theory that the use of and reference to runes in early English manuscripts actually appear to exhibit "unlocking" or "releasing" qualities of solution, which he suggests are best encapsulated by the Latin term "*revelatio*," with its twin meanings of both "uncovering" and "revelation" in the Modern English sense (Birkett 2014a; 2014b; 2017a, chp. 2, pp. 49–81). Proceeding from that standpoint, the runes in *The Fates of the Apostles* do not need to be interpreted as merely adding a simplistic layer of visual encryption or disguising certain letters and words. They can instead be perceived as contributing to the message of the passage and the poem in their own reflective and revelatory way.

In part then, my own ultimate assessment of the textual runes is in accord with those of Orton (2014) and of Gleason (1992). I generally agree with the associative and reflective notions that "the memory of [runes'] original epigraphical role would also have helped the reader to understand their purpose and significance" (Orton 2014, p. 132), and that as an "object of religious meditation" the runes may go beyond designating individual words and letters of the name perhaps to "evoke within the context of the poem a tradition of Christian runic lore to 'whisper' a moral allegory on the mysteries of salvation" (Gleason 1992, pp. 19, 28). Indeed, my overall argumentative trajectory is in line with the points both raise in relation to visibility and Cynewulf's manipulation of runic associative ties that may have existed in the minds of his audience(s). Yet, that is

not the whole story. I would double-back one final time in order to underscore that the opposite also holds true. An overemphasis on *only* the written nature of the text is no less misleading than a focus *only* on its orality.

4. A Multiliteral Eighth Rune

It is crucial to balance conceptually both the transcribed and the aural aspects at work in the poem's passage. For, if we approach anachronistically with a modern monoscriptal writing and/or silent reading viewpoint, it is all too easy to miss a striking example of multiliteral semiosis that occurs in the passage. Associative signification that crosses script boundaries appears not only in connection with the runes, but also derives from a word that is transcribed in Latin alphabet letters.

Seven runes which comprise the poet's name present themselves and are theoretically visible to a silent reader. If one reads the passage aloud, or listens to it for that matter, there is a dynamic allusion to an eighth rune that is aurally accessible, but not literally included. As seen in the manuscript (reproduced below in Figure 1 from (Turco 2016)), the half-line 101a presents one rune and two Latin alphabet words: "Ń on eðle (Ń in the native land)".



Figure 1. Detail from the signature passage in *The Fates of the Apostles*. "Ń" concludes its line on the right, "on eðle" begins the next. Biblioteca Capitolare di Vercelli, (MS. CXVII, Codex Vercellensis, f. 54r) Copyright: Fondazione Museo del Tesoro del Duomo e Archivio Capitolare di Vercelli. Permission for reproduction granted by Silvia Faccin—Curator of manuscripts and rare books of Biblioteca Capitolare.

It is possible here to identify a graphically obscured reference to an additional runic name. "Eðle," translated by Bjork as "native land," is an inflected form of "eðel" or "æpel." This word also has the senses of "property," "inheritance," "land," "ancestral home," etc., and it is the traditional runic name suggested by the *Old English Rune Poem* for the 8 (œ) rune.¹¹ Furthermore, 8 (œ) is one rune that appears very occasionally in specific manuscript instances as an apparent stand-in for its traditional name, e.g., at line 520 of *Beowulf*. In light of the fact that a proper recitation of the signature section demands a degree of multiscriptal proficiency and presumably a familiarity with rune names, this allusion across scripts cannot have gone unnoticed. A reader can see the workings of one script through the other.

This observation has the practical repercussion of further compounding the difficulty of properly extricating the signature runes for an audience listening to the passage for the first time and provided with no supplementary cues. Indeed, Cynewulf's *Christ II* actually presents a corresponding difficulty. It employs Latin alphabet "lif-wynna (of life-joys)" (l. 806) following directly on from "Ŧ (w) (wynn)" (l. 804); likewise, Latin alphabet "lagu-flode (sea-flood)" appears toward the close of *Christ II* (l. 850), recalling the apparent polygraphic compound "Ŧ(l) (lagu)-flodum" that is encountered on line 806. The particular half-line I have highlighted here from *The Fates of the Apostles*, however, is exponentially more complex to unpack in semiotic terms.

Whereas the difficulty in *Christ II* arises in relation to the comparatively commonplace Old English terms "wynn" and "lagu," *The Fates of the Apostles'* Latin alphabet "eðle" follows immediately on the heels of the "Ń (u)" rune which has prompted such great controversy of interpretation. It is still hypothetically possible that Ń (u) is meant to give "ur (aurochs)" in the sense of masculine strength as Elliott maintains (Elliott 1953b, 1991), but if we accept the more prevalent conjecture of "ure (our)," then in the space of three short words there is a convoluted inversion of graphic and associative expectations, one that is in all likelihood intensified by the hemistich's division across one line to the next in the original manuscript.

A word that is not a traditional runic name (*ure*) must be re-understood as a rune for the visual purposes of spelling out the name, immediately prior to the appearance of an inflected form of a traditional runic name (*ēðle*) transcribed in the Latin alphabet. This means that on top of the polygraphy and visible mixing that takes place on the page through reordering of the name's letters, there is an aural layer that underlies both scripts and which plays off of established associations to contribute to the reflective and interactive nature of the passage. Drawing upon these associations, multiliteral signification serves to apply auxiliary semiotic value to one's perceptions of the passage and its linguistic content.

Far from a binary that bids Germanic cultural conventions farewell or establishes an irreconcilable separation between 'the past' and those of Latinate Christianity, Cynewulf seeks not only structurally, thematically, and associatively, but as I have demonstrated, also multilaterally, to weave himself and his English-reading audience(s) into the ideological contexts of Judeo-Christian history and Western European Christendom. The reflection that the passage prompts is not inclined toward division, but rather toward both literal and conceptual integration.

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Notes

- ¹ Modern transcription of the Vercelli Book took place from 1834, but recognition of *The Fates of the Apostles'* association with Cynewulf followed on from Napier (1889)'s publication: "Collation der altenglischen Gedichte im Vercellibuch." See further (Calder 1981, p. 29).
- ² For reference, the formulae under scrutiny are those metrically modular phrases which may be "screened out [...] of the traditional and inherited formulae" (Orchard 2003, p. 273), and which appear shared across poems of the Cynewulf canon vs. the remainder of the surviving corpus of Old English verse.
- ³ By 'paratextual,' I refer to those facets of a text which under Gérard Genette's theoretical schematic serve to locate and identify it for a reader, such as Authorial or Prefatory information, formatting, etc. (Genette 1997).
- ⁴ NB. While a more comprehensive discussion falls outside of the scope of this article, it bears mentioning that there is considerable debate surrounding runic literacy across periods and the historical connections (or lack thereof) between the divergent productive spheres of runic epigraphy and later period manuscript writing. My aim in this section is not to oversimplify paleographical studies, nor the complex historical questions of origin, continuity, revival, and influence. See first: (Derolez 1954, 1990, 1991).
- ⁵ E.g., Compare to *Christ II*, ll. 800–01a: "*þendan k ((c) = CEN) ond ƿ ((y) = YR) yþast meahntan / frofre findan* (while (TORCH) and (SADDLE/HORN/BOW) could most easily / find comfort)" (Bjork 2013, pp. 26–27).
- ⁶ In addition to the *Old English Rune Poem*, Sisam highlights the evidence of the description of the English runic alphabet and rune names in the ninth-century Codex Vindobonensis 795 (Salzburg 140), and the later evidence of three early twelfth-century lists in: Cotton Manuscripts Domitian A IX, Galba A II (now destroyed), and St. John's College Oxford Manuscript 17.
- ⁷ NB. There is also a discrepancy in the rune's name as related by the Old English, Norwegian, and Icelandic rune poems. Senra Silva (2010) has proposed that this could be due to understandably growing ignorance of the aurochs, an animal which survived only in continental forests.
- ⁸ Sc. In order of descending formality, scripts employed include: Insular Half-Uncial, Hybrid Minuscule, Set Minuscule, Cursive Minuscule, Current Minuscule.
- ⁹ Specifically, Boren highlights the recurrence of three discernible elements in the individual narrative sequences which he terms: the "*nominative element*" (designating the subject of the action, frequently one of the apostles), the "*locative element*" (defining the setting or place of action), and the "*instrumental element*" (establishing the means by which an action is attained, i.e., often the figures of the apostles' persecutors through whom their martyrdom is effected).
- ¹⁰ To highlight but one case-in-point example in this vein, Damian Fleming has acknowledged and responded to problematic reappropriation and ideological projection by racist groups that is pertinent to a critique of his own previous scholarship: Damian

Fleming. 2017. *Ethel sweet Ethel-weard: The First Scribe of the Beowulf Manuscript*. *MedievalFleming*: 14 November. Available online: <https://medievalfleming.wordpress.com/2017/11/14/ethel-sweet-ethel-weard-the-first-scribe-of-the-beowulf-manuscript/> (accessed on 1 October 2021). See Damian Fleming. 2004. *Æpel-weard: The First Scribe of the Beowulf Manuscript*. *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 105: 177–86.

- ¹¹ For reference, the relevant segment of the *Old English Rune Poem* reads: “Ǻ byþ ofer lēof æghwylcum men,/ gif he mōt ðær rihtes and gerysena on/ brūcan on bolde blādum oftast (The family land is very dear to every man,/ provided that there in his own house he may enjoy/ everything that is right and proper in constant prosperity)” (Halsall 1981, pp. 90–91, ll. 71–73. This translation is Halsall’s).

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Article

Wyrd Poetics: Collapsing Timescapes and Untimely Desires in *The Ruin*

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Abstract: John Niles suggests that Old English poems often “demand [...] attention not only to the possible nuances of meaning of every word, but also to the spaces where no words are written and no story told”. Such spaces, he argues, invite readers into a kind of intellectual “play” that constitutes, in fact, participation, even collaboration, in the creation of meaning. However, what of more literal spaces in texts, not perceptual gaps composed by a poet, but rather material gaps “crafted” by manuscript damage? What more radical, “veered” reading follows if we pay attention to the physical damage, neither to lament the loss nor to restore what might have been there once, but rather to collaborate with its void? The damage to the final folios of the Exeter Book manuscript means that we read a different poem from any “intact” or “original” text we may try to (re)create; we read something that not only responds to, but also reifies the material effects of time and *wyrd*, the powerful other-than-human force that plays so prominent a role in the poem. This essay seeks to unsettle the text by engaging with both the poem’s extant words and the silent spaces of *wyrd*’s traces “inscribed” upon the material manuscript.

Keywords: *The Ruin*; Old English poetics; Exeter Book

John Niles suggests that Old English poems often “demand [...] attention not only to the possible nuances of meaning of every word, but also to the spaces where no words are written and no story told (Niles 2006, p. 4)”. Such spaces, he argues, invite readers into a kind of intellectual “play” that constitutes, in fact, participation, even collaboration, in the creation of meaning. However, what of more literal spaces in texts: not perceptual gaps composed by a poet, but rather material gaps “crafted” by manuscript damage? What more radical, “veered” reading (Royle 2011) follows if we pay attention to the physical damage as well as the words that persist, and do so neither to lament the loss nor to restore what might have been there once, but rather to collaborate with its void?

The ruined state of *The Ruin* has attracted many modern readers, translators, and critics of Old English poetry.¹ Even the poem’s title—in itself a modern interpretive act that speaks to its reception in the present, as much as its composition in the early medieval past—might seem to foreground its material state. The damage to the final folios of the Exeter Book manuscript means that we read a different poem from any “intact” or “original” text we may try to (re)create: we read something that not only responds to, but also reifies the material effects of time and *wyrd*, the powerful other-than-human force that plays so prominent a role in the poem. In effect, our reading requires us to engage and collaborate with both the poet’s extant words and *wyrd*’s silent spaces.

Emily Thornbury has argued for the influence of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century vogue for the picturesque on foundational later nineteenth- and twentieth-century editing practices, especially in regard to the treatment of damaged texts, such as *The Ruin*.² The Romantic love of ruins in the landscape—the Gothic(k) landscape, if you will—has not only led editors to leave an imperfect text un-emended, but may also induce readers to fetishize them, to make ruined texts emblematic of the historical period and its literature—and consequently, perhaps, to canonize the elegiac as the characteristic mode of Old English

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literature (Trilling 2009). Unlike “ruins” that could be and were purpose-built into the picturesque landscape, however, neither the Old English poet who composed the poem nor the scribe who incorporated it into the Exeter Book could know, let alone design, the poem’s ruin. Nevertheless, in a queer untimely irony, the poem accommodates that possibility—that probability, even perhaps inevitability—in a way that speaks particularly to those of us who read the ruined text through our own twenty-first century engagements with cultural and environmental collapse, within our own anthropocene landscape of disaster and destruction.

Our world, as Eugene Thacker notes in his *In the Dust of this Planet*, “is increasingly unthinkable”. Similar to that depicted in the poem, our world knows the realities and consequences of war and famine—and of plague: we read the poem’s references to pestilence in the context of our own current COVID-19 pandemic and the possibility of other diseases yet to emerge from viral hot zones.³ Given the multitude of potential, even probable “apocalyptic” events, including violent storms that testify to the reality of environmental collapse, we struggle to confront the realities of a perilous contingency. Such challenges to human agency and pride, Thacker suggests, make the literary genre and mode of cosmic horror especially attractive to contemporary philosophers as something to think with, not least because of its focus on encounters that disrupt our ability to feel at home in the world and undermine complacent anthropocentrism by revealing the universe not as hostile (for even that would place humans at the center of things) so much as radically alien in its indifference.⁴ Additionally, in its untimeliness, it invokes an unknowable and other-than-human deep time embracing both geological and primal past and apocalyptic future (Noys 2008). Such encounters elicit fear, certainly, and horror, but also often a fascination and perverse attraction, a paradoxical pleasure and even desire. It is precisely that mingled horror and desire that this essay addresses, as it offers a reading that seeks to unsettle the text by engaging with existential dread, yet finding pleasure in that engagement. Mixing horror and desire in its collaboration with (rather than opposition to, or denial or lament of) temporal decay, such a reading may prompt us to imagine new relationships with/in our own “endscape”, as Sara Pritchard calls a landscape that is experienced as always already lost (Pritchard 2019).

Wrætlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræcon, the poem begins, *burgstede burston, broснаð enta geweorc*. “wondrous is this wall-stone, broken by fate, the fortress shattered, the work of giants decays”. The deictic *þes* in the first line invokes a materiality and a physical presence for that stone (and for the wall of which that stone is imagined to be a part, and for the larger structure of whatever building that wall may be a part) that paradoxically foregrounds its literal absence: there is, after all, no stone before our eyes, only the words on folios 123v and 124r of the Exeter Book manuscript, or more likely a modern printed (and critically annotated) edition of the poem. The poem thereby entangles at least two poetic encounters: the one between the poem’s speaker and the broken stone, and the other between ourselves and the words on the page and/or as a sequence of sounds when we recite the poem aloud. The literal presence of the poem, that is, replaces and obscures the absence of the stone.

The elision of the stone and the text conflates the past that the stone reifies with the present and futures in which the poem is, and will perhaps (but not necessarily inevitably) continue to be read. As Janet Bately notes, the poem plays with the underlying binary tense system of Old English and its distinction of (manifest) the past from ongoing (manifesting, but not yet completely manifest) present–future. For Bately, *The Ruin*’s structure “hinges on the opposition” between the two, while simultaneously “emphasiz[ing] the intimate links between the two (Bately 1984, p. 9)”. In its first two lines, for example, the present tense (*is* in line 1a and *broснаð* in line 2b) encloses the resolved perfect (*gebræcon* in 1b and *burston* in line 2a), an enclosure further substantiated by the interweaving of the alliteration on *w* (*wrætlic* and *wealstan*, line 1a; *wyrde*, line 1b; *geweorc*, line 2b) and *b* (*gebræcon*, line 1b; *burgstede* and *burston*, line 2a; *broснаð*, line 2b). For Rory Crittten, similarly, “the manipulation of the Old English tense system in the text’s opening section establishes a mobile timeframe” that situates us “at an indeterminate point of intersection between the past, the present, and the future of the speaker (Crittten 2019, p. 210)”. The quasi-gnomic

use of the present in the second line's *brosnað enta geweorc* (line 2b), "the work of giants crumbles", invokes an eternal present that transcends the particular moment of the initial *wrætlic is þes wealstan* (line 1a), while reflecting the (past) manifestations of the eternally recurrent in the enclosed half-lines.

The collapse of the temporal difference in these first lines also manifests itself in the text's creation of a speaker unanchored in a single moment. Unlike the other so-called elegies—especially *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wife's Lament*—alongside which it is most often read, *The Ruin* lacks a first-person speaker: there is no one, singular "I" and consequently no one "now" in which to fix the poem's present. Who, in fact, is speaking, and when? The disembodied and temporally unfixed voice of the poem's ostensible speaker incorporates—embodies and is embodied in—a recursive series of observers across time, in a recurrent series of temporal moments, in which *wyrd* is made manifest in the absent yet present brokenness of the stone and (for us) the poem: those of its early medieval composition and initial reception, of its consequent commitment to the late-tenth-century manuscript, and of multiple readings of that manuscript down to our own in the twenty-first century. As *The Ruin* stages these encounter(s) with *wyrd* in the *wrætlic* wallstone (and/or the poem as materially extant in the manuscript), it facilitates an emergent subjectivity, which elides speaker and audience, poet and reader, even as it both collaborates with *wyrd* in an intra-action from which subjects and objects emerge in times(s) and space(s), but remain contingent as they are constantly renegotiated and redefined.⁵

In *The Wanderer*, by contrast, a defined "I" speaking from (and anchored in) a definable "now" exhorts us, *ongietan sceal gleaw hæle hu gæstlic bið/Þonne calle þisse worulde wela weste stondeð*, "the wise man must recognize how ghastly it will be when all this world's wealth stands waste" (lines 73–74) in an apocalyptic future. That future is, to be sure, already present in the ruins of the past:

swa nu missenlic geond þisne middangeard
winde biwaune weallas stondaþ,
hrieme bihrorene, hryðge þa ederas. (lines 75–77)
(So now in various places throughout this middle-earth walls stand blown by
wind, covered with frost, the buildings snow-swept.)

Time overlaps as the desolation continues in the present—as *woriað þa winsalo*. *Walend licgað/dreamed bedrorene*, "the wine halls topple. The rulers lie deprived of joy", because (in the past) *duguþ eal gecrong/wlonc bi wealle*, "the troop is all perished, proud by the wall" (pp. 78–80a). An envisioned future, physically present, depends upon an image of the past shared by the speaker and the reader in the "now" of the text, where

stondeð nu on laste leofre duguþe
weal wundrum heah, wyrmlicum fah.
Eorlas fornoman asca þryþe,
wæpen wælgifru, wyrd seo mære,
ond þas stanhleoþu stormas cnyssað,
hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð
wintres woma, þonne won cymeð,
nipeð nihtscua, norþan onsendeð
hreo hæglfare hæleþum on andan. (lines 97–105)
(Stands now in the track of the dear troop a wall wondrously high, adorned with
serpentine patterns. The might of ash-spears took away the men, weapons eager
for slaughter, powerful *wyrd*, and storms beat the cliffs, fierce blizzards bind the
earth, winter's chaos, as darkness comes, night-shadows draw near, and from
the north come fierce hail-storms maliciously against men.)

The speaker offers for our consideration a future when the earth will be a barren, storm-beaten wasteland—something we can (fore)see in our shared present as we gaze with the speaker upon the ruins of the past. Such consideration, *The Wanderer* suggests, should

move us to a kind of penitential horror: a contemplation of *wyrd* and its effects should prepare us for the dissolving of time and temporal difference into eternity, should inspire us to willingly trade the transient attractions of this world for those of next. In the working of a *wyrd* hostile to human aspiration and agency and in the context of eternity time collapses, what is past is present, is inevitable future. Yet, the three tenses and temporalities remain distinguishable because of the speaker's location in time.

However, is this the only possible response to the apocalypse, at least in a text like *The Ruin* in which the speaker (and consequently audience) is less defined and temporally fixed, and in which *wyrd* is less antagonistic than indifferent to humanity?⁶ For if *wyrd* is revealed and experienced horrifically in quasi-apocalyptic destruction and decay, in *The Ruin*, that same brokenness is also fascinating: it is *wrætlic*, “wondrous”, and may elicit not only horror, but also pleasure and desire. *Wrætlic* is, in fact, the first word of *The Ruin*, alliteratively bound and collocated with both *wealstan* and *wyrd*: the wall-stone is (present tense) *wraetlic*, not despite but specifically because it has been broken by *wyrd*. Broken by *wyrd*, the *wealstan* (and the poem that describes it, equally “broken” as we read it) is *wrætlic* by and through that breaking—and *wrætlic*-ness is something that exceeds and therefore troubles ordinary temporal logic.

The word *wrætlic*, as Peter Ramey notes, is uniquely Old English, unattested in later Middle English texts and thus redolent for us of an untimely obsolescence. It has “no precise counterpart” in other Germanic languages, nor is it used to gloss any Latin aesthetic term, including the *mirabile* we might expect from its connection with wonder (Ramey 2017, p. 460). Extant only in poetic texts, it derives from—is essentially a simile based on—the even more rarely attested noun *wrætt*, “jewel” or “ornament”, and especially insofar as both are cognate with *writan*, intrinsically connected to the materiality of an engraved object, the physical presence of a written text. However, in the usage of the word, as Ramey argues, the physical presence implied by that materiality is also deeply implicated with the effect that presence has on the one who handles or otherwise engages with it, and with the skills of its maker as well. To describe something as *wrætlic* is therefore to produce an essential core estrangement, a disorientation and a consequent re-negotiation of the agencies of object, maker and handler. To begin *The Ruin* with the word effectively requires a reader to participate in the act of creating the text as read, of seeing and perceiving both text and world *wrætlic*-ly. For Ramey, this means the focus shifts from the “ravages of time” on the wall-stone and the depredations of *wyrd* to its “cunning construction” and (as in a riddle) our perception (Ramey 2017, p. 469).

Certainly *wrætlic*-ness has something to do with style and skill, whether in the binding of stone into walls or of words into poems. This seems, in fact, something of a formulaic collocation. *Maxims II* refers to the *wrætlic weallstana geweorc* and the *Gifts of Men* to those who know how to plan the *wrætlice weorc* of building a high-timbered hall (line 44). Additionally, in *Exodus*, the “wondrous highway”, *wrætlicu wægfaru*, through the Red Sea is also metaphorically a house with watery *foreweallas* and heavenly *hrof* (line 297). In *Riddle 39*, the contested solution—which may be time, day, moon, or speech, *woh wyrda gesceapu*, “the twisted shape of *wyrd* and/or words”, perhaps a pun—is an appropriately *wrætlic þing to gesecganne* (line 22). In *Riddle 47*, the book-moth riddle, that a worm should swallow men's songs is a *wrætlicu wyrd* and a *wundor*. *Wrætlic*-ness is thus intrinsically enigmatic play.

Wyrd can be interpreted within a specifically Christian context—in the context of, say, the Alfredian translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Then again, especially as it appears in Old English poetry, it can seem a verbal fossil of sorts, a traditional, possibly pre-Christian concept surviving (like the poem's ruins) into poetic reuse. In *Beowulf's* famous proverb, *wyrd oft nered/unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah* (lines 572b–573), *wyrd*—“fate” is the usual translation—“often saves an un-doomed warrior, if his courage holds”. However, is the warrior “un-doomed” because his courage holds and *wyrd* responds to that courage? Or is he “undoomed” because he is always already saved by *wyrd*? If a courageous warrior was doomed, would or could *wyrd* help him anyway? What if an un-doomed warrior's courage failed? Or is to consider *wyrd* to confront the overlapping of two types of time,

the human/secular within which causality is linear and the eternal/divine within which the past coincides with the present and future, rendering the distinction of cause and effect meaningless?

In *The Ruin*, *wyrd* is *seo swiþe* (line 21), the “strong” or “powerful”, and the same adjective characterizes *wyrd* in *Solomon and Saturn* (*wyrd seo swiðe*, line 444), *Maxims II* (*wyrd bið swiðost*, line 4), and *The Seafarer* (*wyrd bið swiþre*, line 115). *The Wanderer* calls *wyrd seo mære* (line 99), as does *The Menologium* (*mære wyrd*, line 48), *Elene* (*mæran wyrd*, line 1062), and *Genesis* (*mæro wyrd*, line 1397). Whether *mære* should be read as “famous” or “infamous”, “glorious” or “notorious”, seems to vary: something along the lines of “manifest”, something that becomes known, for good or ill might serve as a more inclusive translation. In *The Wanderer*, the landscape of *wyrd seo mare* (line 100b) embodies the tragic aftermath of heroic action and the antagonism of *wæpen wælgifru* (line 100a), “weapons greedy for slaughter”. Additionally, again, *eall is earfodlic eorþan rice*, “all is hardship in this earthly realm,” not least because *onwendeð wyrdas gesceaft weoruld under heofonum*, (lines 106–7), “the shaping of *wyrd* changes the world under the heavens”. In *Genesis*, *wyrd* is similarly *wælgrimme*, “slaughter-grim” (line 995). In *Andreas*, it is *heard ond hetegrim* (line 156), “harsh and hate-grim”, and in *The Dream of the Rood* it is *egeslic* (line 74), “terrifying”. In other uses, however, it is *wyrd*’s enigmatic quality that is foregrounded. In *Elene*, *wyrd* is also *dyggle*, “secret” or “obscure” (line 536), even as in *Juliana* it is *ne ful cuþe*, “not fully known” (line 32): ineffable, observed not directly but rather through its effect on the material. Just as in *The Ruin*, the effects of *wyrd* confound even as they exemplify history and temporality; they can also elicit an appreciation of and a fascination with those effects.

Similar to *The Wanderer*, *The Ruin*’s endscape, *wrætlic* and broken by *wyrd*, is one of winter and apocalypse:

Hrofas sind gehrorene, hreorge torras,
hrimgeat berofen, hrim on lime,
scaerde scurbeorge, scorene, gedrorene,
ældo undereotene. (lines 3–6a)

(Roofs have collapsed, towers in ruins, frost-gate is broken, hoar-frost on the mortar, cut down, declined, undermined by age.)

It is an equally storm-battered world, and indeed *The Ruin* and *The Wanderer* employ much of the same vocabulary: *The Wanderer*’s *hrime bihrorene* (line 77a) echoes, for example, in *The Ruin*’s *gehrorene* (line 3a), *hrimgeat* (line 4a), and *hrim* (line 4b). This endscape invokes a cataclysmic, apocalyptic frozen future that may echo early medieval cultural memories of the late antique little ice age and other environmental phenomena of the so-called, but at times literal, “dark ages” of the poem’s world.⁷ It conjures a world of entropy and disaster that we can read (sometimes paradoxically, ironically) alongside our contemporary awareness of and anxiety about the present existential threat of climate collapse and its future consequences: decreases in arctic ice and thawing permafrost, increasing temperatures, and changing weather patterns that bring more violent and frequent storms, rising sea levels, the destruction of ecosystems, and mass extinctions.

The poem addresses not one particular ruined site per se, so much as it does overlapping multiple manifestations of *wyrd* in the material world. *The Ruin*’s world is a place of graves:

Eorðgrap hafað
Waldendwyrhtan forweorone, gelorene,
heardgripe hrusan, oþ hund cnea
werþeoda gewitan. (lines 6b–9a)

(The earth’s grip holds the powerful makers, decayed, passed away, the hard grasp of the earth, until a hundred generations of the nations of men have passed away.)

The stone has remained, remains, will remain, *rægðar ond readfah*, “grey with lichen and red-hued” and beset by storms (*stormum*) as time and history pass, *rice æfter oþrum*, “one kingdom

after another”, *op hund cnea gewitan* (lines 6b–7a, 8b–9a), “until”—or while—“a hundred generations of the nations of men pass away”, either in the ongoing present-future or in the manifested past. Marking the passage of time by generations invokes notions of kinship, of dynastic succession. However, is that succession strictly and narrowly biological? Or, is it as much an imagined lineage, a fictive continuity, which provokes a nostalgia as much ideologically productive and prospective as retrospective, memorial, and elegiac? (Howe 1989; Trilling 2009) Additionally, if the notion of generations in any way promises reproductive futurity or constructs teleological history, it is teleological without a *telos*: cyclical and recursive rather than linear and genealogical.⁸

At the same time, memorializing temporal rupture, the imagined ruins of the poem constitute spatial markers of temporal difference and distance, even as each uncanny—horrifying and yet fascinating—cataclysm in the past elides with others past and present-future. The poem’s described ruins are, at first glance, Roman, most likely those of somewhere like Bath—although perhaps as read through the valences of the Biblical and allegorical Babylon. The final complete lines of the poem, for example (lines 38–43 or so), refer specifically to *babu*. Elsewhere, the poem uses loan words *torras*, “towers” (line 3) and *tigelum*, “tiles” (line 30), and references to a “red arch” (*teaforgeapan*, line 30) would seem to imply Roman brickwork. Yet, to invoke an utterly deserted city is to ignore—to erase—the way real, non-poetic life continued in such places. In early medieval England Roman centers like London, Bath, Chester, and York were not completely abandoned, even if the focus of settlement had shifted from urban to suburban, from villa to estate to monastery, with old buildings used as quarries for re-usable stone and brick. The incorporation of Roman *spolia* was by no means uncommon, and early medieval recyclers probably knew quite well with whom and what such materials were associated: the patterns of re-use and appropriation of spaces, materials and architectural forms suggest, in fact, their deployment in a conscious re-formation of ideology, (re)establishment and authentication of authority, dynasty, and history (Eaton 2000; Ferhatovic 2019).

As broken by *wyrd*, moreover, the *burgstede* of the imagined city have crumbled, *brosnað enta geweorc* (line 2), “the old work of giants has decayed”. Additionally, the giants point toward a pre-Roman antiquity.⁹ Putatively, Roman cities are recognizable as *burgum* (lines 2, 21, 25, 37 and 49), although (according to line 32a) they are *gebrocen to beorgum*, “broken into mounds” evocative of earlier Neolithic or bronze-age remains in the landscape. That ambiguity, that almost-pun, along with the essential difference, the non-human-ness of giants, suggests an even more primal past: something out of Germanic legend, perhaps, or something Biblically antediluvian, associated (such as Grendel) with the children of Cain and their construction of cities, the Canaanite giants of Numbers 13:33, or the Nephilim, the offspring of “the sons of God” (angels) with “the daughters of men” in Genesis 6:4.

Elsewhere, in Old English poetry, too, phrases, such as *enta geweorc*, blur the relatively recent Roman past and the more ancient and distant. In *Andreas*, the martyr is dragged to prison through mountains and along a (perhaps Roman?) stone highway that is nevertheless described as *enta ærgeweorc* (line 1232). The great stone pillars and columns he sees in that prison are equally the *eald enta geweorc* (line 1492), albeit *storme bedrifine*, “beaten by storms”, as if they were landscape elements of deeper temporality. In *The Wanderer*, *ypde swa pisne eardgeard ælda scyppend/ophæt burgwara breahtma lease/eald enta geweorc idlu stodon* (line 85), “the Creator of men laid waste this earth until, bereft of city-dwellers’ revelry, the old work of giants stood idle”, as empty as that depicted in *The Ruin*. The sword hilt from Grendel’s mere—with its depiction of Flood—is likewise *enta ærgeweorc* (Beowulf, 1677), as is the dragon’s *hlæwe*, barrow-home and its treasures, *enta geweorc* and *eald enta geweorc* (lines 2715, 2773). Additionally, in a passage that echoes *The Ruin*’s collocation of *wrætlic*-ness, walls, and *wyrd*, *Maxims II* tells us that *ceastra beoð feorran gesyne, ordanc enta geweorc, þa þe on þysse eorðan syndon, /wrætlic weallstana geweorc* (lines 1–3a), “cities are seen from afar, the ingenious work of giants, which are on this earth, the ornate work of wall-stones”. However, if *The Ruin* invokes the distant past, the age of giants before the flood as well as the more recent Roman occupation, the city’s abandonment and the absence of human beings imply not only past battles and plagues, but also the on-going

present/future obliteration of human artifice and ambition. The landscape of *wyrd*, that is, is pre-eminently a queer, untimely landscape of overlapping time, simultaneously both primal and apocalyptic, past and present/future.

There is, ultimately, a desire to be felt as an alien, and immaterial *wyrd* is made manifest and material. There is pleasure to be taken in the *wraetlic*, beautiful horror of this untimeliness, and the *wraetlic*-ness of the imagined wall impels the poem toward its own excessive, obsessive stylistic *wraetlic*-ness in the face of *wyrd*. *The Ruin* is remarkable for the elaboration of its verse. Formulaic collocations of words, repetitions of sounds, internal rhyme—one is tempted to think of such things as analogous to repetitions of history—bind the verse just as separate stones are bound together with wires. As early medieval builders strategically re-used roman stone, brick and tile, the poet re-uses poetic formulas, devices and motifs from both Old English and Anglo-Latin “word-hordes”—literary *spolia*—to form (and re-form) a depiction of a noble, wondrous but ultimately fragile and transitory world. As Christopher Abram notes, “*The Ruin* is itself a construction, an edifice of literary building-blocks which have been quarried from the works of past authors” in both Latin and Old English traditions (Abram 2000, p. 24).¹⁰ What results is something along the lines of an Old English reflex of a contemporary Anglo-Latin hermeneutic style that, through its excessive, even obsessive *wraetlic*-ness, defamiliarizes the banality of time and offers it for wonder and reflection—or perhaps something not unlike the thaumaturgic repetitions and sound play of the Old English metrical charms. Through defamiliarization, the poetic encounter—or rather encounters (plural) of the poet/speaker with the ruin resulting in the poem and those of readers with that poem, whether in its complete or ruined state—functions as what Nick Land calls “hyperstitions”, moments and acts of backward precognition that allow the future to change the past as it is perceived in the present.¹¹ That stylistic excess, that *wraetlic*-ness, is associated for us at least with the material existence of the poem in the Exeter Book—and with its own ruined state, its own capitulation to, or rather collaboration with, *wyrd*. Especially insofar as *wraetlic* is cognate with *writan*, the text’s inscription manifests the emergent subjectivity of the untimely speaker of the poem’s first eleven lines. Driven by the sound play on the page, perhaps we (similar to the performer of a charm) may speak the lines aloud, tasting them, feeling them, taking them into our bodies, and thereby manifesting our own encounter with speaker, text, and *wyrd*.

However, it is not only the extant words, but also their absence, which reify this encounter. Manuscript damage creates a very material caesura in line 12. A few scattered words and phrases survive—*fel on* (line 13a), *grimme gegrunden* (line 14a), *orþonc* and *ærscæft* (line 16), *lamrindum beag* (line 17b)—as the poem’s elaborate wordplay shatters into a silence punctuated by inarticulate and uninterpretable syllables and individual letters. We can, and frequently do, attempt to repair the damage. We can read the shards as ironically appropriate and meaningful, or as Romantically elegiac and picturesque, or as conducive to some penitential moral. Or, we can attend more closely to what *wyrd* has destroyed and what it has preserved. In the poem’s most common edited form, we can still hear the sounds of words persisting even as they are choked into silence. Images of the page—or better yet, a more direct, unmediated engagement with the Exeter Book as an artifact—may provoke us to experience across time, imaginatively, the moment of the wound, the sharp shock as the burning brand pierces the body of the codex, the searing heat, and the acrid smell of the singed manuscript’s flesh.

As *The Ruin* continues after this first gap of past manuscript damage, present human imagination—both ours and the poet’s—reanimates the bodies fallen by the walls and (re)populates the ice-bound ruins, through poetic *wraetlic*-ness, with inhabitants figured anachronistically, or better yet, trans-chronistically, as early medieval warriors who face the end of their civilization, their history, again and again, with every re-reading. From the stonework, the poet conjures a vision of prior *waldend wyrhtan* “powerful makers” (line 7)—either the original builders (if builders are ever original) or consequent rebuilders

in the past—particularly noted for their skill in building a place that fosters as well as contains transient human joy:

hwætred in hringas, hygehrof gebond,
weall walanwirum wundrum togædere.
Beorht wæron burgræced, burnsele monige,
heah horngestreon. Heresweg micel,
meodoheall monig mondreama full,
oþþæt þæt onwende wyrde seo swiþe. (lines 19–24)

(Ingenious in rings the high roof was bound, the walls wondrously linked together with wires. Bright were the city's buildings, many halls, high gables. There was great sound of joy, many mead-halls full of revelry until *wyrð* the powerful changed that.)

Wyrð brings death in battle and from disease. Yet, although the builders skillful enough to repair the walls may have been few, and the stone work left to crumble, the present poet can nevertheless envision a world

Þær iu beorn monig
glædmod ond goldbeorht gleoma gefrætwed,
wlonc ond wingal, wighrystum scan,
seah on sinc, on sylfor, on searogymmas,
on ead, onæht, on eorcanstan,
on þas beorhtan burg Bradan rices. (lines 32b–41a)

(Where once many a man glad-minded and gold-bright, clothed in splendor, proud and joyful with wine, shone in war-gear, and gazed on treasure, on silver, on worked gems, on wealth, on property, on precious stones, on the bright city of the broad kingdom.)

In their anthropocentric pride, the city's inhabitants may have wrongly imagined their earthly kingdom broad in both space and time, as everlasting. They were not wrong, however, about its ideal beauty—or perhaps, as we look on that beauty, its prediction of a present/future beauty. Less an authentic or accurate depiction of a Roman stronghold than of an idealized early medieval warrior hall, this (re)created world of the poem blurs the boundaries between nostalgia, either for the historical past or for one that should have been, and a desire for present/future world(s) that might be built from those stones—a present/future that will, however, inevitably be broken and left for others to wonder at and re-use. Significantly, the poem foregrounds this scene as the object of a shared gaze: the past observer of this ideal beauty elides with the present poet observing the observer, who is, in turn, observed by present/future readers gazing on the ruins of as well as in the poem.

As the present poem disintegrates in a second and final passage of manuscript damage in lines 42–48, that gaze—those recurrent gazes—fall(s) finally upon the baths, a place of welcome warmth amidst winter frigidity. Bright with treasure and jewels, filled with song and companionship, this noble, wondrous world becomes more fully alive with the rush of hot water over cold stone. In the past, *þæt wæs hyðelice* (line 41b), “that was convenient, useful”; in the poem's present, *þæt is cynlic þing* (line 47b), “that is a noble thing”—or perhaps a “kin-like” shared thing. The pun echoes the “hundred generations” earlier in the poem. It also, perhaps, implies a hope that some sort of reproductive futurity—biological, ideological, or textual—will ensure further continuity. Additionally, in the imagining of those envisioned baths, words, such as *bosme* and *hreþre*, invoke—and reanimate—living human bodies (Johnson 1980). The poem ends, that is, with (at least metaphorically) embodied desires in the present—or presents, plural—of speaker and reader.

Or, at least it does if one ignores the gaps of the ruined lines, in which that embodiment vanishes even as it appears. Between past *hyðlic*-ness and present *cynlic*-ness, *wyrð* silences the poem's bodies and embodied places. Line 42b is erased, although line 43 still allows

us to see and feel the *harne stan* and *hate streamas* of the baths. *Hate* recurs in line 45b, and line 45a's *hringmere* and line 46b's reference to *þær þa baþu wæron* in the past are intelligible. In the poem's final three lines, however, fragmentary echoes dissolve into the textual wound's silence. That is, perhaps, the essence of the poem's *wyrd* poetics, a poetics and an aesthetic rooted in the precarity of the always already lost. Encountering *The Ruin*, we can look with horror upon a deep past, and/or take pleasure in the fragile, always already perishing possibilities of present/future beauty. Our desire to build is intrinsically a desire for both creation and destruction, both survival and apocalypse. Similar to the imagined original builders and rebuilders of the ruined city, and similar to the early medieval poet who imagined them, in collaboration with *wyrd*, we readers become *wyrhtan* who craft a *wrætlic* imagined past from shattered and timeworn fragments of walls and of poems, such as *The Ruin*, and similar to the other *wyrd*-ruined poems in the manuscript. We can, therefore, also consider the way the wound connects those damaged texts sensually, through their common material precarity, as well as intellectually, through shared themes and genres.

In his 2017 collection, *The Unstill Ones*, Miller Oberman both translates and responds to *The Ruin* (Oberman 2017). The poet also offers translations of Riddles lines 63, 78, 82 and 94 from the Exeter Book, all texts from the damaged portion of the manuscript and consequently almost unsolvable—unreadable—because of their gaps and silences. In these collaborations with *wyrd*, Oberman juxtaposes the jewel (*wrætt*)-like images present in the extant fragments with the absences, the silences inherent in the manuscript damage. Attending to both the words and the gaps in these texts, he crafts a type of erasure poetry: his (re)creative acts of appropriation, destruction, and re-inscription constitute collaborations with change and loss, with *wyrd* materially manifest in the tenth-century manuscript read in the twenty-first.

Unlike Oberman, neither the poet who composed *The Ruin* nor the scribe who incorporated it into the Exeter Book could know how *wyrd* would affect the text. Neither could know that a burning brand would “ruin” the text and thereby allow—even require—us to collaborate with *wyrd* in our reading of the extant text. Yet, both may well have been keenly aware of the precarity of manuscripts, languages, and cultures. Therefore, for example, we might gather from other early medieval English texts, such as the Alfredian translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* and its lament of knowledge loss. Poet and scribe would have known the ways in which flaws in the original animal skin could create blemishes and holes in the manuscript's surface. They may have shared the anxiety about possible consequent subsequent damage most famously expressed (even ironically anticipated and celebrated as a *wrætlic wyrd*) elsewhere in the Exeter Book itself, in the book-moth riddle. Both poet and scribe were likely aware that language change that could make a collection of Old English poetry obsolete, and aware, too, that old, surplus manuscripts could be scraped and palimpsested, or even dismembered for use in binding later volumes. They could not know, but would hardly be surprised, that the Exeter Book would survive, not because of but despite its contents, because it could be used to store gold leaf in a later scriptorium. They could not know the fate of the text, any more than the builders and rebuilders could know that of the wall-stone, but *The Ruin* suggests that they could and should acknowledge its precarity, accept the horror and desire that such precarity provokes, and ultimately collaborate with it. Additionally, that acceptance of the text's precarity and untimeliness unsettles temporal subjectivity and allows—in some possible circumstances perhaps even compels—readers to collaborate with *wyrd*.

Reading *The Ruin* in this way raises a number of questions about the nature of our encounters with other texts and other humans, and the inhuman pasts and futures. It queries, for example, the extent to which our “archaeological” desires—for coherent scholarly interpretations “true” to the circumstances and contexts of original composition, for the objective discovery of sources and analogues—play with as well as against less “academic”, but perhaps more existential, desires for sometimes queer touches (to use Carolyn Dinshaw's phrase) of empathy across time (Dinshaw 2012). Similar to Dinshaw, Elizabeth

Freeman suggests we focus not on History (with a capital letter) as something “seamless, unified and forward moving” inexorably toward completion—or at least the fatalistically inevitable—but on a succession of moments marked by “forms of interruption” and “points of resistance” (Freeman 2010; Love 2007). For Freeman, as for Dinshaw, such points of resistance, among which we might include texts, such as *The Ruin*—and the encounters of both its early medieval poet with a (Roman) past and its post-medieval readers with a medieval literary past—are based on the desire for and engagement with temporal otherness, with *wyrd*. Unsettling our reading of the text as “safely” in the past can encourage us, too, to confront the horror of *wyrd* in new ways as it continues to become manifest in our own environment, our own unfolding of temporal change. In the end, however much we pretend to read objectively, we cannot but engage with texts of the past from our own “now” and with our own anxieties and preoccupations. Doing so consciously can help us not only to appreciate the Old English poetics of *wyrd*, but also to formulate our own strategies for engaging with the precarity of the anthropocene.

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Notes

- 1 As Chris Abram (for example) observes, it has become “almost traditional” in the history of the poem’s critical reception “to describe it as a ruin itself” (Abram 2000, p. 23). For the poem’s translation heritage, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see especially (Davies 2018, pp. 38–54).
- 2 See Thornbury (2006). The poem is, for example, commonly categorized as an elegy, a genre term itself paracritically applied to a group of poems, including *the Wanderer* and *the Seafarer*, in the absence of any historically documented early medieval use.
- 3 The poem’s *woldagas* (25b) may refer directly or indirectly to something like the Yellow or Justinian Plague, the ravages of which on early medieval British monasteries—and the resultant trauma—is chronicled by Bede. On the course and nature of that epidemic, see (Maddicott 1997).
- 4 See (Thacker 2011, p. 1; Tabas 2015). While the term cosmic horror is most often associated with H. P. Lovecraft, as defined theoretically in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* and deployed in his problematic fiction, in which dread produces a consequent abjection infamously voiced in the violent rhetoric of misogyny and racism, that abjection is reworked and reformulated by many twenty-first century examples of the “new weird” including, perhaps most relevantly, the ecological cosmic horror of Jeff Vandermeer and the queer desires of Caitlin Kiernan, as well as the widely influential work of writer and critic China Miéville.
- 5 The term “intra-action” is taken from (Barad 2007).
- 6 As Eileen Joy (2005) notes, the *Ruin* draws no specific moral from its observations; whatever wisdom may arise from contemplation of the poem’s ruins is not defined in this text as it is in *the Wanderer* and other elegies with a speaking subject to anchor them.
- 7 On the late antique little ice age and its influence on Northern European, particularly Scandinavian, culture and mythopoetics, see (Gräslund and Price 2012, 2015). On the persistence of memory and trauma into the ninth century see (Holmberg et al. 2018). An increase in apocalyptic fear during that later period may be connected to the portents of unusually violent storms and intense auroral activity—reported in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle—in the wake of solar flare eruptions and resulting geomagnetic storms: Sukhodolov et al. (2017). Roberta Frank argues the influence of skaldic imagery, especially that of storms and wintery weather, in Old English poems (Frank 2002). For a nuanced ecocritical reading of climate trauma and mythopoetics see (Abram 2018).
- 8 See (Davies 2018, pp. 20–29), on untimeliness of the poem’s multiple apocalypses.
- 9 On the ruin as Roman: Wentersdorf (1977). The site is often identified more specifically as Bath, although Dunleavy (1959) favors Chester, and Herben (1939) suggests Hadrian’s Wall. Against a specific location: Keenan (1966) and Lee (1973). Fell (1991) focuses on the theme of transitory nature of the world and worldly glory (Talentino 1978; Franks 1973). Thornbury (2000) argues for evocation of Roman rather than the commonly referenced Neolithic or bronze age barrow.
- 10 For Abram the poem echoes particularly the Encomium Urbis theme in late Latin poetry (Abram 2000, p. 24). Zanna (1991) defines the subgenre as “meditative reflection on fated downfall of great cities, their present and future state” (p. 524). Additionally, Schlauch (1941) on the Old English “Durham” and Alcuin’s poem on York.
- 11 The terms recur throughout Land’s work as collected in (Land 2011).

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Article

Rereading *The Wife's Lament* with Dido of Carthage: The Husband and the *Herheard*

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Abstract: The Old English poem in *The Exeter Book* titled *The Wife's Lament* is about longing and loneliness; the woman speaking in the poem longs for her absent husband who has sent her to live in a “cave under an oak tree”. The husband’s attitude toward his wife is a major point of controversy among commentators on the poem: has he sent her there as a punishment or for her protection? This essay argues that he loves her and seeks to protect her in his absence. The argument supporting this view addresses the following three topics: the reason he must leave and his brooding silence preceding that departure, the culture of warrior oaths, and the nature of the “cave” where the speaker is located. The first two discussions assess and reframe previous scholarship, while the discussion of the speaker’s location introduces a new area of research, the archaeology of early medieval rock-cut buildings. Finding that the poet might imagine the Wife inhabiting such a constructed building invites us to think about her, her husband, the poem, and even the Exeter Book itself within a new and interesting real-world context.

Keywords: cave; cruel husband; oaths; the word *bot*; rock-cut buildings; pagan temple site; longing and loneliness; the “imagery of silence”

1. Introduction

In 2003, John D. Niles published an article titled “The Problem of the Ending of *The Wife's Lament*” (Niles 2003) that he then revised and incorporated as Chapter 5 in his book *The Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (Niles 2006). *The Wife's Lament*¹ is a poem in the voice of a young woman² living in an isolated location “under an oak tree”³ after the departure of her *felaleof* (much-beloved) husband,⁴ whom she misses desperately. Variations on the word for “longing” occur at key points throughout the poem (lines 14, 29, 41, 53; see Stevick 1960, p. 21). The issue that Niles addresses is “how to construe a passage of ten and a half lines at the poem’s close (lines 42–52a), whether as the speaker’s gnomic reflection on the sorrows of life or as her outright curse upon a man who has wronged her” (Niles 2006, p. 149). He explains that “by combining the methods of philology and historical anthropology, I hope to present an interpretation of *The Wife's Lament* that is both linguistically sound and historically plausible” (Niles 2006, p. 150). Niles emphasizes that interpreting lines 42–52a as the Wife’s curse “upon a man who has wronged her” is only one way of reading those ambiguous lines.⁵ While agreeing that other readings of those lines have merit, this essay finds value in Niles’ argument for the Wife’s curse but stands firm against his borrowed idea of a cruel husband who has wronged her. To support the idea that the Wife curses her husband, Niles provides a long and fascinating sidebar essay on “cursing as a social institution and a literary theme, both in the Middle Ages in Europe and, as space permits, in other times and places” (Niles 2006, p. 150).⁶ But space is, as he indicates there, an issue in his lengthy chapter, so to get quickly to his discussion of cursing and avoid the distraction of problems earlier in the poem, he calls on an acknowledged expert on *The Exeter Book* “elegies”, Anne Klinck.⁷ In her otherwise exemplary book, Klinck interprets the husband as cruel and even wishing harm to his wife—a good reason for

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her to curse him—but the text does not stand up well to that reading, as will be shown. Notably, reading the husband as cruel misses the similarity of the Wife’s situation to that of the most powerfully cursing woman in all literature, Dido of Carthage, whom Aeneas sadly abandons under pressure from the gods. (Dido’s curses against him have such force that, according to Virgil, they echo down the generations to incite the devastating Punic Wars of 264 to 146 BC.) Dido will be our ally in amending Niles’ argument to allow for the idea of a husband who, like Aeneas,⁸ cares about the wife he is forced to leave while arousing her fury by doing so and causing her to curse him in a moment of anguish.

What follows is organized into three sections:⁹ First comes a reading of the poem that does not make the man an enemy to the Wife; this is followed by a sidebar essay on oath-taking that supports the thesis, and the essay concludes with a discussion that examines the Wife’s “cave under an oak tree” as a possible rock-cut building. While rock-cut temples and even entire cities are known tourist sites in other countries,¹⁰ the more modest English rock-cut buildings, typically dwellings cut into a cliff-face, draw little attention and have thus been overlooked as a source for the poet’s possible model for the Wife’s “cave”. Each of these three sections reaffirms the central thesis that the husband may genuinely care about his wife as her “friend” (lines 25, 47, 50).

Accepting Niles’ reading of lines 42–52a as the Wife’s curse, while not interpreting her husband as hostile toward her, reveals the passage to be dynamic self-narration. Like Dido, the Wife is perfectly capable of cursing a *felaleof* (much-beloved) husband who, due to a conflicted situation, leaves her in lonely misery (without friends: lines 10, 16–17, and 33–36). Central to the argument for a caring husband is a positive meaning for the word or words in the letters *herheard* in line 15 (*Hēt mec hlāford mīn herheard niman*), understood in five different ways by a series of respected scholars, with negative interpretations by Klinck and some others. I argue, along with Karl P. Wentersdorf (1981) and P. R. Orton (1989), that the most reasonable way to understand *herheard* is to interpret it as the compound *herh-earð* (compare modern “churchyard”), referring to the site of a *herh* or “pagan temple” (*hearg* in West Saxon),¹¹ where the husband has sent the speaker of the poem for her safety.¹² In *Enigmatic Poems*, Niles confesses to finding “Orton’s reading persuasive”, but since “it is adopted by neither Klinck nor Muir” he chose not to rely on it in his essay (Niles 2006, p. 152, n. 7). Instead, he adopted Klinck’s scenario of the hostile husband.¹³ But Niles’ reading of the poem as “an imagined *cri de coeur*” by a woman cursing her husband because she longs for him (Niles 2006, p. 206) works even better for his argument when the husband is seen as entangled in a web of competing obligations—as Aeneas was. With the cruel husband removed, it is possible to draw attention to the Wife’s apparent understanding, even approval, of the man’s choice of action, the only honorable choice within the constraints of his culture (Notably, Virgil describes Aeneas as *pius*, right-thinking, when he makes a similar choice; *Aeneid* 4: 393). This recognition of the husband’s choice as culturally correct complicates the speaker’s emotional response to his departure, revealing a woman who is socially adept and aware of the mores of her culture, even while furious, and a poem that is more nuanced than previously thought. There is reason to suppose that the Wife would understand what her husband must do, and even why it is appropriate for him to be silent about his decision to take violent action. That violence is not the source of her complaint, nor does she ever complain about the physical nature of the cavern to which he has sent her. She calls it “old” but does not describe it as damp or chilly; the surrounding deep dales and too-high hills are what she seems to find oppressive. As she says at the very beginning of her lament, the cause of her sufferings, “ever since I grew up” (line 3b), is the near-total isolation in which she finds herself.

In saying *sīþþan ic up weox*, a phrase usually overlooked or misunderstood (one writer taking it to mean “throughout her life”), the Wife tells us something about herself that may help to clarify her present situation. When she speaks about “what sufferings I’ve experienced ever since I grew up,/both new ones and old, never more than now” (lines 3–4) and then immediately tells about her husband’s departure (lines 6–8), this may suggest that, once she had reached a suitable age (line 3b; often very young), she was married

exogamously, almost certainly for political reasons, as was expected for a young woman of elite status. Thus, one can assume that she was a child-bride (in our terms) wrenched from family and friends, and now, with her husband also gone, her “friendless” situation is even worse. Leonard Neidorf makes a good case for the similarity of her situation to that of Hildeburh in the Finnsburh episode in *Beowulf*, describing that lady as “a Danish princess living in Frisia, possibly against her will, who perhaps had few friends to begin with and has now lost the people closest to her” (Neidorf 2017, p. 199). Like the Wife, Hildeburh experienced sufferings both “old” when taken from her Danish birth home and “new” upon losing her loved ones in Frisia, in the now of the Finnsburh story. A significant difference lies between the two women’s fates, however: Hildeburh’s son and brother have been slain, whereas the Wife’s husband has merely gone over the sea. After Hildeburh receives satisfaction (as Neidorf persuasively argues), she is escorted back home to Denmark, but the Wife will remain in her cave in a foreign land, waiting (line 53).

In her introduction to *The Wife’s Lament*, Anne Klinck says, “My understanding of the relations between man and wife hinges on reading *her heard* (line 15), where I take *heard* as the adjective “cruel” applied to the husband, and by translating *mines felaleofan fæhðe* (line 26) as ‘the enmity of my very dear one’” (Klinck 1992, p. 50). In this section of the essay I will first examine those two words *herheard* and *fæhðu*, reading them, as Peter S. Baker does, in their most obvious meanings¹⁴ to absolve the husband of hostile intentions toward the speaker. Then I will consider how the verbs *begietan* (used twice) and *hatan* (*het*) may further clarify relationships in this poem. Also relevant is the punctuation after *gebæro* at line 21, another important word appearing twice, with its ethical nuance glossed at line 44.

Attention to *herheard* comes first because so much of the poem’s meaning rests on the nature of the Wife’s location and her attitude toward it, or, more accurately, her attitude toward being left there alone. The look of the word in the manuscript creates this crux in the poem’s meaning. Even though the line-end division of a word is arbitrary in *The Exeter Book*, those who argue for a cruel husband make much of the fact that the eight letters of *herheard* are divided by the end of a manuscript line to read *her heard*, and they interpret this as what the word-division makes it look like: the adverb *her* (here) followed by the adjective *heard* (hard, interpreted as cruel¹⁵), used nominally. Read this way, line 15 produces a meaning like “here [where the speaker is located] the cruel man commanded me to make a home”. But Klinck (following the arguments of two previous scholars¹⁶) makes the pronoun “me” the object of the verb *niman* (take or hold) instead of *het* (commanded), so that she can then read line 15 *Hēt mec hlāford mīn her heard niman* and translate it as “My lord commanded, cruel [hard], to seize me here” (Klinck 1992, p. 181). Not only does the verb “seize” exaggerate the usual meaning of *niman* (“take”), this translation also produces a syntax as awkward in Old English as in modern English when it leaves the transitive verb *het* (“commanded”) without a direct object: whom did he command to seize her? Most editors of the poem interpret the line in a straightforward way. Recognizing that *herheard niman* in line 15b echoes the idiomatic phrase *eard niman*, “to make a home” (i.e., settle in a place), R.F. Leslie interprets *herheard* as two separate words and emends it to *her eard*, “here, [an] abode”, indicating the place where the Wife has been told to take up residence. But Leslie’s word division creates a metrical problem because adverbs like *her* do not normally alliterate, and *eard*, now the main stressed word in the second half-line, does not alliterate. Thus Leslie’s line *Hēt mec hlāford mīn her eard niman* does not scan as well as it might.¹⁷ R.D. Fulk’s corrective solution, to take *herheard* as meaning *hirad* (household, family), is clever but unnecessary and requires special pleading, as well as emendation.¹⁸ Both Wentersdorf and Orton, like C.W.M. Grein before them, prefer to retain *herheard* as an intact word, resulting in a simple declarative sentence: “my lord commanded me to dwell in this temple-yard” (compare the words churchyard and graveyard), or “to take a grove-dwelling” according to Orton (1989, pp. 209–10). Wentersdorf is further convincing with his detailed argument for interpreting *herheard* as a temple that would traditionally be located in a grove, as it is in this poem at line 27b: *on wuda bearwe*. Which among these opposing readings is preferable depends on the reader’s understanding of the husband’s

intentions toward his wife, whether he wants her out of the way as a nuisance, or even killed, as Elinor Lench suggests (Lench 1970, p. 16), or means to send her to a place where she will be safe, perhaps safe from his family. There is no doubt about his family's negative attitude toward the woman because she states it clearly: they are secretly trying to separate the couple as far apart as possible (lines 11–13). Klinck defends her argument for taking *heard* to mean "hard", indicating a cruel husband, by claiming that the spelling of *herh* for West Saxon *hearg* ("pagan temple") is too unusual to be a valid option (Klinck 1992, p. 180) and that therefore *herheard* is an "unlikely form" (Klinck 1992, p. 50). The very existence of a word *herheard* is "dubious", she concludes (Klinck 1992, p. 181). As Peter Baker points out, however, *herh* occurs at line 3072 of *Beowulf* (*hergum geheaderod*, "confined in a pagan shrine" (Peter S. Baker 2013, p. 208, n. 7)), and approximately the same spelling arguably appears on the Franks Casket in the compound *herh-os* ("temple deity").¹⁹ If the word had not been misdivided (according to modern usage norms) where it occurred at the line-ending, *herheard* would probably have been universally recognized to be the compound *herh-eard*, as Grein, Wentersdorf and Orton understood it, and an unbiased reader would accept this word as a compound. There is no good reason to complicate this issue. Line 15, *Het mec hlaford min herheard niman*, should be translated as simply as it appears in the text with *het*, *hlaforð* and *herheard* carrying the alliteration: "My lord commanded me to reside in [this] *herheard*". The Wife does not appear to be disturbed by the location's pagan associations, but that may be because the poet imagines her, as Niles suggests, in a "raw and primitive past" (Niles 2006, p. 206).²⁰ The *herheard* is simply a "safe house" for this endangered young woman, but it is also a cave that she detests because of its loneliness.²¹

The next word to be addressed in this network of cruxes is *fæhðu* at line 26, commonly translated "feud", and the controversy concerns what the Wife means when she says that she is suffering because of *mines felaleofan fæhðu* ("the feud[?] of my much-beloved"). Klinck translates *fæhðu* "hostility" (Klinck 1992, p. 183), a meaning well-established in corrective essays by G. Halsall (1999) and J. D. Niles (2015), but she takes this to indicate that the man's hostility is directed against the speaker as he "cruelly commands his wife to be seized" (Klinck 1992, p. 51). Leslie understands *fæhðu* to mean "feud" in the sense of a recurrent hostility between groups, not between individual persons, and he claims that the word "cannot, therefore, refer to hostility of the husband toward his wife" (Leslie 1961, p. 55). Even when translating *fæhðu* as "hostility", the more general meaning now assigned to that word, *mines felaleofan fæhðu*, may be understood within the context of the poem as the husband's hostility directed against an unspecified enemy not within his kin group. The obligation to perform the dangerous act of violence about which he has been secretly thinking (*morþor hycgendne*, line 20) is what requires him to travel elsewhere, possibly to carry out an oath-duty to family or sovereign. It is the *consequences* of his hostility toward a third party, resulting in his departure on a mission that takes him from her, that has caused the Wife to suffer from his hostility (*fæhðu dreogan*) by being banished to her present isolation.²²

Up to this point in the poem, the Wife resents the loneliness caused by the circumstance of her husband's departure; she is not yet angry at him personally. This reading is supported by what she says later when she speaks of herself walking about alone in a "joyless lodging" (line 31) while she imagines lovers lying companionably together in bed (lines 33–34). Her situation in a land foreign to her²³ was compared to that of Hildeburh above, but it may also be similar to that of another princess in *Beowulf*, the Scylding Freawaru, when her father marries her off to Ingeld the Heathobard in a bid to keep the peace between potentially hostile tribes (*Beowulf* lines 2026–29a). *Beowulf* imagines an angry old Heathobard warrior inciting Ingeld (lines 2041–56) until that prince's love for Freawaru "becomes cooler" (lines 2065–66), so that the hostility between the Heathobards and Scyldings flares up again. Once the adjective *heard* (hard, cruel) has vanished into the noun *herheard*, there is no textual evidence of a similar spousal chill in *The Wife's Lament*. The Wife is sad that the vows never to part that she and her husband took together are broken, "as if their friendship never were" (lines 24–25a), but if a stronger obligation takes her husband away, this is not an

“actionable” breaking of those vows by a husband who “fails in his duty” (Niles 2006, p. 196). In most situations, obligation bound by oath to a strong corporate entity takes precedence over that to a private individual (See the sidebar essay for evidence that loyalty oaths made in earlier times might provoke a kind of compulsion verging on obsession).

How, then, does the wife herself interpret her husband’s command to take up residence in the *herheard* cave? Does she feel exiled against her will like a criminal (as some readers argue), or would she have understood that he wanted her there for her own good? The verb *hatan* in the phrase *het mec hlaforð min* (line 15) can be read either way, as also could the adjective *heard*, if one chose to take *her heard* as adverb plus noun. If the husband is concerned about his wife’s safety when he is not there to protect her, he might tell her quite firmly to take shelter, which she could interpret as being “hard” on her. Even exaggerating the phrasing in this way, however, there is nothing to suggest that the Wife imagines her beloved *freond* as her enemy. But she does get very angry at him.

Niles supports his cruel husband reading with the verb *begietan* (*begeat* in lines 32 and 41). His idea, following Klinck, is that the Wife is seized (*begeat*) by enemies (Niles 2006, p. 156), rather than, as I and others interpret the situation, by the anxiety caused by her husband’s departure (*fromsíp frean*, line 43). This interpretation of *begeat* may be fostered by a difference in our way of expressing emotional episodes. Whereas in modern English we would use the passive voice (“I was seized by anxiety”), in Old English anxiety actively grips the Wife. This happens to her repeatedly and *wraþe* (“fiercely”) in response to her isolated location; as Leslie says, in line 32, “The key words are *oft* and *her*” (Leslie 1961, p. 4). Thus, the sentence *Ful oft mec her wraþe begeat fromsíp frean* (lines 32b–33a: “Very often, here, my lord’s departure fiercely seized me”) apparently refers to sudden involuntary grief spasms, a well-known physical reaction to overwhelming sorrow, especially that caused by the absence or death of someone greatly loved. It may seem to the sufferer as though they are taken over, fiercely seized, by an uncontrollable outside force.²⁴ Similar metaphorical usage where an emotion is reified as a living antagonist occurs in *The Wanderer* as the protagonist experiences sorrow as a cruel companion (line 30) who binds him when aided by sleep (lines 39–40), but only the speaker of *The Wife’s Lament* seems subject to the severe spasms caused by panic about being abandoned.²⁵

However, why does her husband have to leave her? Why not tell his anxious and mournful wife where he is going? Why must he hide his plans for violence under a *blithe gebæro* (“blithe bearing”), a feigned expression of ease? The description of his actions combined with her lament about the broken oath suggests that he may be under an oath that takes precedence over the oath they made together. Following Niles’ example in exploring themes in *The Exeter Book* that resonate intertextually between poems (Niles 2019, p. 72), let us return to *The Wanderer* where a central but rarely remarked preoccupation in that most famous of the elegies can help to answer these questions about *The Wife’s Lament*, and to understand the constraints that may be affecting the husband as well. *The Wanderer* poet is so deeply concerned about oaths made or carried out without sufficient preparation that it is surprising that no one (to my knowledge) has argued that this is a major theme in the poem, almost defining its secular level. Closely related to this theme of over-eager oath-taking is that of stoic (masculine) silence under pressure, what Robert E. Bjork, one of the few who have studied it, calls “the imagery of silence” in *The Wanderer* (Bjork 2008). This dual preoccupation in *The Wife’s Lament* with oath-taking (doing things with words) and silence (suppressing words) bears directly, I believe, on the husband’s outward expression of calm when seething inside with thoughts of *mordor* (violence, probably lethal; line 20). It may be presumed that he has departed “over the waves” (line 7) to enact that violence.²⁶ There is controversy about how to punctuate the descriptive words *blide gebæro* at line 21, depending on whether that phrase belongs with what precedes or with what follows. The gnomic phrasing of lines 42–44, declaring that a man sad or serious of mind having “hard” thoughts should maintain a blithe bearing, suggests strongly that *blide gebæro* belongs with what precedes. This is an issue of some importance because it reflects the poet’s attitude toward the husband. A period placed after *blide gebæro* at line 21 reveals the

husband, *hygegeomor* (sad in thought), to be silently contemplating violence under a “blithe demeanor”. When the poet uses that same phrase along with other echoing language in the later lines, he places positive value on behavior exactly like that of the husband in the earlier passage: a man *ought* to contain his anger silently under an easy demeanor while he is sad and suffering with long-lasting sorrows (*geomormod*, line 42, *sinsorgna gedreag*, line 45). The Wife, even while resenting his leaving despite the vows they had made together never to part, would be aware that her silent, abstracted husband has been thinking about a dangerous undertaking involving violence, and she would probably also be aware that the culture demanded that he should control his feelings silently under outward calm until he has devised a plan because “a man must wait”, as *The Wanderer* poet declares, “until he understands clearly” what action to take.

2. Speaking Big Words: Toward an Exploration of Problematic Oath-Taking

Beorn sceal gebidan, þonne he beot spricedð,

opþæt collenferð cunne gearwe

hwider hreþra gehygd hweorfan wille. (*The Wanderer*, lines 70–72)

A man (*beorn*) must wait, when [i.e., after] he speaks an oath,

until, keen-spirited, he understands clearly

whither the thought of his breast will turn.

- Treow sceal on eorle. (*Cotton Maxims*, line 32b) Good faith must be in a man.
- Til biþ se þe his treowe gehealdað. (*The Wanderer*, line 112a)²⁷ Good is he who holds to his troth (ambivalent: he who is faithful to his vow or he who holds to his religious faith).
- Ec veit ein at aldrei deyr/dómr um dauðan hvern. (The Old Icelandic *Hávamál*, stanza 77: 3–4).

I know one thing that never dies,/a dead man’s reputation (*dómr*).

The multivalent term “oath” can refer to three different verbal acts, an assertion of truth referring to a past fact (as when witnessing in court), a promise of a future action (like an IOU), and a curse making use of a word once associated with the supernatural, usually a free-floating expletive (swear word).²⁸ This essay is concerned only with the second of these, the promissory oath, and this comes in two forms: the “heroic oath” that promises performance of a designated valorous act in the near future, and the more open-ended and trusting “loyalty oath” that promises to perform an undetermined act whenever it shall be mandated. A promissory oath of either kind implicitly contains two elements, the “big words” making a commitment now to a later action, and the obligation to later perform the possibly dangerous deed that was sworn to or will be commanded. Thus, an oath (like any promise) is a double-tensed indexical (an indexical is a word or phrase that changes meaning with a change of context²⁹). The two tenses implied by an oath refer to the time at which the words are spoken and a projected later time when that commitment must be honored in action.³⁰ The concept of “honor” is crucial to oath-taking because any formal oath, whether heroic oath or loyalty oath, assumes that the oath-maker’s honor as a truth-teller is an important element of their perceived identity and that this factor will constrain them to “honor” their vow. Moreover, when a warrior is speaking an oath he challenges a future that he may hope for but cannot know, and the ritual sanctification of the oath within a male bonding situation engages the supernatural in the maker’s promise (as when the witness in a courtroom lays a hand on the Bible). All these factors constrain the oath-taker from choosing a future path in conflict with the intention of the oath, and this limitation on his freedom is relevant to evaluating the husband’s actions in *The Wife’s Lament*.

While attention to the philosophy of “promising” is currently vibrant with discussions extending into numerous disciplines,³¹ it does not, apparently, extend into the study of the ethics of warriors’ oath-taking implicit in several Old English poems, especially those

evoking an imagined heroic age. The oaths and vows in both heroic and elegiac poetry are often at the heart of a situation that turns upon the issue of whether the promise is honored or broken. The main point of the brief study that follows is that there are degrees of obligation in oaths spoken publicly. Whether it is a vow to perform a specific deed or a declaration of open-ended fealty to a leader, when a promissory oath is sealed by the mead cup before the assembled warband, it will take precedence over a vow made to a private person outside that group, even to a wife.³² Proclaiming either kind of oath was and is a socially bonding act, but the performance of an oath in the meadhall before cheering witnesses must have been a special rite of male bonding. The exhilaration of a situation when spirits were high and the mead was flowing would have encouraged warriors, especially eager young ones, to vow to perform deeds of increasing danger and valor, thus eliciting the “heroic” oath. The dark side would come the next morning with the sobering realization that a witnessed oath must be carried out lest honor be lost. As everyone who has read *Beowulf* knows, the best thing a warrior in this (secular) world can hope for is the *dom* that lives after him, the good opinion of the group that will “deem”, or judge and assign glory, and that *dom* for a warrior is won by the honoring of an oath in action:

Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
 worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
 domes ær deaþe; þæt bid drihtgum[an]
 unlifgendum æfter selest. (*Beowulf* lines 1386–9)
 Each of us can expect an end
 of life in the world; let him achieve who can
dom before death; that for the nobleman
 no longer living is afterwards best.

The *dom* or good reputation (glory) that *Beowulf* speaks of in this passage is earned by *lofðædas*, and *lof* is the storied record of deeds performed well: “We have heard”, says the *Beowulf* poet, *hu ða aþelingas ellen fremedon* (“how the athelings performed acts of courage”, line 3).³³ That high aim is why it is important for a warrior to think carefully before speaking, hard as that is when the group is cheering him on. Once spoken, the warrior’s oath *must* be carried through; his *dom* depends on it. The courage and dedication with which he accomplishes the vaunted deed, along with its success or noble failure, builds and determines his identity within the masculine *duguð* culture of the hall, the circle of proven warriors. *The Wife’s Lament* questions this oath culture from the perspective of someone to whom second-level oaths have been made and broken.³⁴ The reader’s part in that questioning concerns the husband’s attitude toward the Wife as manifested in his actions: does he send her to live in the woods because he has become hostile toward her (Klinck, Niles), or is her suffering in that isolated cave-life a by-product of his own necessary, and perhaps temporary, exile (Wentersdorf and others)?³⁵

Before he leaves, the husband broods in “manly” silence, a practice that is not unique to *The Wife’s Lament*. Here the argument again engages that more famous *Exeter Book* elegy, *The Wanderer*. When *The Wanderer* poet gives voice to his beleaguered protagonist, the very first thing he does is to introduce “the imagery of silence” (Bjork 2008). First the poem’s persona laments that he must speak his woes alone because no one now lives to whom he can open his heart (we find out later that his lord is dead), but next he comforts himself with the truism that it is an *indryhten þeaw* (“noble custom”, line 12)³⁶ to lock up one’s unhappy feelings, as in a treasure-chest:

Oft ic sceolde āna ūhtna gehwylce
 mīne ceare cwīþan. Nis nū cwicra nān
 þe ic him mōdsefan mīnne durre
 sweotule āsecgan. Ic tō sōþe wāt

þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þēaw
 þæt hē his ferðlocan fæste binde,
 healde his hordcofan, hycge swā hē wille. (*The Wanderer*, lines 8–14)
 Often I must, alone, every morning
 speak my sorrow. There is none now alive
 to whom what’s on my mind I dare
 openly say. I know as a truism
 that it is in a man a noble custom
 that he bind fast his spirit-locker,
 hold [shut] his hord-coffer, think whatever he will.

With lord and kinsmen all dead in battle, the Wanderer has no social matrix that will allay the pain of his sorrow or hold it at bay. Nevertheless, he is consoled by the socially sanctioned *indryhten þeaw* of keeping one’s sorrows “bound up” within. More sensible is the preventative measure advised in lines 70–72 (“a man must wait, etc.”, quoted above) that cautions against making an oath until as certain as humanly possible of the ability to honor it, with no regrets. The word *beorn* places this admonition in a warband context where breaking a public oath would reveal the warrior to be lacking in honor, missing a vital part of what would identify him as a worthy member of that high-status community. The advice to consider “whither the urges of the heart might turn” may hint at the problem of a conflicting commitment that unexpectedly complicates the honorable carrying out of an oath.³⁷

The word *collenferð* in line 71 of *The Wanderer*³⁸ (quoted above) suggests a rashness to be guarded against, even though eagerness for action is a virtue in a warrior. The poet develops an understanding of oath-taking in stages through the poem, first presenting the “stiff upper lip” maxim (about keeping quiet about one’s woes) in lines 11–14, then advising caution in oath-keeping in lines 70–72, and finally adding to these two an important qualifier about knowing the *bot* before acting, in lines 112–114.³⁹ *Bot* is an ambivalent word having both secular and religious meanings, like *treowe* (pledge/religious faith) in line 112a and *fastness* at the very end of the poem at line 115b (fortress/stability), and the poet takes full advantage of this double meaning of *bot*. Recent scholarship has downplayed its secular aspect. The gnomic sentence about *bot*, in emphatic long lines, repeats the word *beorn* that directs the wisdom to warriors, with lines 112b–113 referring back to the “noble custom” of keeping silent in lines 11–14, and with *bote cunne* of line 113 echoing *cunne gearwe* of line 69:

Til biþ se þe his trēowe gehealdeþ; ne sceal nǣfre his torn tō rycene
 beorn of his brēostum ācyþan, nemþe hē ær þā bōte cunne
 eorl mid elne gefremman. (*The Wanderer*, lines 112–114a)

Good is he who holds to his troth [pledge]; his grief he must never too quickly,
 a warrior (*beorn*), from his breast make known, unless he first knows the remedy,
 the nobleman, how to achieve it with vigor.⁴⁰

The meaning that most recent commentators assign to the word *bot* is “remedy”, as translated here, with the idea that the “remedy” for suffering is to put one’s faith in God.⁴¹ Within the “heroic” or legal context, however, *bot* refers to recompense, so interpreting *bot* “heroically” refers the reader back to lines 70–72, where the *beorn* is told to be careful about making a commitment until he knows “whither the thought of his breast will turn”. Once committed, to carry out his oath in good faith he needs to be clear about what he must do (the *bot*) to prove himself loyal to his word and fully a warrior. E.G. Stanley has recently edited *The Exeter Book* poem *Precepts* (Stanley 2018, pp. 277–95), in which these lines on the same subject of maintaining silence occur:

Ymb his forðgesceaft, nefne he fæhþe wite,

wærwyrde sceal wisfæst hæle
breostum hycgan, nales breatme hlud. (Lines 55–57)

Stanley translates: “A truly wise man must reflect on his future in his inmost thoughts, unless he experiences contrariety [line 55b], careful in speaking, not at all clamorously noisy.” Stanley’s note on line 55b betrays the fact that he is not certain about what *nefne he fæhþe wite* means.⁴² I suggest that *Precepts* 55b and the similar phrase at 112b in *The Wanderer* (quoted above) shed light on each other, and that the “remedy” alluded to in the word *bot* is an act of violence, *fæhþe*. Thus I would translate these three lines of *Precepts* as follows, with bracketed additions for clarity: “Concerning his future, unless he knows the violence [that he must perform],/a firmly wise man shall be wary of words,/ponder [that *bot*] within his breast, not noisily aloud.” When the husband in *The Wife’s Lament* is secretly and silently pondering violence under a “blithe demeanor”, he is conforming to a “wise” practice endorsed by his warrior class.⁴³

Thus, lines 112b–113a of *The Wanderer*, supplemented by the *Precepts* passage, mark a return to the theme of oath-keeping and the “imagery of silence”, as the *bot* in line 113b refers to what comes after the oath. However painful or terrifying the task to be done may be, it is best to plan for it in silence until certain about how to carry it out. As Hamlet knew so well, vengeance is a dish best served cold, specifically so that the avenger can take the time to calculate calmly the best strategy for achieving success. This requires the oath-taker to contain within himself the passion that led to his vaunting words, an anger and grief that might concern anything from a minor insult to the murder of a kinsman. The danger addressed by these cautions about oath-taking must have been the easy violence stirred up by manly posturing at a hall celebration as warriors are forced by their “honor” (and mead) into swearing to perform actions that reflection or a change of circumstances might make undesirable. As the “Rad” stanza of the Old English *Rune Poem* suggests, daylight may reveal the task as surprisingly daunting. In that poem, two different meanings of the rune-name *Rad*—“advice” (or talk) and “riding” (taking action)—are exploited in a stanza that appears as a maxim: “*Rad* in the hall for any warrior is easy [*sefte*, soft], and very strenuous for someone who sits on a powerful horse on the mile-paths”.⁴⁴ Talking big in a safe place among raucous friends may be all *too* easy.

The story of the Jomsburg men’s oath-taking vividly illustrates the kind of swearing of oaths at mead that builds bonds while binding the swearer to a future deed (a ritual to which both *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* famously allude, among other works). The Icelandic story of the feast that King Svein held in memory of his father King Harald appears in several versions; the version condensed here is quoted by Einarsson (1968, pp. 109–10) from the *Heimskringla* account in the Morris and Magnússon (1893) translation of that work. At this feast a great quantity of “grave-ale” is being served—

And that cup of memory must all drink who were at the feast [. . .].

And then were borne to the Jomsburgers the biggest horns of the mightiest drink that was there [. . .].

But thereafter drank Earl Sigvaldi the memory of his father, swearing oath therewith that before three winters were worn away he would come into Norway and slay Earl Hakon or else drive him from the land.

Then swore Thorkel the High, the brother of Sigvaldi, that he would follow his brother to Norway, nor ever flee from battle leaving Sigvaldi fighting.

Then swore Bui the Thick that he would fare to Norway with them, and in no battle flee before Earl Hakon.

Then swore Sigurd his brother that he would fare to Norway, and not flee while the more part of the Jomsburgers fought.

Then swore Vagn Akison that he would fare with them to Norway, and not come back till he had slain Thorkel Leira, and lain a-bed by his daughter Ingibjorg without the leave of her kin.

Many other lords also swore oath on sundry matters. So that day men drank the heirship-feast.

But the morrow's morn, when men were no more drunken, the Jomsburgers thought they had spoken big words enough; so they met together and took counsel how they should bring this journey about, and the end of it was that they determined to set about it as speedily as may be. So they arrayed their ships and their company; and wide about the land went the fame of this.

In this simple story, these brothers and their loyal friends have no trouble coping with conflicting loyalties. All they must do to "hold to their troth" is to carry out the raping and murdering that they have sworn to accomplish.

In his well-known essay on "The Heroic Oath" (Renoir 1963, pp. 237–66), Alain Renoir shows that carrying out an oath (at least in literature) was not always so unencumbered. Brief summaries of only two of the stories that Renoir tells in that essay will be enough to demonstrate the unanticipated conflicts that an oath-taker may have to face and the amazing rigor with which the oath must be honored despite any personal grief that honoring it may entail. The milder of Renoir's two stories is about Walter of Aquitaine. This hero's tale was told in the Old English poem *Waldere*, but only two fragments of that poem remain, so one must supplement it with scenes from the possibly contemporary Latin epic *Waltharius*. This is a great adventure tale. Waltharius and his betrothed, Hildegund, both hostages to Attila, have escaped from Hunnish captivity with treasure that Hildegund has cleverly managed to spirit away. Presumably with a horse to carry the treasure and their gear, they take an (estimated) two-month-long hike along the Volga from what is now Hungary to the crossing of the Rhine into the Vosges area of what is now France. However, the ferryman of the Rhine has heard the clink of gold and reports this to the Frankish king Gunthur, who greedily sets off with 12 warriors to take the treasure. The greatest of his warriors is Hagen, a previously escaped hostage of the Huns with whom Waltharius took an oath of friendship when they were captives together. The two groups clash in the Vosges Mountains, and Waltharius takes on Gunthur's men one by one, killing each in turn until only his friend Hagen is left alive. Hagen has tried all along to talk his obsessed king out of this battle, but to no avail, and when his turn comes to make the final attempt on Waltharius, he must keep his word to the king whom he does not respect against the personal vow of friendship. We cannot know how the Old English *Waldere* ended, but after Hagen and Waltharius chop each other up until both collapse, this Latin epic concludes with the three survivors, those two and Gunthur (now also maimed), sitting around and chatting about the fight and their wounds. No modern scholar knows what to make of this strangely unheroic ending, though some have very strong opinions.⁴⁵ In any case, the story makes my point clearly: Hagen's loyalty oath to his king trumps that to his friend.

Renoir's second example of an oath to a leader that results in remorse is from the twelfth-century Old French *chanson de geste* titled *Les Quatre Filz Aymon* (*The Four Sons of Aymon*). When Aymon's oath of service to Charlemagne takes precedence over commitment to family, this story concludes with the tragedy one might expect. Aymon's sons are oath-bound to the king's enemy, so under pressure from Charlemagne Aymon must unwillingly fight all four of them to the death. Remorseful though he is, he nevertheless takes pleasure in the valor with which his sons, one after the other, take him on. To me, the situation is unbelievable; why do they not unite in turning on the king, whatever the cost? Again, however, the story makes the point well: these oaths of allegiance to king and *comitatus*, potentially to be honored even to the point of killing one's closest friend or dear children, had a power over the oath-taker's mind and sense of identity that no sane modern person can come close to comprehending.

Few oaths in real life were so fraught as either of these, of course, although the obligation to stand fast by one's lord at all costs is attested both in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and by the poem *The Battle of Maldon*. In the Parker Manuscript, the chronicle entry for the year 757 records Prince Cyneheard's surprise attack on King Cynewulf. After his victory, Cyneheard offers to let Cynewulf's men go free, but they choose to fight to avenge their

king to their certain death (*Parker Chronicle and Laws: A Facsimile* 1941, p. 127; Swanton 2000, pp. 46–47). *The Battle of Maldon* was composed soon after the event of 991 that it commemorates. In that poem, after the invading Danes have slain the Ealdorman Byrhtnoth and a group of cowardly warriors have fled the battle (lines 185–197), the remaining loyal warriors urge themselves on, one of them reminding the others what *we oft æt meodo spræcon, þonne we on bence beot ahofon* (“we often spoke at mead when we on the bench raised the oath”, lines 212b–213a). “Now we will find out who is brave,” he concludes at line 215 (Dobbie 1958, p. 13), and they, too, fight on to the death. Carrying out the oath means everything. Renoir attempts to explain the power of the “heroic oath” in respect to this understanding of it by reference to *Beowulf*:

The nature of the heroic oath in *Beowulf*, confusing as it may be to the modern scholarly reader, posed no serious problem for the protagonists of the poem. Even the jealous Unferth, who insultingly questions Beowulf’s adequacy to deal with the monster Grendel (lines 499–528), never openly doubts the intrinsic value of the latter’s oath to rid the world of the evil doer. The only problem is the fulfillment; if Beowulf either kills Grendel, and later his mother, or bravely dies in the attempt, he will have fulfilled his oath to the letter and won eternal renown among both the Danes (lines 660b–61) and the Geats (lines 1484–86). (Renoir 1963, p. 242)

It is argued here that when the husband in *The Wife’s Lament* breaks the vow never to part that he and the speaker took together (*wit beotedon*, line 21), he must have been under a compulsion to carry out a “heroic” oath similar to that which caused the real-life companions of Cynewulf and Byrhtnoth to fight on after their leaders’ death, that caused Beowulf to swear to do or die and even heroically to add odds in the huge monsters’ favor (he would bear no sword against Grendel; he would go alone against Grendel’s mother and later the dragon); and that caused the legendary Hagen and Aymon, under oath to their respective kings, to take up arms against those they cared for. Despite some recent readings of *The Wife’s Lament* that claim otherwise, the Wife says nothing about her husband turning against her; she speaks only of the desire of his family to part them, so the easiest scenario to imagine from the inconclusive hints we are given—the man’s dark brooding about violence under a “blithe demeanor” and his going “over the waves” to who-knows-where—is that he was compelled to take action abroad by an oath more substantial in the culture of the poem than a vow made to a beloved woman.⁴⁶

However, in evoking an imagined future, oaths share a semi-magical proleptic force with cursing and with this element comes a danger in the breaking of them that has not been suggested before in discussions of Old English poetry (so far as I am aware). The result of not carrying out to the letter an oath made with Big Words may be even worse than loss of honor. In the mind of a warrior, always conscious of what might hinder or help at need, a serious oath that was “sanctified” by raising the meadcup and then left unfulfilled might be thought to turn the psychic force of that oath back upon its maker, perhaps awakening a malevolent reprisal as powerful as a curse. Giorgio Agamben refers to such forces (Agamben 2011, p. 12) when he quotes the historian of Greek law Louis Gernet, who speaks of the ‘sacred substance’ with which the one who utters the oath is put in contact: “To swear, therefore, is to enter the realm of religious forces of the most fearsome sort” (cp. Gernet 1981, p. 223).⁴⁷ If the husband in *The Wife’s Lament* even subconsciously feared reprisal for oathbreaking by “forces of the most fearsome sort”, that superstition might have led him even more profoundly than the need for *dom* in his choice to break a less binding vow to his wife.

However, he did have a choice about what to do about the wife whom he must leave. Assigning him a caring concern about her safety is speculative (though less so than assigning him hostile intent), but if the poet locates the Wife’s story in a pre-Christian period, then what he does makes sense. In that pagan world, the husband would know that the sanctuary of a *herheard* was an excellent place to keep a woman safe. According to recent discoveries about inhabited caves in the discussion that now follows, the poet may

well have been familiar with some acceptable havens in his actual ninth- or tenth-century landscape, locations to which the husband of his poem might feasibly entrust his wife, probably with a servant who would come to look after her daily needs.⁴⁸ As Niles suggests in *God's Exiles* (Niles 2019, p. 237), by labeling her haven with the word *herheard* that identifies it as a pagan temple site, the poet locates the lonely Wife's underlying narrative in an imagined pre-Christian world of long ago.

3. The Caverns under an Oak Tree as a Retreat

Few would disagree with Anne Klinck that, whatever framework we choose for interpreting it, *The Wife's Lament*

remains something of an enigma. The speaker's feelings, not the events of her life, nor even in any exact sense her physical surroundings, are the focus, and this makes the poem both highly evocative and at the same time tantalizingly laconic and elliptical. Probably the poet intended to mystify; the woman's circumstances are disturbing largely because they are strange and undefined. (Klinck 1992, p. 54)

Despite this lack of definition, some new ideas are offering a fresh perspective on the context of *The Wife's Lament*, suggestively in recent revisionist work on *The Exeter Book* by John D. Niles (2019) and his student Brian O'Camb (2009), and more denotatively in assessments of recent archaeological excavations of cliff-side dwellings and human-altered caves—one of which may plausibly have sheltered a named ninth-century king (discussed below). While the Wife may find her current habitation strange and perhaps threatening to her status, thereby leaving *her* undefined and in mental turmoil, if those "caves" in which she has been ordered to live are anything like the "rock-cut buildings" in the English Midlands that are attracting current attention, her dwelling place may not be so unpleasant as some have assumed.

Michael Lapidge claims that "the poet is describing a mental landscape, not a physical one; in its loneliness and desolation it is a visible embodiment of the narrator's invisible grief". (Lapidge 1997, p. 34; Emily Jensen goes so far as to say that there is no actual cave at all; Jensen 1990, pp. 450–51). Though we will challenge his assertion that the poet does not intend to evoke a physical landscape, Lapidge is correct in saying that the speaker's representation of her surroundings is colored by her grief. It should be observed, however, that the Wife only complains about the looming landscape around her and the isolation and loneliness that she feels; she does not complain about the physical nature of her cave-dwelling, never suggesting, for instance, that it is damp and cold. It is her isolation in a land far from her home and friends (see line 16) that makes that place a *wic wynnra leas* ("joyless dwelling", line 32). Because it is called an *eorðscraef* (line 28, usually translated "cave"), modern readers of the poem have assumed that the poor woman has been forced to live in a dank and horrible hole underground, as in this passage from Burton Raffel's popular interpretive translation that vaguely reflects lines 28 and 34–35 of *The Wife's Lament*:

I writhe with longing in this ancient hole [. . .]

While at dawn alone, I crawl miserably down

Under the oak growing out of my cave. (Raffel 1998, pp. 14–15)

In fact, there is reason to believe that (in the poet's imagination) her husband has arranged for the Wife to occupy a clean and well-lit sanctuary cave structured like one of the many medieval and later hermitage caves under the care of a monastery, where her needs would be looked after much as if she had chosen isolation for religious purposes. The meager hints offered in the poem allow us to suggest that the Christian poet knew, possibly from personal experience, although hearsay would be sufficient, of livable "hermit" caves associated with monasteries, while locating the cave of the poem in a long-ago time that Niles describes as "a raw and primitive past" (Niles 2006, p. 206).⁴⁹ By having the Wife call the site a *herheard* (line 15) without displaying fear of its heathen aspect, and calling

the cavern “old” (line 29), the poet invites us to imagine her in an ancient native place of sanctuary that in later times might be appropriated and administered by a Christian community.⁵⁰ Even the oak, twice mentioned, that stands on the hill above the cavern suggests a pagan location—although oak trees often stand tall on hilltops quite naturally.

The Wife’s cavern, pre-existing in the landscape and ready for habitation, is not unique within the context of early English poetry. It is similar to the cave found by Lot in his escape with his family in the Old English *Genesis*. That dwelling, too, is called an *eorðscraef* at line 2597:

Ne dorste þa dædrof hæle
for frean egesan on þam fæstenne
leng eardigean, ac him Loth gewat
of byrig gangan and his bearn somed
wælstowe fyrr wic sceawian,
oðþæt hie be hliðe heare dune
eorðscraef fundon. Pær se eadega Loth
wærfæst wunode, waldende leof,
dægimes worn and his dohtor twa. (*Genesis*, lines 2591–99; Krapp 1931, p. 77)

The valiant hero dared not then/for fear of the lord, in that stronghold/dwell longer, but he, Lot, departed/to walk away from that city [Sodom], and his children with him,/far from that death-place, to seek a dwelling,/until by the slope of a high hill/they found an earth-cave. There the fortunate Lot/dwelt faithfully, the beloved ruler/for many a day with his two daughters (translated by the author).

Drawing on Paul Battles’ argument in “Of Graves, Caves, and Subterranean Dwellings: *eorðscraef* and *eorðsele* in The Wife’s Lament” (Battles 1994; cp. Harris 1977), Lori Ann Garner is persuaded that the word *eorðscraef* at *Genesis* 2597 refers to a souterrain, and it is true that the words *eorðscraef* and souterrain both refer to a dwelling “scraped” (*scraef*) from the earth, thus not a natural cave. Whereas the word *eorðscraef* is directionless, the etymology of souterrain emphasizes a downward direction. The possibility of a uniquely English *horizontally* cut cliff dwelling occurs to neither Battles nor Garner, as no scholar was yet aware of the cluster of such buildings in the Midlands (discussed below).⁵¹ Of all suggestions made, however, their idea of a souterrain comes closest to the building type proposed for the Wife’s cave in this essay. In connection with Lot living in an *eorðscraef* with his *dohtor twa* (“two daughters”, line 2599), translating the Latin *filiae eius* (19:30), Garner adds a minor point worth considering in the Wife’s context: “Souterrains often function as a protection and hiding place in Germanic literature for females more widely” (Garner 2011, p. 173). Her comment recalls another female cave-dweller speaking her plight in *The Exeter Book* only a small block of riddles away from *The Wife’s Lament*. The speaker of *Exeter Book* Riddle 15, identified as a vixen by Audrey L. Meaney (2000), plans actively to alter her earthen dwelling when, threatened by an enemy breaching her “souterrain” (my term here), she will dig a new path through the hillside (lines 17–18) to create a “secret way” out (line 21).⁵²

But Garner finds that the word *burgtunas* does not fit well with that souterrain concept in *The Wife’s Lament*:

Potentially problematic to conceptualizations of such a space as either a barrow or a souterrain is the phrase *bitre burgtunas* in line 31. The compound *burgtunas*, which literally means something like ‘fortification towns’, is unique in Old English poetry, and it is difficult to reconcile the woman’s apparent underground solitude with the presence of such a grand space, with the designation *bitre* (“bitter”) only adding to the quandary. Leslie offers “protecting hedge” as a gloss and suggests it is “possibly an ancient earthwork” (56). Leslie further argues that *bitre* is used

here in the sense of ‘sharp’; thus describing “briars which have grown over the protecting walls of the cave or mound, although the abstract meaning ‘bitter’ may be intended as well” (56). Even more specifically, Klinck posits that “the bitter enclosures overgrown with briars” may be the remains of an abandoned settlement. (Garner 2011, p. 184)

Shari Horner argues that these *burgtunas* are not abandoned because the Wife’s situation should be associated with that of an enclosed nun near a monastery (Horner 2001, p. 52). Even if one objects to making the Wife into a sort of proto-nun, Horner’s idea of the woman being enclosed in a site under the guardianship of a monastery may offer a clue to the type of dwelling in which she finds herself—in the poet’s imagination. Two other poems in the Exeter Book, *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B*, attest to knowledge of the story about the hermit of that name whose place of “isolation” in a known location had become, by the time of *The Exeter Book* poems, relatively near a monastery. Soon after 700, the young nobleman named Guthlac (a real person) chose to become a hermit in the wilderness near Croyland in what is now southern Derbyshire. His vita by a near-contemporary named Felix of Crowland, writing around the mid-eighth century, tells how Guthlac dug into the side of a barrow “built of clods of earth” and built his hut in that curious location. It was isolated but contained a human-built structure (the barrow) and could be visited, although nearby Croyland Abbey that ministered to that hermitage was established later.⁵³

The Wife’s wilderness home seems different from Guthlac’s in several respects, wilder and more genuinely isolated, with a shelter more like that of the *eorðscraef* taken over by the dragon in *Beowulf*. But that is only an impression because the poet does not provide enough information to allow the reader to envision her cave in the detail that the *Beowulf* poet provides for the dragon’s lair. In exploring that description in *Beowulf*, Niles refers to a series of passages that include six *eorð*-headed compounds, four different words with one of them repeated: earth-building, earth-hall (three times), earth-scraped structure, and earth-wall. As Niles explains:

What *Beowulf* sees there is the opening to an earthen hall or chamber (*eorðreced* 2719a; cf. *eorðsele anne* ‘a singular earthen hall’ 2410; cf. also *eorðse(le)* 2232a, *eorðsele* 2515a, *eorðscraef* 3046a, *eorðweall* 3090a). The chamber is roofed by stones supported by upright pillars (the vaulting is *stapulum fæste* ‘firm on its pillars’ 2718b). The ceiling (*inwithrof* ‘inimical roof’ 3123b) is high enough that a person may walk about inside unimpeded (2752–2755, 3123–3125; cf. 2244–2246a, 2268b–2270a), while the room is capacious enough to contain a large treasure hoard plus a fifty-foot-long dragon (coiled up, one assumes). Eight men can occupy the chamber concurrently (3120–3124a) (Niles 2012, p. 27).⁵⁴

Despite the more meager description of the Wife’s *herheard*, there exist promising analogues for her cave. Amid the cluster of rock-cut dwellings in the Derbyshire Midlands (in roughly the same area of England as Guthlac’s dwelling) are cave complexes with interiors large enough to allow someone like the Wife to pace about in them, as she does in her frustration and growing anger, walking “alone at dawn through these earthen caverns under the oak tree” (lines 35–36).

4. Dido’s Fury and the Wife in Her Cave

This anger takes us back to Queen Dido, who believed that her night spent with Aeneas in a sheltering cave meant that they were betrothed and that in leaving her forever he betrayed that troth (*Aeneid* 4: 316–30, 431).⁵⁵ Dido’s perception of betrayal leads to the powerful curse that she launches at the departing Aeneas before killing herself with the sword that he gave her as a love gift. There is no hint in *The Wife’s Lament* that the Wife is as desperate as Dido, and in fact the final word of the poem, the verb *abided* (“awaits”), hints at an expectation that her husband, if he survives, will come back to her. Nevertheless, her anger at being left alone in the cave crescendos into a curse that he may experience a similarly aching isolation. Thus, it is the cave experience in each poem that arouses the

pagan fury of both Dido and the Wife, inciting each high-status woman, humiliated by being abandoned, to curse her *felaleof*, her much-beloved man.

However, the cave itself is not the object of the Wife's fury, and indeed she probably could not justly complain about its discomfort. When elite exiles and even royalty retired for a time to dwell in a hermitage "cave", they probably had comfortable furnishings and dutiful minions to serve them—completely unlike the "place of hellish exile" imagined for the Wife by both Alaric Hall (2007, pp. 224–32) and Sarah Semple (2013, pp. 152–53). In what follows, this essay will introduce examples of real "caves", some even situated "under an oak tree", that may represent the sort of building the poet may have known about and envisioned as a safe house for the lonely Wife. Precise dating of such buildings is impossible because they may or may not have been dug out from what was initially a natural cave, and the soft stone that makes their construction attractive also makes it easy to alter, so that the date of the dwelling becomes fluid. Nevertheless, certain features within these buildings suggest that they may be dated at least to an era because of stylistic correspondence to similar features in more ordinary buildings. That such buildings were known in the days of King Alfred (848/49–899) is indisputable because of an aside by Asser in his life of the king written in 893 (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, p. 53). In telling how the Great Army of the Vikings left Northumbria and came to Nottingham in 868, Asser (a Welshman) breaks off to remark that the city "is called *Tig Guogobauc* in Welsh or *Speluncarum Domus* in Latin" (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, p. 77). Asser's editors remark that the Welsh place name "does mean precisely 'cavy house' in Old Welsh", but they then suggest that the name "may perhaps have been Asser's invention, based on his own knowledge of the place" (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, p. 241). The City of Nottingham, built on soft sandstone in the same general Midlands area as Repton Abbey and the rock-house cluster, is riddled with rock-cut buildings ("approximately 840 known medieval and post-medieval man made caves"⁵⁶), mainly used for storage and brewing in recent times, and now mostly abandoned. It is only Asser's odd naming of the place that allows us any certainty (beyond their physical existence) that rock-cut buildings in that Midlands area were noticed at all before the modern era. An important aspect of these cave-like buildings is that, unless they are spectacular in some way, they tend to go unnoticed, and once untenanted may fall to ruin, may revert to existing as "mere rock".

The "cave under an oak tree" is no ruin. Asser's fleeting aside with its implicit ninth-century date allows us the pleasure of imagining the desolate young Wife weeping her summerlong day outside of an *earðscraef* that might look something like Blackstone Cave in Worcestershire, as shown in this 1721 copper engraving by Elisha Kirkall for William Stukeley's *Itinerarium Curiosum* series (see Figure 1). The location and number of windows carved in the cliff-face suggest a generous interior with more than a single chamber. Today a surrounding grove of trees and other hindrances make access difficult.⁵⁷ The following section is the British archaeologist Edmund R. Simons' account of current excavations of such rock-cut buildings as this.



Figure 1. (Stukeley and Kirkall 1721) Stukeley, William, and Elisha Kirkall, artist and engraver. 1721. View of Blackston Cave, River Severn & Ld Herberts house near Bewdley Sep 23 1721. In *the Series Itinerium Curiosum*. Bewdley: Worcestershire. Available online: <http://www.rareoldprints.com/p/722> (accessed on 28 December 2021). Copyright Status: Public Domain.⁵⁸

5. Current Archaeology of Rock-Cut Buildings

A Contribution by Edmund R. Simons, MSt, IHBC, FRGS, FSA

The current archaeological project titled "Rock-cut Buildings of the English Midlands" is a preliminary attempt to identify and assemble a corpus of rock-cut buildings that will eventually extend throughout the UK.⁵⁹ (Although the present project focuses on the Midlands cluster of these buildings, important outliers exist in almost every corner of the country.) These rock-cut buildings are not natural caves; almost all those considered in this project are entirely artificial structures, generally cut into soft sandstones, limestones, or tufa. A few such sites were occupied as dwellings as recently as the 1960s, and many are still in use as sheds, cellars, and outbuildings. Despite some very limited antiquarian interest during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁶⁰ and despite the vast date range and the huge number of these structures, with over 400 in the Midlands alone, they have

previously been studied only in isolation. This ongoing project attempts to begin to rectify this situation by regarding these buildings as a type and creating a draft typology to develop, test, and apply techniques to analyze the negative stratigraphy, to understand the archaeology of voids, and to develop techniques for analyzing and phasing of rock-cut buildings. It is the first attempt to understand how, when, and why these structures were built, how they were used, and how they change over time—that is, to understand them in the same way we would understand any other building type.

The early results of studying these buildings as a type rather than individually have been something of a surprise, as roughly half of the dwellings looked at in the principal study area (the Permian and Triassic sandstone counties of Worcestershire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire, and Nottinghamshire) can be credibly suggested to have a medieval or earlier origin.⁶¹ A good case can be made that some of the large multi-room rock-cut sites studied in the project were in use or partly constructed before c1200. These include (among others) the following major sites:

- Anchor Church (Derbyshire),
- Dale Abbey Hermitage (Derbyshire),
- Lenton Hermitage (Nottinghamshire),
- Bridgnorth Hermitage (Shropshire),
- Redstone Hermitage (Worcestershire),
- Blackstone Hermitage (Worcestershire),
- Southstone Hermitage (Worcestershire),
- Crachcliffe Hermitage (Derbyshire),
- Guy's Cliffe (Warwickshire).

Immediately apparent from this list is that all of these sites are known as or inferred to be religious hermitages. All have known or credibly demonstrate later medieval (twelfth to sixteenth century) activity that survives in the historic and archaeological records, or they contain diagnostic medieval features such as pointed arched doors, smoke hood fireplaces, quatrefoil windows, etc.⁶² Moreover, several of the entirely rock-cut sites have very strong evidence of prehistoric activity, with periodic use over very long periods of time.⁶³ Of particular interest when thinking of the “cave under an oak tree” in *The Wife's Lament* are the many structures with substantial standing remains that have documented histories and diagnostic features similar to those found in conventional early medieval English buildings. In what follows, I will first trace roughly what is known of the medieval history of British “cave” dwellings (broadly considered), beginning with the Celtic practice and then moving to the current study of English sites. This will lead to consideration of the probably early medieval English period sites and the possibility of their providing a context for the poet's imagining of a “cave under an oak tree” in *The Wife's Lament*.

The use of caves in Britain as places of sanctuary, exile, reflection, and solitude, and simply as habitation, goes far back in antiquity. As elsewhere in the world, many British caves have been a focus of spirituality and ritual for millennia; they include Paleolithic burials, Bronze Age ritual use, and Iron Age and Roman shrines. The sites are numerous, and many of the earlier ones are well-understood.⁶⁴ What is less understood, and has been comparatively neglected in archaeological study despite considerable historical evidence, is how this ancient ritual use of cave sites crossed over from a broadly pagan context into revised use in the Christian era.

There does exist, however, contemporary and later historical evidence for use of caves in post-Roman Britain and Ireland. This documentary evidence almost always relates to religious figures, many of whom were later to become saints or were recognized as such in their lifetimes. In “Saintly Associations with Caves in Ireland from the Early Medieval Period (AD 400–1169) through to Recent Times”, Marion Dowd describes how, during the early medieval and medieval periods, the prehistoric human usage of caves as funerary sites shifted to encompass a wider variety of secular and religious uses. Piecing together local folklore, place names, and traditional Christian religious practices such as pilgrimages

celebrating local saints, Dowd hypothesizes how early medieval ascetics likely used caves (Dowd 2018, p. 125). The discomfort of these caves likely added to their appeal, as Irish monasticism “consciously followed the ascetic and meditative ideals of the desert fathers” (Fisher 2001, pp. 2–3). Early Christians highly regarded caves as suitable settings for solitary contemplation (Dowd 2018, p. 127), and numerous British saints are thought to have lived in caves.⁶⁵ For example, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede describes Saint Ninian, a British bishop who was responsible for bringing the Christian religion to the southern Picts (Colgrave and Mynors 1969, p. 223), and the anonymous eighth-century *Miracula Nymie Episcopi* tells how Saint Ninian lived “in a cave of horrible blackness” (MacQueen and MacQueen 2005, p. 101; cp. Levison 1950).

The cave was traditionally, therefore, part of the suite of places where a hermit could seek salvation, either as a solitary or as part of a community, and for some the very fact of a cave’s previous association with paganism was an attraction. Several saint’s lives include descriptions of the saint’s use of a cave, perhaps to escape supplicants, or as a Lenten hermitage. There are also many locations where the place name is evidence for an early cave-anchorite site, or where historical and folklore associations suggest a connection with a saint, although very few of these sites have been studied or excavated, so we know little or nothing of how, or even if, the saint that legend associates with such a site actually used it. Examples of known or suspected early cave dwellers in the British Isles are usually Celtic, with the majority of the earliest known or suspected saintly cave dwellings found in Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and Ireland. Persons dwelling in these sites include the important fourth- and fifth-century saints Ninian, Illtud, Samson, Kevin, and Patrick, as well as less well-remembered saints such as Melangell, Serf, and Gwyddafach. Caves long associated with these names are usually natural, small, and simple in the extreme, but they may have some rock-cut features or conventional walling.⁶⁶ Their nature suggests the search for solitude in wild places.⁶⁷ This geographic spread of “mystical” Celtic cave-dwelling must be balanced against the physical fact that many of the caves in Britain and Ireland lie in the north and west, where the geology and topography make cave dwelling possible.

It is clear that even as early as the fifth century the use of caves by both male and female Christian solitaries was a well-established practice, and Gildas himself refers to “caves and consolations of holy men” (Gildas 1978, p. 102). Already, however, the actual use of the cave is varied. A familiar pattern of use features a single divine originally seeking solitary prayer but accruing fame that attracts followers. These newcomers may dwell in the cave with the saint for a time, but lack of space (presumably) leads to the creation of a monastery nearby. Saint Melangell, a seventh-century female Welsh saint of supposedly noble Irish descent, is a good example of this pattern. She is associated from the eighteenth century with a rock shelter that bears her name and may be where she lived in solitude before the founding of the monastery.⁶⁸ Another variant is when an already established holy person with followers seeks periods of solitude or goes to live in a smaller and simpler community. Some such persons may have high-status religious standing or even be bishops, like Illtud, Samson, and Dubricius, all of whom are reputed to have taken periodic sabbaticals in caves.⁶⁹ As suggested above, for some, the lure of caves is their inhospitality and the difficulty of living within them. Cave dwellings like Saint Kevin’s Bed in Ireland are little more than person-sized shelves in the rock (in this case artificial), capable of keeping off the worst of the weather. In this case, mortification was the key to the choice of the site, but it must not be presumed that this was always the case. The simple convenience that a cave may have presented to a person wishing to live alone, or within a small community having a readymade building, may have often played just as much a role as the quest for mortification. There is a long-running concept, in some cases accurate, that earlier saints become identified as hermits in the twelfth century as a way of retroactively enhancing that saint’s reputation. In recent years, the work of Marian Dowd (2018) and John Blair (2006), among others, has substantially changed this picture to suggest that paucity of preconquest written evidence has hidden the true number of Celtic and early medieval English hermits.⁷⁰ The cave sites associated with the earliest

hermits often follow a similar pattern. They are almost all entirely natural and, although some have been enlarged or have been refurbished with stone walls or roofs, or even have rock-cut furniture, their capacity for enlargement is severely limited by the geology of the enclosing stone.

The archaeological project has identified a number of probable early medieval hermitages that are cut into the softer, more easily worked stones, such as the Permian and Triassic sandstones found throughout much of the English Midlands, as well as in parts of Cumbria, Southern Scotland, Northumbria, Sussex, and Dorset. These sandstones are generally poor in natural caves,⁷¹ so these wholly manmade rock-cut structures have not been a focus for cave archaeology or studied as a group before now.

Gaps in the chronology remain in these core territories of England, but (as mentioned above) notable early hermits such as Guthlac, Cuthbert, and Chad are all associated with subterranean living in semi-artificial sites, and there may well have been a continuation of the use, creation, and enlargement of rock-cut sites throughout the early medieval period. By the ninth century they were common enough that, as noted above, the Welsh Bishop Asser could describe Nottingham, with its many caves cut from sandstone and thus artificial rather than natural, as “Tig Guocobauc” (“City of Caves” in Welsh). A recent paper by the author suggests that Anchor Church (see Figures 2 and 3), a complex rock-cut site in Derbyshire, may be an almost intact hermitage of the same period and perhaps served as the temporary dwelling place of Saint Hardulph, a deposed king known to historians as Eardwulf of Northumbria (fl. 790–c. 830) (Simons 2021, “Anchor”). Another hermit, a brother of King Athelstan, is said to have retired to the already existing rock-cut hermitage at Bridgnorth (Shropshire) in the early tenth century, an association that may be supported by the rock-cut remains of an early Romanesque chapel with chancel arch of probable Saxon origin.⁷² Guy’s Cliffe in Warwickshire, associated with the legendary Guy of Warwick, is recorded as already existing by the 920s and was substantially enlarged over succeeding centuries (Clay 1914, p. 31). By the time *The Wife’s Lament* was written down in the tenth century, the concept of the use of caves for retreat and religious exile was very well-established throughout Britain. The practice was not only familiar from (and thus endorsed by) biblical texts and the lives of desert and continental saints, it had been known in Britain for several hundred years and was undergoing something of a revival.



Figure 2. Anchor Church, Derbyshire, is a probable early medieval hermitage adapted and used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but with little change to the fabric. Photograph E.R Simons.



Figure 3. The interior of Anchor Church (Derbyshire): Although thin internal rock walls have been partly removed, features such as tall narrow Romanesque doors and a debased pilaster relate to the initial construction of the structure. Photograph E.R Simons.

Those of us involved in the “Rock-cut Buildings” project are currently in the initial stages of understanding the physical remains of cave hermitages themselves, as the earliest features in a complex rock-cut structure can be difficult to define. By making use of a modified version of the archaeological analysis of traditional buildings, however, we are able to identify and define primary spaces and features. This is partly made possible by the preservational qualities of artificial caves, which, unlike conventional buildings, can survive for many centuries unless the cliff is entirely quarried away or completely collapses. Rock-cut buildings can be added to and altered, of course, but deep excavation is a dangerous and intimidating process, so an awareness of such danger by potential “improvers” may have aided the survival of primary features.

The construction dates of the Midland sites chosen for analysis range from the (possible) prehistoric to the 1840s. The earliest legible structures in the sequence are tiny cell-like rooms, sometimes incorporating an enlarged natural hollow or a cleft in the rock. Several sites, such as Guy’s Cliffe, Bridgnorth, Redstone Rock (see Figure 4), and Holy Austin Rock, include raised entrances accessed by ladder or steps; very small, narrow arched-headed doors and very low ceilings are typical features. At other sites we see similarly raised entrances, but with suites of tall irregular rooms above, and these often have slots for timber external walls on the cliff face, walls that later are usually replaced by stone.⁷³ These sites can be large, with identifiable chapels, cells, etc. Some remained in use until the Reformation, and they can be rich in later medieval features such as round chimneys, smoke hoods, large fireplaces, and pointed arches, but analysis of the sequence shows that these features were often inserted into older spaces. Early diagnostic features are few, but they include those details mentioned above at Anchor Church, with tall and narrow arches, tiny elevated arched windows, and simple pilaster heads of a type that appears to predate 1200. Several sites show distinctive triangular-headed niches, which, if found in a conventional building, would be dated as early medieval English with no debate.⁷⁴ Simple incised crosses and other graffiti of early medieval form appear at a number of sites. There is thus strong evidence to indicate that some of these very large hermitages may be of mid-to late Saxon date and may even have earlier origins.⁷⁵



Figure 4. Redstone Rock Hermitage. Redstone Rock Hermitage, Worcestershire, is a massive complex of caves comprising at least 10 main rooms and with a known later medieval history and features that suggest an early medieval origin. Photograph E.R Simons.

One of the largest and most complex hermitages, long a place of local pilgrimage and under investigation by the current project, lies at Guy's Cliffe just outside of Warwick. Possibly dating to the tenth century (with an association since the twelfth century with the legendary Guy of Warwick, hence its name), it is clear that the complex of buildings has grown up around an early cell that is partly excavated into a natural hollow in the rock. This primary cave is surrounded by numerous other rock-cut rooms and tunnels and topped with a fifteenth-century chapel. There has been much fifteenth- to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century work on the site, but the primary cell itself remains largely untouched, as do a great number of possibly early rock-cut rooms. This Guy's Cliffe site will soon be the subject of scientific investigation and excavation,⁷⁶ giving us an opportunity to examine, in far greater detail than has been done before, a rock-cut site ostensibly contemporary with *The Exeter Book*. The size of some of the case studies makes it possible that they had facilities for receiving guests and supplicants. Later records of hermitages with several buildings, including cells, oratory, workshops, and buildings or rooms to receive guests, suggest a permanent staff of servants and other monks or nuns.⁷⁷

In summary, the initial findings of the current project provide ample evidence for the existence of pre-conquest rock-cut hermitages that would have been familiar to Exeter's cosmopolitan and well-connected monks because of their value as destinations for quiet contemplation and potential royal patronage.⁷⁸ Several details in the *The Wife's Lament* chime with locations in the Midlands; for example, the concept of an "earth-hall" may imply that the material is more earthen than stone and is legible as a hall rather than a small irregular cave. The Wife also moves freely through her dwelling, which does not tally with the tiny single-entrance spaces of a reused barrow or chambered tomb like the one described in *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Colgrave [1956] 2007, pp. 93–95). In other words, the poem's description fits several of the probable near-contemporary rock-cut sites better than it does a natural cave or barrow. Perhaps tellingly, at least three sites on Kinver Edge, Holy Austin Rock, Nanny's Rock (see Figure 5), and Solcum Aylesbury, also have oak trees growing above caves that are positioned immediately under the defenses of hillforts reused in the sub-Roman period, and oaks similarly tower above Anchor Church, which sits near Viking fortifications.



Figure 5. Nanny's Rock, Kinver, Worcestershire, is a rock-cut site with early medieval features similar to a number of known or suspected hermitages. The site is made up of a suite of three large rooms along a cliff face and formerly accessed by a stair, with a small, detached cave to the north. Photograph E.R Simons.

It is plausible that the Wife's location is a former pagan site, whether we imagine her in a natural cave or a rock-cut structure. Some rock-cut buildings investigated in the project show pre-Christian usage or construction. If we assume her to be a lady of considerable social standing, abandonment in a natural cave seems improbable. In *Coastal Landscapes and Early Christianity in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria*, David Petts notes that since many hermitages were visible from areas connected with the monarchy, they were included in a network of royal protection and patronage, even if they were geographically isolated. High-status male and female guests were not only permitted to see and visit such locations but even inhabited them on occasion (Petts 2009, p. 88). John D. Niles posits that *The Exeter Book* poems serve in part as "a means of acculturating high-ranking members of Anglo-Saxon society to cenobitic ways of life" (Niles 2019, p. 13). In that case, it is likely that a tenth-century monastic poet would have been familiar with the concept of established cave hermitages as ideal locations for prayer and solitude. It is possible that the poet's inclusion of such a site was an effort to increase interest in eremitic living among high-status individuals at a time and place where hermitages functioned as a component of a broader cenobitic entity.

6. Conclusions (by the Author)

"Rock-cut", i.e., human-made, cave dwellings are not mentioned in books on early English archaeology and are absent from their indices for one clear reason: no indisputable archaeological proof exists that any extant rock-cut building known was created that long ago, no coin or brooch has been recovered, as yet, to give evidence of a likely date. The only documented record of an awareness of such buildings is Asser's Welsh name for

Nottingham, and the only archaeological evidence consists of some suggestive stylistic features at certain Midlands sites. Yet, it seems entirely plausible that the poet of *The Wife's Lament* adopted a cliffside hermitage, known in person or by hearsay, to evoke the image of a complex of rock-cut chambers where a young woman lived, lonely and perhaps furious, but safe.

The reuse of some of these buildings in modern times makes the point clearly that the Wife has not been sent to suffer in a hole beneath the roots of an oak tree. However miserable and furious she may be, if she has been sent to a rock-cut building like some of those described above, she is well-domiciled. The poet who placed her there in his imagination was clearly not concerned that the *eorðscraef* might be inappropriate lodging for a young lady of high rank, but he might nevertheless have been surprised at how such "caves" could be recovered for reuse a millennium or more later. For example, rock houses carved into Kinver Edge, a sandstone cliff near Stourbridge in the West Midlands, were inhabited until the mid-twentieth century, and some are now being restored to that period by the National Trust. According to the Trust, "The most famous are the homes at Holy Austin Rock, now restored and open to visitors" ([Kinver Edge and the Rock Houses n.d.](#)). These buildings are cozy and quite pleasant, with a functioning tearoom on the upper level. Another site, the "Rockhouse Retreat" in Worcestershire, provides a more startling example. The owner, claiming the building is medieval, rents its refurbished rooms to tourists for GBP 231–286 (USD 333–379) per night ([The Rockhouse Retreat 2021](#)). These two renovations demonstrate that rock-cut dwellings, when whitewashed and well furnished, could provide surprisingly luxurious accommodation, suitable as a safe house for a high-status wife in (imagined) pagan times, as a comfortable retreat for an exiled ninth-century king, or as an unusual holiday getaway for a wealthy modern tourist.

This essay regards as dated the idea that the husband in *The Wife's Lament* was "cruel" in sending the Wife of the poem to live in an *eorðscraef* under an *actreo*. Current archaeology suggests that she could have been comfortable and well looked after in such a site, most likely a spacious rock-cut building, perhaps like one in use at the time the poem was written that the ninth- or tenth-century poet relocated in imagination to a "pagan" time of long before, calling it a *herheard*.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ *The Wife's Lament* is one of nine so-called elegies in the Exeter Book as edited by Anne L. Klinck ([Klinck 1992](#)), with *The Wife's Lament* on pp. 93–94. The entire Exeter Book is edited by George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie ([The Exeter Book 1936](#))

with *The Wife's Lament* on pp. 210–11, and by Bernard James Muir (Muir 2000) with the poem's text in vol. 1, pp. 328–29 and commentary in vol. 2, pp. 664–67. R. L. Leslie edits the poem with useful commentary (Leslie 1961, introduction pp. 3–12, text pp. 47–48, notes pp. 53–58). R.D. Fulk added *The Wife's Lament* to his updated edition of John C. Pope's *Seven Old English Poems* making it *Eight Old English Poems* (Pope and Fulk 2000), with text on pp. 39–40 and discussion on pp. 120–28. Peter S. Baker includes the poem in his *Introduction to Old English* (Peter S. Baker 2012, pp. 207–10). The main editions I use in this essay are those by Leslie and Klinck, though I make reference to the others listed here. (Other introductory textbooks that include editions of the poem are not listed.)

2 Her gender is revealed by the feminine adjectives *geomorre* in line 1 and *minre sylfre* in line 2. Because the poet uses terminology associated with the *comitatus* (warband), some early commentators decided that the speaker was meant to be a man, one going so far as to delete the first two lines containing the “misleadingly” gendered adjectives: see Bambas (1963).

3 The following scholars have argued that because the Wife occupies an earthen dwelling (see part three of this essay), she must be dead and a revenant or speaking from the grave: Lench (1970); Tripp (1972); Johnson (1983); Semple (1998), and most recently Deskis (2020), although Deskis makes it clear that the imagery “does not require us to read the speaker in this way”, but it “allows us to do so” (p. 385, her emphasis). Leanne MacDonald (2015) claims that *The Wife's Lament* is a poem about a zombie”. The idea that the Wife's location is a grave is further promoted by a misunderstanding of the word “under” in the phrase *under actreo* at lines 28 and 36. “Under” in this sense is a British usage, as in the place name Boughton-under-Blean mentioned by Chaucer in line 3 of “The Prologue of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer 1986). This village is lower on the hillside than the Blean Forest, just as the Wife's cave is situated lower on the hillside than the oak tree. For a firm rejection of the dead-Wife reading, see Berit Åström (1999). In a different approach, A.N. Doane argues that the Wife is a disaffected pagan goddess (Doane 1966), an idea revived by Banishalmah and Mizher (2020), basing their argument on the poem in Richard Hamer's translation (Hamer 1970).

4 Complex scenarios that include two or more men have been proposed for the poem. In agreement with recent editors, I regard the terms *freond* and *hlaforð* as designating a single man beloved by the speaker. I will refer to him as her “husband”, though whether they are married or not is irrelevant to my argument.

5 Niles does not insist on his own preferred view: “The speaker of the poem thus emerges, in the end, as a figure to whom individual readers can have very different responses, all of them legitimate, depending on their personal world view and values” (Niles 2006, pp. 205–6; see also 202, “door open”).

6 While Niles prefers the possibility that the Wife curses her husband (“I am felicitous in the ‘curse’ reading” (Niles 2006, p. 208)), he does not insist on his own preferred view: “The speaker of the poem thus emerges, in the end, as a figure to whom individual readers can have very different responses, all of them legitimate, depending on their personal world view and values” (Niles 2006, pp. 205–6; see also 202, “door open”).

7 Klinck examines and evaluates the use of the word “elegies” (Klinck 1992, pp. 223–51).

8 See *Aeneid* 4: 393–96. I am using the edition by Clyde Pharr (Pharr 1964), but the numbers of the books and their lineation are standard. Niles has argued for Ovid's *Heroides* as an influence on the poem (Niles 2019, p. 170). It should be noted, however, that the *Aeneid* was a much-quoted text in early medieval England, as Michael Lapidge documents in *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Lapidge 2005, especially pp. 188–90); compare Lapidge's far scunter statistics concerning Ovid (Lapidge 2005, pp. 183, 323).

9 This essay in homage to J.D. Niles imitates the structure of his essay to which it replies, including his sidebar essay. While the sidebar essay within each longer essay can stand alone, each functions as an important part of the argument as a whole.

10 The most spectacular rock-cut architecture is in India and Cappadocia, but extensive buildings cut into rock exist in Malta, Slovenia, and elsewhere. Less known to those outside Australia is the currently inhabited rock-cut town of Coober Pedy in South Australia, and no doubt many other such dwellings exist throughout the world. These go unremarked for several reasons: a small cave shelter is literally less easy to spot than an equivalent small building on the open ground; the use of such buildings can slide easily between functions (dwelling place, storage, wine cave, etc.), and as living spaces cave-dwellings are readily associated with the poor and dispossessed, outlaws, and the supernatural. From the archaeological point of view, caves showing prehistoric occupation or ritual (such as art) are traditionally of major interest, medieval ones less so.

11 In a study of the noun *hearg* (*herg*, *herh* in the Northumbrian dialect), the archaeologist Sarah Semple says, “The OE term *hearg* is interpreted variously as ‘pagan temple’, ‘hilltop sanctuary’ and even ‘idol’. It is a rare survival in the English place-name record. When it can be identified, the place name is commonly considered to refer to a location of pre-Christian religious activity, specifically a pagan Anglo-Saxon temple” (Semple 2007, p. 364). The pagan Danes in *Beowulf* worship *æt hærgtrafum* (line 175), glossed “heathen temple” in *Klaeber's Beowulf* (Fulk et al. 2008, p. 391; but see the note on p. 128).

12 This is not a new idea; Christian W. M. Grein proposed it over a century ago (Grein 1865, p. 422) and Wentersdorf (1981) has constructed a long and well-supported argument for this reading.

13 Niles later modified that interpretation: “Since the phrase *earð niman* is used elsewhere in Old English to mean ‘to take up one's abode’, there is reason to take the phrase in that same sense here. The Wife's abode is then best viewed as a pagan *herh*, whatever difficulties may be involved in reconstructing the other details of her story” (Niles 2019, p. 237). As will be seen below, however, he retains the hostile husband view.

- 14 Baker says, “Editors do not agree on the interpretation of this line. *Herheard* is often glossed ‘dwelling in the woods’, but a *herh* (the more standard spelling is *hearth* or *hearg*) is a pagan shrine or sanctuary. [. . .] This edition retains the manuscript reading *herheard* in its obvious sense; the verse should be translated ‘take up residence in a pagan shrine’” (Peter S. Baker 2012, p. 208, n. 7).
- 15 Note, however, that the word *heard* (hard) can have positive meanings such as “firm”, “staunch”, or “resolute”.
- 16 For support in this reading, Klinck (1992, p. 181) refers to Nora Kershaw (1922, no page numbers cited) and W. S. MacKie (1925, pp. 91–93).
- 17 Leslie argues that the adverb *her* can alliterate, giving an example, in order to justify his emendation of *heard* to *eard* (Leslie 1961, p. 54), but the fact remains that his change weakens the alliteration.
- 18 Fulk points out that the initial h of *heard* is necessary for the alliteration; then he emends that word: “The reading selected for this text is based on a different assumption, that *heard* is a corruption of *heord*, more commonly spelled *heorod*, the chiefly Mercian equivalent of West Saxon *hired* ‘household’” (Pope and Fulk 2000, p. 125). Fulk’s editing of the poem conforms in principle to that of John C. Pope for the original seven poems of the book, by normalizing the text in order to allow students ease of access. Therefore his version of *The Wife’s Lament* will vary from editions following the original Exeter Book text more closely. Fulk explains his method on pages xi–xii.
- 19 For the alternation of g/h as in *hearg* and *herh*, see Campbell (1983, p. 446). Hilda Ellis Davidson proposed that *herh-os* on the right side of the Franks Casket means “pagan deity” (Davidson 1969, pp. 216–26). See also Sarah Semple’s archaeological study of the word *hearg* in place names (Semple 2007).
- 20 Later Niles changes his mind about this word, now accepting that *herheard* refers to a pagan sanctuary (Niles 2019, pp. 236–37), and this leads him to some interesting speculations that will be examined in part three of this essay. But he does not change his mind about the “hard-” hearted husband.
- 21 Inhabited caves and dugouts are often reused and enhanced from earlier natural cave or rock-cut structures. Such domiciles are the focus of part three of this essay.
- 22 An alternative suggestion in the same vein is that the husband has been outlawed by his own people for a violent act, perhaps like that committed by Beowulf’s father when he took refuge with Hrothgar (*Beowulf*, lines 459–72; see Hamer’s introduction to his translation, Hamer 1970, p. 71). Such outlawry was typically of a temporary duration, which could explain the verb *abidan* (await) in the final line of *The Wife’s Lament*. The Wife may be hoping for her husband to return after accomplishing either his mission or his outlawry—if he survives.
- 23 As Klinck says, the phrase *pissum londstede* at line 16b refers to “a place that may or may not be the husband’s own territory but is clearly alien to his wife” (Klinck 1992, p. 181). Her location in a friendless land not her own and the hostility toward her from her husband’s people suggests the Wife’s possible role as a “peaceweaver”. (For an excellent history and analysis of this term, see Peter S. Baker (2013, pp. 103–26)). As she grew up the young woman would have been trained in diplomacy and hall ceremonies with a view to being married into a neighboring kin-group, thus becoming a sort of hostage in an attempt to keep peace. For an argument about misuse of the practice, see Alaric Hall (2006, pp. 81–87). The standard exogamous marriage frequently did not end well, as Beowulf himself points out at lines 2039–41. Though the violent outcomes when peace-weaving fails are the ones we hear about (as in the stories of Freawaru and Hildeburh in *Beowulf*), sometimes the woman does succeed in accomplishing her task, as Wealhtheow does when she eases tensions in Heorot. For one recent argument among several disputing the old idea that Hrothulf will murder his cousin when the old king Hrothgar dies, see Osborn (2019).
- 24 “Off” is an interesting word here. Has the poet personally observed or experienced such repeated “seizures”? Grief spasms may be a symptom of ASAD (Adult Separation Anxiety Disorder), a mental disorder only recently recognized by the DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* 2013). In some cases ASAD represents a persistence or recurrence of the childhood-onset type. If the Wife was married exogamously in her early teens, as was often the case, her current symptoms may represent a recurrence of anxiety about that earlier separation from family and friends. In any case, she is “disabled” by her violently emotional response to her mandated lonely situation.
- 25 One may be seized “by” a sudden panic attack, but we would not be likely to say, in the active voice, “panic gripped me”. Thus the Wife speaking with today’s usage would have to express herself more fully: “Very often her feelings about my lord’s departure fiercely overwhelmed me”. Such differences from ours in early English ideas about mental states are examined by, among others, Malcolm R. Godden (1985), distinguishing between the classical concept of a unified inner self and the vernacular idea of a mind separable from the inner self; Britt Mize (2008), on the mind as enclosure and container; and Leslie Lockett (2011), building on these discussions combined with ideas from modern psychiatry, such as Hinton and Hinton (2002), “Panic Disorder, Somatization, and the New Cross-Cultural Psychiatry”. None of these scholars discusses the distress appearing as an outside agency (somatization) in some Old English poems, though Lockett touches on the concept of somatization itself (pp. 172–77). The Wife’s panic attacks lead to her reflective contrast between her lonely situation “here” and the happier one of the couple living above ground. Throughout the poem it is the situation resulting from her husband’s leaving that causes her anxiety (panic attacks) and makes her increasingly furious.
- 26 As has long been noted, the implicit chronology of *The Wife’s Lament* is not matched by the order in which actions are mentioned in the poem.

27 The word “curse”, like “oath”, is a multivalent term. Note that this mini-essay and its title allude to John D. Niles’ mini-essay and its title, “Toward an Anthropological Theory of Cursing” in *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Text* (Niles 2006, p. 187).

28 I believe that this sentence is intentionally ambiguous as the Wanderer (now a wise man) moves toward the ambiguous *fastness* at the poem’s conclusion. The meaning of *fastness* includes both the fortress ruled by the [L]ord he has longed for and a secure situation of “stability”, thereby combining the secular and spiritual longing into a single image of the Great Hall of God (Martin Luther’s “Mighty Fortress of our Lord”). This doubling of secular and religious meanings builds up toward the end of *The Wanderer*, adding spiritual depth to the poem. There is nothing like it in *The Wife’s Lament* with its focus on passionate love-longing.

29 The explanation in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Braun 2017) begins: “An indexical is, roughly speaking, a linguistic expression whose reference can shift from context to context. For example, the indexical ‘you’ may refer to one person in one context and to another person in another context. Other paradigmatic examples of words that function as indexicals are *I, here, today, yesterday, he, she, and that*. Two speakers who utter a single sentence that contains an indexical may be saying different things”.

30 The suggested scenario where the husband in *The Wife’s Lament* is constrained by an oath taken in the past adds temporal interest to the poem as it places the speaking Wife conceptually between the two “times” of her husband’s oath: his “then” in making it, her “now” in lamenting the result for her (her loneliness), and his “later” (but soon, presumably) enactment of it, what he has gone over the seas to do.

31 Agamben (2011) with the discussion following that publication is an example of this interest.

32 Technically, a promissory oath is sworn publicly to an authority whereas a vow may be a personal promise made in private, although the “marriage vow”, sworn to one’s partner, is made publicly. It is doubtful that poets writing in Old English made such careful distinctions in their use of the related words *ad* (oath), *beot* (pledge), and *treow* (troth or vow). In the poetry all three terms appear to refer to a witnessed and irrevocable personal guarantee, so the oath-taker should consider carefully where it might lead before speaking such a promise in public (as in *beot spriced*, in the passage quoted below).

33 Reference to *lof* as a worthy aim for a warrior is a structurally interesting element in *Beowulf*, coming at the beginning of the poem (*lof-dædum*, line 24), the middle (*lof*, line 1536), and the very end (*lof-georn*, line 3182).

34 See Magennis (1996, p. 119).

35 For an early argument that “the situation of the poem is that the wife of a lord has been made a prisoner in an oak grove at the instigation of her husband” because he has become hostile toward her, see Greenfield (1989b, p. 149).

36 This “noble custom” is specific to the warband. R.D. Fulk says of the word *indryhten*, “This adjective is probably formed from *in-dryhtu*, the prefix indicating a quality inherent in a noble *dryht*” (Pope and Fulk 2000, p. 193); in his glossary under *dryhten* he defines *dryht* as “army or host” (Pope and Fulk 2000, p. 176).

37 In a thoughtful discussion in *Heroic Identity in Beowulf* Scott Gwara (2008, pp. 173–77), questions the standard view that Hengest broke the oath that was meant to quell violence at Finnsburh. He makes a clever argument that is well worth consideration.

38 R. D. Fulk explains the element *collen-* as the “pp [past participle] of a lost verb *cwellan, *swell, spring up, grow big*” (Pope and Fulk 2000, p. 173).

39 Andy Orchard traces a series of other words in *The Wanderer* that have both secular and Christian meanings (Orchard 2002, pp. 1–26). He finds that the ambiguity creates a structural development from the passive wanderer (*eardstapa*) waiting for *ar* (help, favor, grace, mercy, etc.) to the contemplator actively seeking it at line 115 (here translated “grace”). Orchard does not comment on the irony of these two stances as they proceed “from the selfish and worldly preoccupation with a lost past life to a selfless and unworldly concern for a timeless and future afterlife” (p. 12). But he does caution the reader that the ambiguities in the opening lines are *not completely*, as Greenfield argues, “artfully resolved at the poem’s close” (p. 8, quoting Greenfield 1989a, p. 134). Even the phrase “Father in heaven” (*fæder on heofonum*, line 115), Orchard says, is “far from unambiguous”, and he then lists a series of “key words and phrases” in the final lines that have both secular and Christian meanings, sometimes having secular meanings earlier within the poem itself: *beorn, eorl, mid elne, treowe, ar, even frofre* (Orchard 2002, pp. 6–7). The one word this fine close reader omits from this list is *bot* at line 113. In note 18 he translates this word “remedy”, without comment.

40 The meanings of *torn* at line 112 and *bote* at line 113 are significant here. In their glossaries under *torn*, Leslie has “grief;” Bliss and Dunning have “resentment”, then “anger on p. 59; Klinck has “remedy, amelioration”. In their glossaries under *bot*, Leslie has “remedy”; Bliss and Dunning have “remedy”: Klinck has “remedy, amelioration”. For an acceptable meaning I would translate lines 112b–113: “[a warrior] must never too quickly reveal his anger from his breast unless he first knows the remedy” (i.e., how to ameliorate the situation, how to swing it his way, probably through violence). In this sentence the poet is not telling this (imagined) warrior to “stand down” or to “make peace”, but to work out how to get payback most effectively and at least cost.

41 This is primarily Bjork’s interpretation in “*Sundur æt Rune*”, with which others concur. It should be noted that the Old English word *bot* meaning “remedy” occurs mainly in a medical sense, but so does our modern word “remedy” that is similarly used in other contexts.

42 Stanley claims that this half-line is “a difficult intrusion”, and he then offers some suggestions made by others: “Gollancz (*The Exeter Book* 1895, p. 303) has ‘unless he experience adversity’, which uses adversity in a sense of ‘opposition’. My ‘contrariety’ is nearer to the ‘enmity’ of *fæhpe witan*, but no ‘feud’ is mentioned, and, if interpreted literally, ‘feud, enmity’ would divert from

the paternal teaching. Shippey's 'unless he knows he has an enemy' (Shippey 1976, p. 51) and DOE's 'unless he perceives enmity' (s.v. *fæhþ*, sense 1. 'feud, state of feuding, enmity, hostility; hostile act') would be diversions from the teaching of the poem" (Stanley 2018, p. 286).

43 Leonard Neidorf translates this precept: "A wise man seldom enjoys himself without worrying; just as a fool rarely mixes enjoyment with concern about his future, unless he knows he has an enemy [*nefne he fæhþe wite*]. A sensible man must be careful with his words, and think things over in his heart, not be loud and noisy" (Neidorf 2021, p. 45). "Such advice is inherently aristocratic", says Neidorf, and arguing for a secular environment for the poem, he suggests that the speaker is imagined "as neither a monk nor a personified abstraction", as others have maintained, "but as an elderly Anglo-Saxon aristocrat endeavoring to persuade his ambitious son that piety is compatible with prosperity" (Neidorf 2021, p. 34 (abstract)). Whatever way one translates this precept, the sequence of ideas may refer to a cautionary formula to be heeded by a warrior when there is *fæhþe* in the air. Following that significant word, the *wisfæst hæle* of "Precepts" (line 57b) may remind one of the man *snottor on mode* ("wise in his heart") who sits apart in secret thought in line 111 of *The Wanderer*, or of the silent, pondering husband in *The Wife's Lament*.
44 This is my translation of the *Rad* stanza in M. Halsall (1981, p. 86).

45 Dennis M. Kratz (1980) argues that the peculiar final scene of the poem is intended as mockery.

46 The alternative proposal mentioned above, that the husband has already performed the *mordor* and is exiled "over the waters" because of that deed, does not fit the context so well as the idea that he is oath-bound to take action abroad from his homeland.

47 See further Sinan Oruc (2018).

48 The Wife may not have had a servant as devoted as those who looked after Guthlac, especially the monk Beccel who came to live with him during his last days (Colgrave [1956] 2007, pp. 152–61), but she makes no mention of any deprivation except the comfort of her husband and friends.

49 Niles amplifies his idea of a pre-Christian setting in *God's Exiles* (Niles 2019, pp. 236–37).

50 For reuse of structures in the early English landscape, see, among others, Williams (1997, pp. 1–32); Semple (2013, *passim*); and Hartmann (2019, pp. 230–64). In "Barrow Agency: Reading Landscape in Felix's *Vita Guthlaci*", Jan-Peer Hartmann (2022) argues that the *Vita Guthlaci* illustrates how literature may transform perceptions of the landscape through the audience's expectation of genre. Felix initially describes Guthlac and his Fenland (a real person in a real location) partly on the basis of hagiographies believed to be known to the saint and the *Vita's* audience, but he brings in new elements as the text progresses. The Guthlac who results is no triumphant colonizer of a primeval wilderness; instead, he both influences and is shaped by the landscape in a symbiotic process of becoming. As an assemblage of variously interacting natural and cultural forces, Guthlac's Fenland is a physical and mental construct, as is the Wife's *herheard* according to this essay's argument, and this location also participates in the "process of becoming" that shapes the Wife in the poem.

51 Unlike the dwelling called a souterrain, dug down into the ground as the name implies and known mainly in Celtic areas of Britain (not in the poet's early medieval England), the rock-cut cave houses clustered in the Midlands are carved horizontally into the vertical face of a cliff. The fact that Battles and Garner do not consider this type of building along with the others that they examine demonstrates how new the cliff-face rock-cut building is to the typology of earthen dwellings. Moreover, attention is only now being directed to dating these buildings, so even if these two scholars had known about them, it is unlikely they would have considered them within an early medieval context.

52 Edward B. Irving, Jr., imagining the little fox with her kits as representing a woman in a cave, claims that the riddle is "about people driven to act like animals" and "dragging their children, hands clapped over screaming mouths, out of the way of some marauder" (Irving 1994, p. 204). I consider the subject of this riddle to be a realistically imagined animal whose actions under duress bear analogy with human ones, in particular those attacked by Vikings in the ninth-century. Hardly the panic-stricken mother that Irving imagines, the vixen first delays, then effects the "remedy" (*bot*) with a counter-attack. Harried by the enemy she describes as an unwanted "guest" in line 10 and identifies as a *wælhweþ* (a terrier who "goes to ground" after prey) in line 23, she takes the precaution of digging an exit route from her burrow to lead her kits to safety, and only then does she return to set viciously upon her attacker.

53 For dates see Colgrave's introduction to *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Colgrave [1956] 2007).

54 On the basis of the poet's extensive description, Niles is able to identify with some certainty the way we are meant to understand the nature of the fire coming out of that human-built "cave" (see Niles 2012, pp. 25–36). Niles' description of what Beowulf sees as he looks into the dragon's abode is a model of the information that can be retrieved from a poem about an imagined place, a site based on, he says, "a megalithic chambered tomb (or long barrow) of the kind built in many parts of Europe during what we now know as the Neolithic era, with this building activity culminating around the years 2300–2200 BC" (27).

55 Aeneas objects strongly to Dido's interpretation of their night together in the cave (*Aeneid* 4: 338–39), and he points out that it is not his choice to go to Italy (*Aeneid* 4: 361). He never stops loving her deeply (see *Aeneid* 4: 393–95).

56 According to a Historic Environment Records (HER) database reported by the City Archaeologist Scott Lomax at Nottingham City (Lomax 2021).

57 For presentation here, the print has been cropped in order to emphasize the cave entrance at the end of the winding road. The inscription along the top reads, in its entirety, "View of Blackston Cave, River Severn & Ld. Herberts house near Bewdley, Sep. 23." (Stukeley and Kirkall 1721).

- 58 According to the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, the rock has become unstable, making the cave no longer safe to view; therefore access to Blackstone Farm Fields is now forbidden. (See [The Devil's Spittleful and Blackstone Farm Fields n.d.](#)). Most visitors to the area will therefore be unaware of the existence of this cave house.
- 59 The project is generously sponsored by Professor Richard Skinner of Houston, Texas, USA.
- 60 See in particular [Stukeley and Kirkall \(1721\)](#). Although primarily interested in prehistory, Stukeley visited many varied sites and drew three important medieval rock-cut buildings. Other antiquarian or archaeological interest has been sparse and concentrated on individual sites rather than looking at the rich corpus of surviving buildings as a whole.
- 61 Some of these sites have long-established histories and are widely accepted as medieval. Oddly, though, almost identical sites, with telling place names and even similarly datable diagnostic features, have in the past, due to unfamiliarity with similar structures, been thought to be of the eighteenth century or later.
- 62 For example, Thomas Habington (c1560–1647) described Redstone Rock ([Habington 1899](#), pp. 17–18, n. 2; [Jones 2019](#), pp. 204–5); John Leland (c1503–1552) described Guy's Cliffe ([Leland 1907](#), pp. 45–46; [Jones 2019](#), p. 204); Bridgnorth Hermitage, which retains a debased Romanesque chancel arch, received a royal land grant in the tenth century ([Bradley 1920](#), p. 205) and was surveyed by John Leland in the sixteenth century ([Eyton 1857](#), pp. 352–54); Crachcliffe Hermitage is home to a later medieval crucifix carved into a simple rock shelter; a fourteenth-century liturgical plate found at Southstone Rock is now lost but was sketched in the eighteenth century ([Noake 1851](#), p. 174); The fifteenth-century *Chronicle of Dale Abbey*, which contains fragments of a thirteenth-century version, details the origin and construction of that site's hermitage ([Ward 1891](#), pp. 14–18); Anchor Church is first mentioned in c1270 ([Cameron \[1959\] 1993](#)).
- 63 These sites are of such potential archaeological sensitivity and fragility that I am not naming them at this time. After full analysis and the implementation of mitigation measures they will be named in future work. The evidence for prehistoric construction is compelling and has been shared with selected notable scholars of that era. The evidence includes structures cut with stone tools and antler picks as well as finds and features of a particularly early date.
- 64 Conventional cave sites have been the focus of investigation for several centuries, and there is a wealth of high-quality speleological work from throughout the UK. For example, Kent's Cave in Devon contains animal bones, flint tools, and a radiocarbon-dated Neanderthal human jawbone that dates to around 40,000 years ago, making it one of the oldest known modern humans in Europe ([Schulting et al. 2015](#)). The teeth and bones of 21 individuals discovered in Aveline's Hole in Somerset are believed to be between 10,200 and 10,400 years old, making it the earliest scientifically dated cemetery in Britain and one of Europe's largest early Mesolithic burial sites ([Schulung and Wysock 2002](#), p. 255). In another example, Creswell Crags, a limestone ravine on the boundary of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, has Ice Age rock art ([Pettitt et al. 2007](#)) and an extensive collection of post-medieval apotropaic symbols believed to ward off evil and misfortune ([Paul Baker 2019](#)).
- 65 For the English Saints Hardulph, Guy of Warwick, Athelardson, Saint Wulsi of Evesham, and Saint Constantine of Stratclyde see [Clay \(1914\)](#), pp. 47, 49, 53, 54, 73). For Saints Ninian of Whithorn, Columba, Ciaran, Molaise, Samson of Dol, Cuthbert, Guthlac, and Illtud see [Ahrnson \(2018\)](#), p. 98). For Irish Saints Patrick, Fiacc, Colman, Brendan, and Moling see [Dowd \(2018\)](#), p. 118). For Irish Saints Finbar, Kevin, and Mocuda see [Dowd \(2018\)](#), p. 119) and for Irish Saints Leo, Scaithin, and Colmán see [Dowd \(2018\)](#), p. 120).
- 66 Many examples show signs of having been enlarged, or having structures built within them. Excavated examples such as St Ninian's Cave (Whithorn) included free-standing carved crosses as well as incised wall crosses, domestic material and walls. Other far less well known examples such as Saint Bertram's Cave (Staffordshire) have been excavated numerous times and have sealed datable deposits which are broadly contemporary with the life of the saint.
- 67 The differences between the Roman and native churches have long been the subject of debate and investigation. What is becoming more apparent however is continuity of both populations and practice, particularly in Mercia where the vast majority of rock-cut sites may be found. Christian sub-kingdoms such as Pengwern and the Hwicce are absorbed into an expanding Mercia, retaining churches and administrative units with almost no evidence of a pagan period (apart from a few furnished burials). There is strong evidence that practices such as eremitism in these areas continued and were absorbed during the changes led by Augustine and others in the early seventh century. By later in the seventh century Chad, Cuthbert and other noted figures are regularly retreating to hermitages. See [Higham \(2008\)](#) for discussions of the evidence for the survival of Christianity in what later became the western part of Mercia.
- 68 See [Cartwright \(2002\)](#), pp. 6–7; [Pryce \(1994\)](#), pp. 23–24; and [Archaeologia Cambrensis \(1847\)](#), p. 138). The narrow rock shelter reached by stone steps and commonly known as Gwely Melangell (bed of Melangell) is not mentioned until the late eighteenth century ([Pennant 1810](#), p. 361). The cave is partly collapsed, but it is similar to "beds" of saints in Wales and Ireland (e.g., Gwely Gwyddfarch in Powys and Saint Kevin's Bed, Glendalough, Ireland) which may have acted as places of retreat and penance and have been remembered in place names. G.G. Evans suggests that the story of Melangell is "a fine example of imaginative folklore" ([Evans 1984](#), p. 16), but this does not explain the similarity of the site to other examples, or the presence of such an artificial shelter in a hill with no other activity apart from quarrying.
- 69 From their earliest appearance, manifestations of anchorensis are broad and complex. After c1200 the identification of these sites becomes refined into association with hermits, anchorites proper, solitaries, etc. In this paper the terms are used interchangeably.
- 70 See in particular [Blair \(2006\)](#), pp. 216–21).

- ⁷¹ With a few exceptions such as the glacio-fluvial caves of Creswell Crags and a number of natural overhangs and shallow caves elsewhere, the natural caves are created by water action.
- ⁷² John Leland visited the site between 1536 and 1542 and left a description of the hermitage along with the first description suggesting its early medieval English origin. While David Horowitz has expressed doubts about the particular royal inhabitant (Horowitz 2009), the Alfredian date together with the fabric and archaeology of the site support the traditional interpretation more generally.
- ⁷³ These include the main terrace at Bridgnorth, with large chambers alongside a partly rock-cut chapel, at least part of the two massive hall-like suites of rock-cut rooms above the River Severn at Redstone Rock (Worcestershire), and Anchor Church with its oratory and three roomed cave house.
- ⁷⁴ Examples of these include Redstone Rock in Worcestershire and Saint Catherine’s Hill, Guildford. I am indebted to Archaeology South East for providing pictures of this recently discovered site.
- ⁷⁵ Dating is a problem, but targeted excavation and techniques such as OSL dating can reveal something of the sequence of events. OSL, dating by “optically stimulated luminescence”, measures the time between the deposit of luminescent material such as quartz until it is covered from light by further sediment. Detailed explanations of this technique are available online.
- ⁷⁶ Importantly, the sandstone at this particular site contains calcites which may be datable. Unlike most sites, there is also the potential of sealed deposits beneath rammed earth and stone paved floors. The description of the language of the inscription in the cave as “Mercian semi-runic” has met with considerable scepticism.
- ⁷⁷ Hermitages constructed in the traditional early medieval English design might include several structures, “Among Godrick of Throckenholt’s many buildings were an animal corral, an oratory, a residence, and a ‘consulting chamber’ for guests” (Simons 2021, “Anchor”, p. 358; citing Licence 2011, p. 99).
- ⁷⁸ Niles suggests that monks may have compiled and possibly authored poems of the *Exeter Book*; see his discussion in *God’s Exiles* (Niles 2019, pp. 5–7, 21, 33–39). If this were the case, it does not necessarily follow that those poems were composed at Exeter or that the book was copied there. Moreover, even if the poet of *The Wife’s Lament* had direct personal knowledge of some rock-cut dwellings in the Midlands (a possibility suggested but not argued here), that would not mean that the poet was a native Mercian.

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Article

Old English Enigmatic Poems and Their Reception in Early Scholarship and Supernatural Fiction

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Abstract: The scholarly reception history of the Old English riddles and adjacent “enigmatic poems” of the Exeter Book reveals a long process of creating intelligibility and order out of a complicated and obscure manuscript context. Understanding this history of reception allows us to see the influence of Old English poetry on modern creative medievalism, including the unexpected influence of medieval “enigmatic” poetry on the modern genre of supernatural fiction. Specifically, it is argued that the scholarly reception of folios 122v–123v of the Exeter Anthology was instrumental in inspiring one of the acknowledged classic ghost stories of the twentieth century, M.R. James’s “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad”.

Keywords: Old English literature; reception history; medievalism; Exeter Book; riddles; *The Husband’s Message*; Montague Rhodes James (1862–1936); ghost stories; horror genre; supernatural fiction

Our eye drawn to so many of his other landmark publications, it would be easy to overlook the great significance of Jack Niles’s contributions to the reception history of Old English literature.¹ This research has left a truly invaluable legacy, however, for to sharpen perceptions of a field’s past is to release present possibilities. A long view is always useful, and it is all too easy to discount what has come before. In fact, as David Matthews has emphasized in his work on the history of medievalism, older medieval studies are always in peril of falling back into abject antiquarian oblivion, so that yesterday’s serious scholarship is perceived today to be mere fantasy, as fanciful as fiction—except in a genre very few want to read.² When Jack encounters even the most dated, outmoded scholarship, however, it inevitably inspires in him not derision, but rather respectful consideration and reevaluation, and often, even, reinvention. Cast-off ideas summon something new.

Indeed, one paradox of medievalism—the inspiration of the Middle Ages in all forms of art and thought”, in the words of Leslie J. Workman—is that the past must first be invented before it can influence.³ Such invention is always ongoing and accumulating its own history, as Bill Herbert’s modern Exeter-style riddle suggests: “I do not have a body/ yet I grow constantly”.⁴ Nearly any medieval text we might name has gathered much on its postmedieval path, beginning often with a narrow escape from the scrapheap. In the best of cases, the contents of a manuscript will be preserved, catalogued, edited, emended, titled, attributed, translated, annotated, and entombed beneath dozens of uneven layers of academic commentary. As a rule, only after many such scholarly interventions does inspiration of an avowedly “creative” kind arrive.

Yet many studies in medievalism neglect the significance of these contexts, even sometimes in cases where the painstaking work of medieval studies and the fantastical creativity of medievalism are obviously inseparable. The most obvious such case is the fantasy fiction of the Oxford professor J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973), but there are many others we might name. In comparison to Tolkien, the “antiquarian” ghost stories of the Cambridge provost M.R. James (1862–1936) have received far less attention from medievalists, though his tales have been very influential, especially in their use of artful reticence to arouse a response in the reader—that “pleasing terror” for which his tales are so celebrated.⁵ Tolkien’s debt to medieval riddling is well known, especially in the “Riddles in the Dark”

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chapter of *The Hobbit*, and the great popularity of that book ensures that many who read the *Exeter Riddles* today, whether in the original or in translation, do so with an understanding of the genre shaped in part by the sensibilities of Tolkien.⁶ Yet Tolkien's creative riddling is itself best understood as in dialogue with medieval sources, not as fixed objects, but as informed by particular and always-shifting scholarly contexts.⁷ The same holds for M.R. James and his most famous and influential story, "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad", which here I will argue likely owes much overlooked inspiration to the "enigmatic poems" found in folios 122v–123v of the Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501), the sections containing what today we call *Riddle 30b*, *Riddle 60*, and *The Husband's Message*.⁸ In James's day though, this stretch of the manuscript tended to be read quite differently than at present, and to best assess his ghostly excavation of Old English enigmatic poetry, we must pay close attention to that past as well.

1. Early Scholarship: Obscurities Made Intelligible

It might not seem worth pointing out that what we name the *Exeter Riddles*, by definition and design, are *enigmatic*. From their earliest scholarly reception, though, a very elastic sense of that word has tended to blend with other sources of obscurity and unintelligibility quite distinct from the strategies of obfuscation and misdirection which are characteristic of their apparent genre. In fact, in the early days of their recovery, it was not even clear that a unified and coherent collection of Old English riddles was what scholars had on their hands. The deeper riddle was how to make basic sense out of the baffling last sections of the manuscript. In a book published in 1826, John Josias Conybeare pointed to the only—and therefore exceptional—Latin text found in the Exeter Book as representative of the challenge: "The obscurity attaching itself to much of this part of the MS. will be rendered most conspicuous by the following specimen of corrupt Latinity, which appears absolutely unintelligible".⁹ Sixteen years later, in his 1842 *editio princeps* of the Exeter Book, Benjamin Thorpe offers a tortuous apology that echoes the key words of Conybeare's statement: "Of the 'Riddles' I regret to say that, from the obscurity naturally to be looked for in such compositions, arising partly from inadequate knowledge of the tongue, and partly from the manifest inaccuracies of the text, my translations, or rather my attempts at translation, though the best I can offer, are frequently almost, and sometimes, I fear, quite, as unintelligible as the originals".¹⁰ For the rest of the century and beyond, variations on this formula were to appear time and again, with many evasive sources of unintelligibility and obscurity expressed.¹¹ This is not surprising. *The Exeter Riddles* have long offered a readymade metaphor for the challenge of their own study.

Rendering that multidimensional obscurity intelligible has been the work of more than two centuries, in order to arrive at our dominant contemporary image of the *Exeter Riddles* as a delimited collection of nearly a hundred enigmas complete with consensus solutions, identifiable links to multiple riddling traditions, generic and sectional differentiation from other poems in the manuscript, and even, possibly, a structural and thematic coherence mappable onto "encyclopedic principles of order".¹² Today, this orderly vision of the *Exeter Riddles* is often encountered as a tidy package of numbered texts isolated from most of the other poems of the Exeter Anthology. Niles has recently offered much illumination by simply reminding readers to take seriously the connections these texts have with the rest of the manuscript in a network of "horizontal" relationships.¹³ Those links are not limited to poems that also produce what Niles calls "bewilderment effects"—such as *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Husband's Message*—though these are texts that especially blur the line between riddles proper and poems that are merely bewildering.¹⁴ Even sectional divisions in the Exeter Book remain in doubt, as evidenced by the various competing systems for numbering the individual *Riddles*.¹⁵ In fact, in the name of toppling artificially imposed barriers, some have recently endorsed the idea of removing numeration altogether and replacing the imposed title formula [*Riddle* + number] with something more individual for each poem. In my view, the practical wisdom of such a measure is questionable, but

propositions such as this serve as an important reminder that what we make of the Exeter anthology of poetry is not a given—and not unchangeable over time.¹⁶

In fact, the earliest postmedieval scholars to study these texts do not seem to be primarily interested in them either as poems or as riddles. It is rather for their use of runes that they are included as specimen examples in the second volume of George Hickes's treasury, or *Thesaurus*, of northern European medieval materials, published between 1703 and 1705.¹⁷ Hickes's work, groundbreaking for early medieval studies, was accomplished under conditions of considerable personal distress and in collaboration with scholars such as the autodidactic marvel Humfrey Wanley (1672–1726), whose descriptive catalogue of medieval manuscripts (*Catalogus Historico-Criticus*) included in the *Thesaurus* was foundational to the particular field M.R. James was later to make his own.¹⁸ Hickes's *Thesaurus* has left a tremendous legacy to Old English studies, for were it not for his transcriptions, many treasures would have been lost to fire or other destructive forces. The Old English *Rune Poem*, for example, is preserved only in this treasury, where there is much evident interest in runes in the work's abundance of facsimiles and tables of variant characters drawn from a range of epigraphical contexts. Compiled in an "antiquarian" era predating the cordoning off of strict disciplinary bounds, Hickes's *Thesaurus* freely gathers together its medieval materials, so that sections devoted to language and literature share space with studies of numismatics and manuscript illumination. To a degree not found in much later scholarship, considerable emphasis in the *Thesaurus* is placed on reproducing textual layout and letter forms with precision as they appear in their original inscriptional contexts, whether on parchment, coins, or the surface of objects that "speak for themselves" such as the Alfred Jewel or the Sutton Brooch, both of whose first-person inscriptions are carefully reproduced as facsimile illustrations within the *Thesaurus*.¹⁹

Likewise presented in facsimile are nearly all those *Exeter Riddles* that feature runic elements. These texts are not, however, to be found in the first volume of the *Thesaurus*, where Hickes provided what amounts to an anthology of Old English poetry in tandem with a grammar of the language.²⁰ Some poetry from the Exeter Book (in particular, the *Maxims*²¹) is included there alongside other poems, but no riddles appear until the beginning of the second volume, not as supplements to the study of Old English language and literature, but rather as specimen illustrations accompanying an expanded version of Runolfur Jónsson's 1651 *Icelandic Grammar*. The specimens selected—including portions of *Riddles* 19, 24, 36, 64, and 75–76, alongside the runic sections of *The Ascension* and *Juliana* (later to be identified as the "signatures" of Cynewulf)—are clearly chosen for their use of runes.²² The fact that these Old English riddles are represented in the incongruous context of an Icelandic grammar is not so surprising when we consider that scholars of this era generally assumed that runes were the "ur-script" of an ancestral Scandinavian language, one cloaked, from their perspective, in an "aura of quasi-pagan mystery", as Niles puts it.²³ These riddles, then, may have seemed to Hickes an especially good illustration because they used runes in such a bewildering way.

It is, in fact, difficult to separate Hickes's interest in mysterious runic characters from his fascination with the voices he found speaking in the Exeter Book, as "not only the letters but also the voices are truly runic, that is mystical and occult".²⁴ The "runic" quality of these texts, then, is defined not just by their use of runes, but also by the enigmatic first-person voices of speakers who declare themselves either to be (*lc eom*) or to have seen (*lc seah*) something wonderful. All five of Hickes's riddle specimens are headed by a large capitalized initial "Ic", pronouns that are rendered even more prominent by being extracted from their original context and stacked together in facsimile. In an accompanying commentary, Hickes summarizes each of these puzzles, but does not attempt to solve them. For example, he explains that the text known today as *Riddle 24* "also describes as a monster some thing or person, whose name is enigmatically set out in the runes".²⁵ Yet although he describes each of his runic examples as operating *ænigmaticè*, "enigmatically", Hickes nevertheless does not appear to regard these texts as individual riddles so much as

the components of a larger piece of religious poetry organized around a single enigmatic speaker: “But he who describes all these things, especially the sights of so many of them so mystically, is the *dramatis persona*, who also says many things about herself”.²⁶ Hickes goes on to stitch together a sequence of additional *Ic*-statements drawn from other *Exeter Riddles*, including the opening few lines of *Riddles* 6, 8, 11, 15, 17, and 27. Presented with the puzzle of how such incongruities might be merged to apply to a single speaker, Hickes declares the *dramatis persona* to be evidently *Ecclesia*, the best candidate to embody such an amazing convocation of voices.²⁷

Scholars today make distinctions among these speakers, so that Hickes’s *Ecclesia* doing battle for Christ is taken to be the Sun, while Hickes’s *Ecclesia* suffering persecution becomes a badger (or perhaps a fox or porcupine) harried in her den. But guessing the identity of these “riddle creatures” only began more than a century after the publication of the *Thesaurus*. Before this guessing game could begin, scholars had to first demarcate this section of the Exeter Book as a stand-alone collection, comprising a number of individually distinct and solvable riddles with answers as likely to be mundane as mystical. Hickes’s presentation does not encourage such recognition or supply complete texts for evaluation. The first sporadic solving efforts would need to be undertaken by those few who could access the Exeter manuscript in person. This John Josias Conybeare (1779–1824) was able to do in his relatively short tenure as the Rawlinsonian Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University, during which time he engaged with the Exeter Book in unprecedented depth. After his untimely death in 1824, Conybeare’s brother, William Daniel (1787–1857), himself a pioneering scholar (in the also emerging field of geological sciences and the fossil record), took up the task of continuing and completing for publication these researches, which appeared as *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* in 1826. The *Illustrations* is a landmark publication for a number of reasons, including its groundbreaking technical insights into the nature of Old English meter.²⁸ Yet, simply in their presentation of texts and translations, the brothers Conybeare made a profound contribution to the field, making many Old English poems accessible to contemporary readers for the first time.

The scholarly debate around Old English riddle solutions also effectively begins with the *Illustrations*. Texts and translations for *Riddles* 3, 32, 46, and 66 are offered, along with proposed solutions of “sun”, “waggon or cart”, “Adam, Eve, two of their sons and one daughter”, and “the omnipresent power of the Deity”.²⁹ Two of these four answers still enjoy at least some favor today, but more notable here is the Conybeares’ early recognition of the miscellaneous character of the *Exeter Riddles*: the riddle of the homely cart standing side by side the spiritual enigma of divine power. This mixing of the everyday with the mysterious has subsequently come to be seen as a central feature of Old English riddles, a standout characteristic of the genre. Indeed, the *Illustrations* is a work particularly interested in the matter of genre classification, beginning with an “Arranged Catalogue” of extant poetry divided into classes, including a catch-all category of obscure texts containing, among others, *Widsith* (here referred to as “the Song of the Traveller”), the *Rune Poem*, the dialogues of *Solomon and Saturn*, and the “Ænigmatical Poems” of the Exeter Book, referred to in discussion as both “ænigmata” and “riddles of the olden time”.³⁰ This may be the earliest instance of classifying these texts with the vernacular terms “riddles”, and they are declared to be “so extremely obscure that they might suffice to damp the perseverance of a Saxon (Edipus)”.³¹ Yet here, the thesis of an *Ecclesia* speaker is not wholly abandoned (Conybeare notes, “Others of the ænigmata appear to relate to the Christian Church, according to the opinion of Hickes”), so that the resolution of the *Exeter Riddles* into a singular generic category (let alone a unified, numbered collection) is not quite, at this point, fully affected.

This step was not taken until the *editio princeps* of the Exeter Book prepared by Benjamin Thorpe in 1842. In a field still dominated by the enthusiasm of untrained amateurs, Thorpe was a philologically trained professional scholar, and his numerous expertly produced editions have proven a rich legacy. Many of the editorial conventions he established still endure, and his standard of care and accuracy are relatively high for this era.³² For

instance, although his representation of the runes of the *Exeter Riddles* were not able to match the high fidelity of facsimile possible in Hickes's *Thesaurus*, Thorpe nevertheless faithfully reproduced the basic runic characters as he found them, rather than transcribing them into Latin equivalents, as we find in so many successive studies and editions. His translations—the first in modern English for the lion's share of the Exeter Book, including most of the *Riddles*—were predictably flawed but still invaluable for offering access to many new readers. Thorpe's sense of decorum, however, leads him to leave several of the more sexually charged riddles untranslated, including the notorious onion, key, dough, and churn riddles, along with the puzzle of the cock and hen (which combines elements of cryptography with barnyard copulation). He does translate a few riddles with similar, if slightly less obvious implications, though for one of these, a rare interpretive endnote seems calculated to stamp out any such unseemly possibilities, as noted for *Riddle 21*: "By this, no doubt, a plough is intended".³³

This same endnote may also offer an indication of the difficulties Thorpe faced in making ordered sense out of the contents of the Exeter Book. The endnote refers to the plough riddle as "Riddle XXI", but the reference is quite plainly to the passage he has numbered "Riddle XXII" in the body of the text.³⁴ The most obvious explanation for this mismatch is that Thorpe changed his mind at some point in his process, shifting his numbering to accommodate, as a riddle, the text known today as *Wulf and Eadwacer*, which he presents here as "Riddle I". This first "riddle" is also left untranslated, though in this instance, not for reasons of decorum, but simply because it is too difficult: "Of this I can make no sense", he notes in the commentary (one of Thorpe's virtues as an editor was to admit when he was stumped).³⁵ The most sense Thorpe could make of this text's obscurity was to assign it the genre category of *riddle*, as that designation alone provided intelligibility of a kind. Moreover, simply adding it to the count also had the effect of rounding off the first group of riddles found in the Exeter Book to an even sixty. Thorpe indeed is more faithful to manuscript sequence than most subsequent editors, so that he begins the numbering anew with the next group (which also receives the numbering I-III) and yet again with a third group beginning I-III and so on. While this makes for a potential confusion of reference, it does have the effect of packaging the riddles as three neat sets of 60 (I-LX), 3 (I-III), and 30 (I-XXX). After all, medieval Latin enigmata are typically arranged in series with a round count. To create comparable order in the *Exeter Riddles*, Thorpe is obliged to identify as stand-alone riddles certain sections of text ambiguously presented in the Exeter Book (including what is now commonly interpreted as the opening of *The Husband's Message*, as I will discuss further below). One might even say Thorpe's editorial dilemma here is reminiscent of the plough's neighbor, *Riddle 22*, with its sixty star-like riders—a puzzle of counting in its own right. However one strains, though, it is difficult to split or lump the collection in such a way as to produce the ultimate magic number of one hundred. Yet Thorpe's split arrangement of the *Riddles* at least offers the honesty of reflecting their discontinuous distribution in the manuscript.

Thorpe's edition put scholars in a much better position to respond to the *Exeter Riddles* with plausible solutions. The plough answer of *Riddle 21* was Thorpe's only guess and indeed, at that point, only a handful of other answers had reached print.³⁶ But now the gates opened to a fertile new field of speculation, and many scholars have since lent a hand. Yet it was a single solver, Franz Dietrich, who was responsible for an impressive share of the first harvest. In two articles published in 1859 and 1865, Dietrich drew on Latin parallels, medieval material culture, and his own exceptional wit to solve nearly all of the *Exeter Riddles*. Well over half of the answers he offered have stood the test of time.³⁷ To anyone familiar with the collection this informal list will speak for itself: storm, bell, swan, nightingale, cuckoo, leather, horn, badger, anchor, sword, bow, jay, onion, mead, moon and sun, bagpipes, iceberg, rake, mail-coat, bellows, bull-calf, creation, cock and hen, soul and body, key, bookworm, bookcase, battling ram, web and loom, swallows, well, chalice, reed, shirt, borer, beaker, another onion, another riddle of creation, ice, spear, oyster, ore, water, fish and river, one-eyed seller of garlic, inkhorn, another key, and another inkhorn.

Though not every answer Dietrich offered has found favor, by the end of the nineteenth century his legacy was clear. In 1912 A.J. Wyatt wondered at the way Dietrich “by an effort of sympathetic imagination” had been able “to see and think with the eyes and mind of an eighth-century Englishman”.³⁸

But Dietrich also made a contribution to perhaps the most distracting turn in the history of *Exeter Riddles* scholarship: the tortured chain of reasoning that led so many to assign them to Cynewulf as their wandering author. In 1840, two years prior to Thorpe’s edition of the Exeter Book, John Mitchell Kemble (1807–1857) had established that the runes of *The Ascension* and *Juliana* (both poems that appear in the Exeter Book) were to be deciphered to reveal the “signature” of Cynewulf.³⁹ These passages, as I mention above, had long been closely associated with the runic Exeter Riddles, appearing side-by-side with them in composite facsimile in Hickeys’s *Thesaurus*. In 1857, however, the German scholar Heinrich Leo took the association several unsupported steps further by “solving” Thorpe’s first “Riddle I” (*Wulf and Eadwacer*) as a highly contrived charade-like puzzle concealing another Cynewulfian signature.⁴⁰ In the opening enigma of the collection, then, Cynewulf was apparently claiming authorship over all the *Exeter Riddles*. The idea caught on and was swiftly linked to Dietrich’s 1859 proposal to solve the last riddle of the collection as “wandering singer” (*fahrende sänger*).⁴¹

Thus, Cynewulf the Wandering Singer of Riddles was born in the scholarly imagination and was soon to be encountered roaming through popular accounts such as Stopford A. Brooke’s *The History of Early English Literature* (1892), where we are invited to:

... imagine a wandering singer coming through the untilled woodland to one of the villages, to sing his songs, and to pass on to another. [. . .] Then, our wandering singer (whom I will now call Cynewulf, because all the illustrations of village life which I shall quote are from his riddles), listening, heard the rushing of the water past the wattled weirs built out from its sides for the fishing, and saw the bridge of wood that crossed it, and perhaps mills by its side that ground the corn of the settlement, and thinking of the millstone made it the subject of his fifth riddle.⁴²

Brooke’s Cynewulf is a forerunner of the Romantics and the *Exeter Riddles* are the exuberant nature poetry he wrote in his youth (composed at the age of about twenty-five, before some unknown downturn in fortune darkened his subject matter and genre preferences⁴³). In reference to what he takes as the badger of *Riddle 15*, for instance, Brooke notes:

It is in these short poems—in this sympathetic treatment of the beasts of the wood, as afterwards of the birds; in this transference to them of human passions and of the interest awakened by their suffering and pleasure—that the English poetry of animals begins. [. . .] His sympathy is even more than that of Shakspeare in his outside description of the horse or the hare. The note is rather the note of Burns and Coleridge [. . .].⁴⁴

Brooke goes further than most to extract from the *Exeter Riddles* not only a name but a local habitation (“he was well acquainted with a storm-lashed coast”⁴⁵) and indeed a full personality and turbulent biography. Not all accounts were quite so fanciful, but the Cynewulfian theory of riddle authorship enjoyed widespread acceptance in the scholarly world, retaining adherents decades after its premises were dismantled.⁴⁶

But by the turn of the twentieth century the focus had decisively shifted away from attempts to detect secret Cynewulfian messages, settling instead on many of the concerns that continue to absorb scholars today. Certain aspects of the *Riddles* have proved to be of perennial interest. For instance, early scholars’ fascination with “runic voices” is matched by much recent discussion of the *Exeter Riddles*’ affordance of first-person subjectivity to speaking objects, work that is informed by a wave of theoretical interest in all things nonhuman.⁴⁷ Such approaches frequently link the voice-bearing *Riddles* to other enigmatic first-person inscriptions on early medieval artifacts in a way rather in keeping with the

textured, multidisciplinary approach we find in the *Thesaurus*.⁴⁸ Of course the contemporary “object-oriented” turn in the field has been applied to a wide range of early medieval materials, but the *Exeter Riddles* have provided both a key example and a guiding metaphor. Indeed, James Paz lays out the scope of his larger study of *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Material Culture* (2017) in just such riddling terms:

The argument that I draw from these areas of focus is that, although things are endowed with voices in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture, they also have an agency apart from humans. This agency is linked to: one, their enigmatic resistance, their refusal to submit to human ways of knowing and categorising the world; and, two, their ability to gather, to draw together, other kinds of things, to create assemblages in which human and nonhuman forces combine. Anglo-Saxon things speak yet they can be stubbornly silent. They can communicate with humans but, like riddles, they also elude, defy, withdraw, from us.⁴⁹

A century and a decade earlier, Mary Bentinck Smith (1864–1921)—at the time, Director of Studies and Lecturer in Modern Languages at Girton College—would also highlight riddling encounters with the nonhuman, which she links to paganism and a more sinister sense of English landscape:

“in [the Old English riddlers’] hands inanimate objects become endowed with life and personality; the powers of nature become objects of worship such as they were in olden times; they describe the scenery of their own country, the fen, the river, and the sea, the horror of the untrodden forest [. . .]”⁵⁰

Smith’s discussion here appeared in her contribution to the first volume of the multi-authored *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1907), where discussions of the *Exeter Riddles* are to be found in four separately authored chapters. Smith also remarks on the “peculiarly English tone and character of the riddles”, and her colleague at Cambridge, M.R. James, would seem to agree, writing in his directly subsequent chapter: “That this form of wit-sharpening made a great appeal to the mind of our ancestors is amply evident from many passages in the Old English literature”.⁵¹ Taken together, the contributions to this *Cambridge History* provide a useful snapshot of the consensus of academic opinion at the beginning of the twentieth century, just prior to the publication of the first separate scholarly editions of the *Exeter Riddles* by Frederick Tupper, Jr. in 1910 and A.J. Wyatt in 1912. Indeed, with Tupper’s edition in particular—still of considerable scholarly value today—one might well say that the *Exeter Riddles* as we know them had arrived.

But arrivals always come from somewhere. Early scholarship, I would like to suggest, not only rendered these texts intelligible, but also enhanced their dark resonance. An expert would be alive to such associations, even when obsolete, contradictory, or incongruous. For instance, turn-of-the-century readers versed in the scholarly dark matter surrounding the *Exeter Riddles* would be aware that Hickeys’s occult runic voice—so suitable for illustrating the shadowy character of an *Icelandic Grammar*—is also that of a quintessentially English genre, rooted in national sensibilities and a familiar landscape. Both qualities coincide, along with other shadowy companions. As an heir to the “antiquarian” past, the scholar and storyteller M.R. James would be intimately familiar with the way the past grows as it gathers itself. We can turn now to his enigmatic ghosts.

2. M.R. James and the Voice of the Whistle

Ghost Stories of an Antiquary appeared in 1904, its publication motivated in part to benefit a friend, James McBryde (1874–1904), who was to provide illustrations. When the young artist died of appendicitis before completing this work, James’s small volume of stories became a memorial, dedicated to McBryde and “to all those who at various

times have listened to them”.⁵² As the book’s title hints, nonacademic imaginative work of this kind was something of a departure for a scholar like James, who had by that time achieved an outstanding reputation in the scholarly world. His publisher Edward Arnold sought to trade on that reputation in advertisements: “Those who know the extensive and miscellaneous character of Dr. James’s researches in various fields of learning will not be surprised to find him appearing as the author of a volume of ‘Ghost Stories’”.⁵³ The “antiquarian” accomplishments of James are difficult to summarize succinctly—the subject matter of his major publications ranged from biblical apocrypha, to hagiography, to art history, to church architecture.⁵⁴ His most profound legacy, however, was the contribution of the many descriptive catalogues of medieval manuscripts he produced over his lifetime. In many ways, in fact, James was a professional heir to Humfrey Wanley and the *Catalogus Historico-Criticus* of Hicke’s *Thesaurus*.⁵⁵ In his early thirties, James had been declared by Lord Acton (1832–1902), “in knowledge of MSS [. . .] already third or fourth in Europe”.⁵⁶ By the time James began publishing ghost stories, his academic reputation was more than well established. In 1903, he had been elected Fellow of the newly-formed British Academy (numbering among only the second cohort of inductees to be so honored) and received a congratulatory letter of “genuine satisfaction and delight” from Israel Gollancz, his one-time colleague at Cambridge (who had, incidentally, published the first volume of an edition and translation of the Exeter Book in 1895).⁵⁷ And so, although James was not a specialist in the field of Old English poetry, his professional work was certainly engaged with the study of early medieval books, Old English manuscripts, and related artifacts.⁵⁸ He would not need to look far afield for sources of antiquarian inspiration.

As is the case for many of his tales, “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad” was first written for a Christmastime audience of intimate friends and colleagues in James’s residential rooms at King’s College. These gatherings were festive, all-male affairs, where eerie ghost-story telling often gave way to raucous horseplay: “after which those played animal grab who did not mind having their clothes torn to pieces & their hands nailscored” (in one witness account of such a game of “animal grab”, we read of a participant thrashing about on the floor, with “Monty James’s long fingers grasping at his vitals”).⁵⁹ We can imagine something of this atmosphere on the occasion of the probable first reading of “Oh, Whistle” in December of 1903, which was attended by guests including, among several others, McBryde and A.C. Benson (Benson was one of a number of regular attendees who would take to writing his own ghost stories influenced by the Jamesian style). In a diary entry describing this reading, “Oh, Whistle” is characterized by Benson as “one of [James’s] medieval ghost stories”, notable for the excellence of its “local colour”.⁶⁰

The local color of this ghost story includes several medieval elements, including the darkly suggestive setting of a ruined Templar preceptory on the windswept Suffolk coast, where the tale’s protagonist, the vacationing Professor Parkins, unearths in a medieval ruin a haunted whistle through which he ventures to blow a note—a sound carrying “a quality of infinite distance”.⁶¹ This act whistles up the wind and brings to the professor’s bedroom a terrifying visitor, which shoves its horrible face into Parkins’s own in a terrifying semblance of a kiss. It was, after all, an unwise investigation from the beginning, for Parkins is no scholar of antiquities. His area of expertise is “ontography”, a term which James clearly invented in order to spoof what he saw as preposterous and arrogant fields of modern academic study.⁶² Curiously, and with no little irony, this same term has now been directly borrowed from James’s tale by the very object-oriented theorists I discuss above who have been so influential on the recent study of the *Exeter Riddles* and those poems’ representation of nonhuman being, agency, and voice.⁶³

At any rate, with its richly atmospheric quality of fright, this story of Parkins’s encounter with the alien spirit of a haunted whistle has often been regarded as James’s finest, where he was able to “refine the essence of the ghost story” into “something altogether stranger and more frightening” than what had come before.⁶⁴ It is a story we might well point to as a turning point in James’s approach to the genre. The celebrated subtlety of the

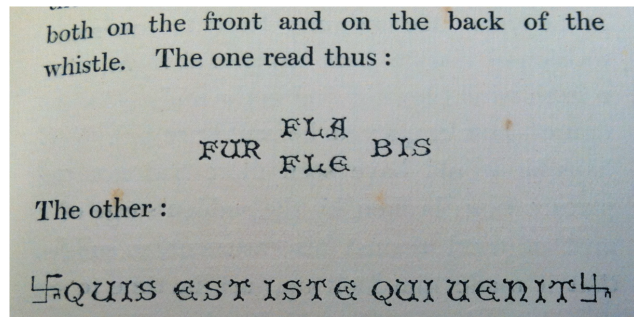
Jamesian horror—rising with an undefined sense of unease and punctuated by “the very highest calibre of jolt”—is not quite as present in his earlier efforts, such as “The Ash-Tree” (first read in 1899, with witch-trials and spiders the size of kittens) and “Count Magnus” (first read in 1902, with its grisly gothic horrors and a sarcophagus sealed with “massive steel padlocks”). Before “Oh, Whistle”, arguably, James’s frights are rather more raw, bloody, and what James might call “blatant”.⁶⁵ James came to recognize restraint as essential to the genre and his foundational example has become a model for those participating in the “antiquarian” ghostly tradition ever since: “Reticence may be an elderly doctrine to preach”, he wrote in 1930, “yet from the artistic point of view I am sure it is a sound one. Reticence conduces to effect, blatancy ruins it, and there is much blatancy in a lot of recent stories”.⁶⁶ The story of the haunted whistle is certainly reticent in its implications, so much so that aficionados online continue to speculate on the backstory of a whistle unearthed in a ruin. How did it get there? Most would concede that James was right to leave us in the dark on this point. Yet despite all the ink shed—some of it mine—annotating and explicating this extensively anthologized tale, one particularly promising medieval source of inspiration has gone unnoticed.⁶⁷ Readers familiar with the Exeter Book—and in particular, the Old English enigmatic poem *The Husband’s Message*—may now be ready to guess where this discussion is headed.

The basic parallel of a speaking object declaring its beckoning message by the sea is only a beginning of what potentially links these texts, and the discussion below will point out many further particulars. To begin, however, note that *The Husband’s Message* centers around an enigmatically inscribed object arriving on the coast from a faraway land (*eom nu her cumen*), reminding its recipient of an *eald gebeot*, “old pledge”, and summoning her to a lover who eagerly awaits her coming *on wenum*, “in expectation”. The title of James’s story alone might remind us of this situation, though its exact wording is borrowed from another source: the refrain of a 1793 song by Robert Burns:

O Whistle, and I’ll come to you, my lad;
 O whistle, and I’ll come to you, my lad;
 Tho’ father, and mither and a’ should gae mad,
 O whistle, and I’ll come to you, my lad.⁶⁸

The larger contexts into which this line is imported has led many to suspect a subtext of gender anxiety or same-sex desire in James’s tale, a story which, after all climaxes, with a bedsheeted specter pressing its face suggestively into that of Parkins.⁶⁹ Such scenarios of terrifying intimacy were to become a hallmark of the Jamesian approach to horror writing, especially in the tales he wrote after “Oh, Whistle”. Take, for example, “A School Story”, composed in 1906 and published in his follow-up 1911 *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, which concludes with a haunted victim hauled off to the bottom of a well, embraced there eternally by a persecuting specter who had announced his imminent arrival with cryptic words: “*Si tu non veneris ad me, ego veniam ad te*”, “If you don’t come to me, I’ll come to you”.⁷⁰ In the case of Parkins, the professor’s scare is—at least on the surface—a punishment for his stuffy incuriosity and arrogance, though it can also be interpreted as a phobic manifestation of other sources of anxiety.

The more immediate cause of the haunting, however, is simply a failure to construe the meaning of the inscriptions found on the whistle, which are worth reproducing as they appeared in the first edition of *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*:



M.R. James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (London: Edward Arnold, 1904), p. 199.
 Photo by the author, from a copy of the first edition, Eton College Archives, Lq.4.06.

The meaning of this puzzle has long been disputed by Jamesians, partly because the uniquely bracketed swastika-like fylfot crosses flanking the second inscription were substituted out for the plain ones in James's *Collected Ghost Stories* (1931), as well as in all subsequent editions until very recently. To sum up a rather complicated situation, it is now clear that the bracketed arms of the second inscription were intended (confirmed by witness of James's holograph manuscript of the story) to provide a key to the riddle of the first inscription, so that *bis* is linked with two of the three other enigmatic syllables. Thus, the first inscription can be construed, "Fur, flabis, flebis", "O Thief, you will blow, you will weep", in what amounts to a compact (and sinister) synopsis of the story that is to unfold.⁷¹

Like "Oh, Whistle", "the Old English poem *The Husband's Message* centers around a riddic inscription with ambiguous characters to be rearranged and decoded. As Niles has noted, however, most modern editions of this Old English poem—especially those published subsequent to the early work of scholars like Hickes and Thorpe—have tended to efface and so suppress the ambiguity of the characters as they appear on the parchment of the Exeter Book by rendering them into plain Latin characters of S, R, EA, W, and D (or M). In the case of *The Husband's Message*, this de-"runification" has contributed additional confusion to the interpretive history of an already difficult text.⁷² A parallel situation arose with the fylfots of James's whistle inscription, which lost their brackets probably for similar reasons of printing practicality. The fact that both texts have proven vulnerable to such effacement is an unintentional coincidence, but not an insignificant one. As a scholar exceptionally immersed in the study of manuscripts and their great variability of form, James was keenly attuned to the unruly qualities of medieval textuality. The creation of his own whistle inscription with rune-like fylfots unsurprisingly reflects a sensitivity to the potential importance of spatial layout and ambiguous "runified" characters, features that prove resistant to modern reproduction.

The rest of the whistle inscription is transparent enough for even Parkins to translate, yet still offers a riddle-like challenge:

"I ought to be able to make it out", he thought; "but I suppose I am a little rusty in my Latin. When I come to think of it, I don't believe I even know the word for a whistle. The long one does seem simple enough. It ought to mean, 'Who is this who is coming?' Well, the best way to find out is evidently to whistle for him".⁷³

A curious detail here is Parkins's assumption that a medieval word for whistle might be relevant to construing the inscription. This suggests an awareness (whether we want to attribute that awareness primarily to Parkins or to James) of the penchant for medieval inscribed objects to name themselves, as does, for example, the Brussels Cross ("*Rod is min nama*", "Cross is my name") and a comb-case discovered in 1867 ("*kamb: kōpan: kiari: porfastr*", "Thorfast made a good comb").⁷⁴ Often such inscriptions take on the voice of

the object itself, as in the case of the ninth-century Alfred Jewel (“ÆLFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN”, “Alfred ordered me made”⁷⁵), or the Sutton Brooch (eleventh century) which, like James’s whistle, offers a warning to thieves:

AEDPEN ME AGE HYO DRIHTEN
DRIHTEN HINE APERIE DE ME HIRE ÆTFERIE
BUTON HYO ME SELLE HIRE AGENES PILLES

(Aedwen owns me, may the Lord own her. May the Lord curse him who takes me from her, unless she gives me of her own free will’).⁷⁶

It is this similarity of speaking objects that has led many scholars to link such inscriptions to the Old English riddling genre, which makes such effective use of prosopopoeia in first-person texts challenging solvers to “*saga hwæt ic hatte*”, or “say what I am called”.⁷⁷ Of course, the inscription on James’s whistle does not speak in the first person, but only enigmatically inquires, “*quis est iste qui uenit*”, “Who is this who is coming?” Yet, the disembodied voice of the object does manage to speak for itself in the title of the tale, detached and floating ominously on the epigraphical edges: “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You . . .”⁷⁸

This untethered voice, with its enigmatic relation to the runified whistle inscription, is a striking echo of what we find in *The Husband’s Message*. In the Old English poem, the voice bidding the beloved to come is evidently that of a wooden item (*treocyn*, line 2) speaking on behalf of its absent lord, but also presenting a more circumscribed message in the form of riddic runes. Whatever we take the literal object to be (a runestick, the mast of a ship, or some other tree-made thing⁷⁹), its postmedieval critical reception has revolved around the curiously disembodied and paradoxical quality of its speaking position (made even more obscure by burn damage to the Exeter manuscript), so that some readers have resorted to positing a split between the object and the separate voice of a human emissary delivering and providing a lengthy gloss for the inscribed object on-site.⁸⁰ Most readers, though, have more simply attributed the entire monologue to the voice of the runic object, yet this only heightens the oddly disjointed relationship between the message of the runes and the disembodied voice of the poem’s *treocyn* speaker. As Ralph W.V. Elliott explains it:

. . . the five runes [are] the actual message supposed to have been carved into the wood and sent to the wife. They may represent a secret cypher previously agreed upon by husband and wife; in any case, it is clear that we cannot be expected to regard the whole seventy lines of the poem as having been inscribed on a *runakefli*. If this assumption is correct the poem may properly be deemed an explanation of the terse runic message in greatly expanded form. This expansion allows the inclusion of the wood’s own history as well as the more detailed exposition of the actual situation of husband and wife and the message sent by the former.⁸¹

If some explanation along these lines is accepted, the poem is an unusually complex example of the “phenomenon of ‘voices within voices,’” notable as a curious feature of the Exeter Anthology.⁸² Of course, it is possible that such voices would not have been quite so bewildering to a medieval audience.⁸³ Yet as “eavesdroppers” into this cryptically intimate communication—via a split voice at once carved into solid wood and yet mysteriously disembodied—many modern readers have found *The Husband’s Message* to be exceptionally obscure, even by the standards of this manuscript.⁸⁴ And this quality may be what inspired James to create his own parallel object, complete with its own alien and disembodied voice that beckons menacingly from beyond.

But why has the Old English object become, for James, a whistle?⁸⁵ A ready answer is revealed when we look not only at the Exeter poems, but also at their scholarly reception. As I have noted, “Oh, Whistle” was probably written around December of 1903. The timing here may be significant, as the immediately preceding years saw the publication of an important and controversial article by F.A. Blackburn in 1900 (making a splash large enough to receive an endorsement from and a full paragraph of summary in the 1907 *Cambridge*

History).⁸⁶ Blackburn's article engaged anew with those questions of sectional division in the Exeter Book that had challenged scholars ever since Thorpe's edition. It might well have caught the attention of James, a scholar whose daily work involved cataloguing the individual items contained within medieval manuscripts.⁸⁷ Blackburn argued that the text of *The Husband's Message* was, in fact, best interpreted as part of the text that immediately preceded it: *Riddle 60* (or "Riddle 61", according to the numbering of the Thorpe edition used by Blackburn). As Blackburn noted, *Riddle 60* shares much in common with *The Husband's Message*, describing as it does, in the first person, the experiences of an enigmatic object that, having been shaped by human skill, allows for the conveyance of a secret message.⁸⁸ Blackburn thus contends that "when we read the whole as a single poem, we find a consecutiveness and unity so clear" that it would be quite natural to read them together as a single continuous composition. Indications otherwise in the Exeter Book were explained as scribal error. Together, the two sections should be taken to form a single text, to which Blackburn proposes we apply the title of "A Love-letter".⁸⁹

Blackburn's theory has not been wholly successful in persuading later editors to re-title and redraw the boundaries of these poems, but neither has it been altogether discarded.⁹⁰ Certainly, the texts share much in common. After all, like the speaker of *The Husband's Message*, the voice of *Riddle 60* has been often taken to be a runestick/staff, a solution favored, for instance, by Moritz Trautman in 1894, and by Henry Morley in 1888 (in accounting for its seaside origins, Morley described the object as specifically a "letter-beam cut from the stump of an old jetty").⁹¹ More widely adopted in 1903, though, was Dietrich's proposal of *rohrflöte* (*hwistle*), or "reed-pipe (whistle)", an identification largely based on its perceived similarity to Symphosius's "*Arundo*", or "reed" enigma.⁹² In fact, Frederick Morgan Padelford, in his book on *Old English Musical Terms* (1899), cited this very text to illustrate ancient English whistle nomenclature. If we were to imagine Parkins actually visiting a library to look up old words for whistles, Padelford's volume would be the most obvious place to start:

Pipe and *hwistle* were also the names of instruments of the flute order, for *tibicen* is glossed as *pipere oððe hwistlere*, and *auledus* as *reodpipere*. The reed-pipe is the subject of the sixty-first riddle.⁹³

Like Parkins's whistle, the speaking object of this riddle dwells alone, secured in a covert spot by the sea. The full *Riddle 60* reads:

Ic wæs be sonde, sæwealle neah,
æt merefaroþe minum gewunade
frumstapole fæst; fea ænig wæs
monna cynnes þæt minne þær
on anæde eard beheolde,
ac mec uhtna gehwam yð sio brune
lagufæðme beleolc. lyt ic wende
þæt ic ær oþþe sið æfre sceolde
ofer meodu[drincende] muðleas sprecan,
wordum wrixlan. þæt is wundres dæl,
on sefan searolic þa þe swylc ne conn,
hu mec seaxes ord 7 seo swiþre hond,
eorles ingeþonc 7 ord somod,
þingum geþydan, þæt ic wiþ þe sceolde
for unc anum twam ærendspræce
abeodan bealdlice, swa hit beorna ma
uncre wordcwidas widdor ne mænden.

[My home was on the beach near the sea-shore;/Beside the ocean's brim I dwelt,
fast fixed/In my first abode. Few of mankind there were/That there beheld my
home in the solitude, /But every morn the brown wave encircled me/With its
watery embrace./Little weened I then that I should ever, earlier or later,/Though
mouthless, speak among the mead-drinkers/And utter words. A great marvel
it is,/Strange in the mind that knoweth it not,/How the point of the knife and
the right hand,/The thought of a man, and his blade therewith,/Shaped me with
skill, that boldly I might/So deliver a message to thee/In the presence of us two
alone/that to other men our talk/May not make it more widely known.]⁹⁴

The central conceit here is the riddling motif of “mouthless” speech, and many have found in this text a clear reference to writing, whether in the form of runes inscribed on a slip of wood, or as penmanship accomplished with a sharpened reed. The paradoxes of written and spoken language are a well-studied theme of Exeter riddling, where the whispering quality of all writing often overlaps with playful games of runic concealment.⁹⁵ *Riddle 60* seems in tune with that theme, yet the clue of speaking among mead-drinkers is a point in favor of a musical instrument. An elegant way around this impasse, as Niles has established, comes when we “answer the riddles in their own tongue”, so that the single Old English word *hreed* can encapsulate the protean identity of the reed—a cylindrical creature that can “speak” both as pen and as whistle.⁹⁶

Early solvers, however, felt compelled to make the case for “reed whistle” by way of an alternative explanation to account for the sense of secret communication we find at the end of the riddle. In the lively imagination of Stopford Brooke (1892), the theme of silent speech becomes clandestine romance, an intense intimacy conveyed by the sound of the whistling. But Brooke’s real interest lies in the way the theme merges with the English landscape in the riddle:

It tells of a desert place near the shore, traversed by a channel up which the tide flowed, and where the reeds grew which were made into the *Reed-Flute*, which is the answer to the riddle. I translate the whole. The picture, at the end, of the lover talking in music to his sweetheart, music that none understood but she, is full of human feeling, but the point on which I dwell is the scenery. It is that of a settlement where only a few scattered huts stood amid the desolate marsh.⁹⁷

The secret notes of the reed-flute, of course, easily mingle with the beckoning message of *The Husband’s Message*, once these texts are merged by Blackburn. In James’s hands, at any rate, the scene turns to horror, and countless critics have emphasized the atmospheric brilliance of the tale, set in the seaside resort town of Burnstow, a lightly disguised version of Felixstowe on the Suffolk coast.⁹⁸ James’s word-painting in the tale is indeed lovely:

Bleak and solemn was the view on which he took a last look before starting homeward. A faint yellow light in the west showed the links, on which a few figures moving towards the club-house were still visible, the squat martello tower, the lights of Aldsey village, the pale ribbon of sands intersected at intervals by black wooden groynes, the dim and murmuring sea.

Such “local colour” noted by Benson at the tale’s first reading has subsequently been analyzed time and again in terms of its “agoraphobic sea horizons;” “the cumulative forces of the eerie that animate the East Anglian landscape;” the way it evokes “the windswept mystery of the barren unknown”⁹⁹ Such characterizations are in no way to be dismissed; James’s fiction is certainly rooted in an English landscape he personally experienced and found deeply evocative, but it is also informed by his engagements with medieval studies, and here the sense of the enigmatic looms large. Even the “shape of a rather indistinct personage”, the “bobbing black object” conjured on the shoreline by the whistle, behaves quite like an unresolved riddle creature, declaring its own incongruous form for the solver’s contemplation: “a little flicker of something light-coloured moving to and fro with great

swiftness and irregularity. Rapidly growing larger, it, too, declared itself as a figure in pale, fluttering draperies, ill-defined".¹⁰⁰

The sense of enigmatic intimacy we find in both *Riddle 60* and *The Husband's Message* finds its analogues, too, in the celebrated culmination of James's tale, as the whistle-summoned horror arrives in the loosely wrapped, sinuous form of a bedsheeted figure gliding across the bedroom to press in upon Parkins in his state of "horrid perplexity". The climax brings a "face of crumpled linen" that is "thrust close into his own".¹⁰¹ It might be worth comparing this specter with yet another Exeter riddle, the one that, in fact, immediately precedes Blackburn's "A Love-letter". As Blackburn argues, *Riddle 30b* is also likely a creature of wood, yet its duplication here (*Riddle 30a* is found earlier in the Exeter Book) seems to rule out the possibility that it, too, might be properly joined to what follows. Blackburn, in fact, argues that its repetition in this part of the manuscript can be explained as another error, this time a mistaken attempt to join text that does not belong to "A Love-letter". If this is a scribal error, then it might also be a productive one in James's medievalist ghost story, for the opening of *Riddle 30b* is very reminiscent of the flexuous creature conjured by the whistle, particularly if we look to Blackburn's emended text:

ic eom licbysig, lace mid winde
w[unden mid wuldre we]dre gesomnad
[I am agile of body, I sport with the wind. I am clothed with beauty, a comrade of the storm].¹⁰²

Readers familiar with *Riddle 30b* will notice Blackburn has emended MS "ligbysig" ("flame-busy", likely reflecting the capacity of wood to burn) with "licbysig", "agile of body" (a reading in which Blackburn ultimately followed Thorpe, who translated the half-line as "I am a busybody").¹⁰³ James's whistle ghost is also quite agile:

It would stop, raise arms, bow itself toward the sand, then run stooping across the beach to the water-edge and back again; and then, rising upright, once more continue its course forward at a speed that was startling and terrifying.¹⁰⁴

Such uncanny movements match the bewildering effects of *Riddle 30b*: "þon ic mec on-hæbbe/hi onhnigað to me/modgum miltsum" ("when I rise up, before me bow/The proud with reverence").¹⁰⁵ Proud men also kiss the creature of *Riddle 30b*, a fate the arrogant Parkins nearly suffers before the amorphous, wind-sporting horror collapses into "a tumbled heap of bed-clothes".¹⁰⁶

It is true that James's tale bears only a superficial resemblance to *The Husband's Message* as it is usually encountered today. But when considered from the scholarly perspectives of 1903, it is easier to see how James may have found dark inspiration in Blackburn's "A Love-letter"—with its composite features of an inscribed whistle concealed on the desolate shoreline, beckoning with an untethered voice for a lover to come calling, an enigmatic message associated with another amorphous and alien being of the wind. In James's virtuoso remaking, though, these elements acquire a peculiarly haunting quality, and recognition of this inspiration affords insight into the affective power of the story. The claim—long controversial among some Jamesians—that "Oh, Whistle" taps into anxieties of sexual desire and homosocial intimacy is strengthened and enriched considerably by recognition of the tale's connection to Blackburn's "A Love-letter". Additionally, appreciating James's medievalist sources also allows us to better understand how such themes are linked in particular to scholarly experience in the tale, where Parkins's antiquarian discovery is framed by questions of academic companionship, isolation, and alienation. James's transformation of Exeter Book folios 122v–123v becomes a haunting and anxious meditation on the many ways men in such circles call out to one another—alluring and reassuring, desirous and threatening. There is a touch of the elegiac in this story of the self-exiled Parkins, who refuses the company of Cambridge colleagues on his stay by the sea.¹⁰⁷ The alien voice of the whistle, then, takes on a new resonance when considered in these contexts: the enigmatic quality of the title itself and its strange relation to the

“runified” object is a crucial aspect of the story that has surely been sensed by readers more often than explicitly identified as a source of the tale’s impact. And if “voices within voices” are a hallmark of Old English enigmatic poetry, they also seem to have helped shape the Jamesian style of “reticent” horror at a crucial moment both in James’s career and, therefore, in the development of the contemporary genre of supernatural fiction.

Of course, further connections are always a temptation. For instance, we might remark that *Riddle 30b*, *Riddle 60*, and *The Husband’s Message* are followed immediately in the Exeter Book by the damaged poem *The Ruin*. Is this why a ruin is where the hidden whistle is found? Perhaps, perhaps not, and the wisdom of pursuing these links much further is doubtful. Sometimes it is hard to know when to stop scraping at the turf.¹⁰⁸ To be clear, I am not claiming that James stumbled across his reticent style of horror while rooting around in the Exeter Book, but engaging imaginatively with these enigmatic poems—as, crucially, they were received at this particular scholarly moment—may have allowed the self-styled antiquary to enhance his particularly effective and influential approach to horror. James brilliantly reinvented the spirit of the Old English enigmatic voice, and it was his own recognition of the riddle creature’s potential—its reticent resonance within the ghostly genre—that has proved to be such a source of “pleasing terror” for numberless readers. This alone is a rich legacy.

The role that Exeter enigmatic poetry played in the formation of the modern fantasy genre—especially by way of Tolkien—is very well-documented, but its part in the history of horror fiction is also worth acknowledging, considering the way so many later writers have emulated both “Oh, Whistle” and James’s approach to the genre in general. James’s “ontographical” response to the voice of the Exeter Book now appears even to have helped inspire theoretical interests that circle around to animate present-day medievalist scholarship on the *Exeter Riddles* themselves.¹⁰⁹ This seems appropriate enough. A singular feature of these unsolved texts is the way they invite us to complete them creatively with our own voices, as we offer up imaginative guesses in a distantly familiar tongue. Of course it is rarely possible to banish all forms of fantasy from scholarship. Medieval studies and creative medievalism have always been joined together, even if the links are easily lost. This may be a disappointingly unparadoxical point on which to end, but I appeal to the inimitable example of a mentor who has offered so much illumination by pursuing deceptively simple ideas with uncommon seriousness and skill. I cannot match his light, but I have at least tried to avoid needless obscurity.

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Notes

¹ Most recently in (Niles 2015) and (Niles 2016), but in numerous other publications as well, including the co-edited collections (Niles 1997) and (Niles and Frantzen 1997).

² See (Matthews 2006, pp. 9–22).

³ (Workman 1987, p. 1)

⁴ (Crossley-Holland and Sail 1999), No. 44 (solved as “the past”).

⁵ For James’s reticent style, see for example (Briggs 1977; Sullivan 1978; Cavaliero 1995; Cavallaro 2005; Brewster 2012, esp. at 46); etc. James explicitly commented on this strategy: “The reading of many ghost stories has shown me that the greatest successes have been scored by the authors who can make us envisage a definite time and place, and give us plenty of clear-cut and matter-of-fact detail, but who, when the climax is reached, allow us to be just a little in the dark as to the working of their machinery”, (James 1929, p. 172). For my attempt to connect the scholarly and creative work of James, see (Murphy 2017). For more on the relationship between James’s academic career and his fiction, see (McCorristine 2007).

⁶ A good introduction to the range of Tolkien’s sources is provided in (Anderson 2002, pp. 120–31.)

⁷ Even the very best critical assessments of riddling in *The Hobbit* have not always taken such contexts into account. I am in agreement with John D. Rateliff that work here remains to be done: “Careful examination of Old English [riddle] sources, and the contemporary critical literature of the first third of this century debating their correct interpretation, would probably shed a good deal of light on Tolkien’s exact sources and his treatment of them”, (Rateliff 2007, p. 171).

8 A phrase taken from (Niles 2006).

9 (Conybeare 1826, p. 213). As Niles (*Idea of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 199) notes, it is often difficult to separate the voice of John Josias from that of William Daniel, who edited his brother's work posthumously.

10 (Thorpe 1842, p. x).

11 In Thomas Wright's *Biographia Britannica Literaria* (London, 1842), we read: "From their intentional obscurity, and from the uncommon words with which they abound, many of these riddles are at present altogether unintelligible" (79). In *The Anglo-Saxon Home: A History of the Domestic Institutions and Customs of England* (London, 1862), John Thrupp provides yet another version of this pattern: "A very large number of their riddles have been preserved, but partly owing to their original obscurity, and partly from their having been copied and re-copied by persons evidently ignorant of the Anglo-Saxon language, and from our imperfect knowledge of it, the bulk of them are unintelligible to the best scholars" (Thrupp 1862, pp. 386–87). By (Wyatt 1912), some progress had been made, but the challenge remained: "I have cared greatly to try and evolve a more intelligible text in the many whole passages that were yet obscure" (v).

12 (Salvador-Bello 2015, p. 2).

13 (Niles 2019, p. 72)

14 Niles, *God's Exiles*, 6, p. 153.

15 Unless indicated elsewhere, I myself will here follow the numbering of (Krapp and Van Kirk Dobbie 1936).

16 See (Neville 2019); (Cavell and Neville 2020, esp. at xiv–xvii and 5–6). My own reservations about accepting this proposal may be found in a review of the latter volume in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (forthcoming).

17 (Hickes 1703–1705).

18 For the remarkable story of Hickes, his collaborators, and the *Thesaurus*, see (Niles 2015, pp. 147–58). See also (Harris 1992).

19 Hickes, *Thesaurus*, vol. 1, pp. 142–43; vol. 2, p. 186.

20 (Niles 2015, p. 152.) See also (Lerer 2001).

21 Hickes, *Thesaurus*, vol. 1, p. 221. See (O'Camb 2018).

22 For the backstory of these "runic additions", see (Harris 1992, p. 61–63).

23 (Niles 2015), 179. James was to draw on similar runic overtones for his tale "Casting the Runes", which itself is an apparent inspiration for the Japanese horror film *Ringu*, with its various remakes and sequels. See (Murphy 2017, pp. 58–74).

24 "quum literæ, tum voces verè runicæ, hoc est mysticæ et occultæ": (Hickes 1703–1705), vol. 2, figures IV–VI (with accompanying commentary on pp. 4–5). That Hickes desires to highlight this enigmatic sense of a first-person "runic voice" is perhaps reflected in his decision to include here the cryptographic—though strictly speaking, *non-runic*—*Riddle 36* (f. 109v in the Exeter Book), which is headed by a prominent capitalized "Ic". By contrast, Hickes ultimately elected not to include here the nearby runes (f. 123v) of *The Husband's Message*, which he had also marked in the Exeter Book with penciled notation.

25 "etiam rem aliquam, sive personam tanquam monstrum describit, cuius nomen in runiis ænigmatice ponitur": (Hickes 1703–1705, vol. 2, p. 5.) Although he does not attempt to answer *Riddle 24*, Hickes's general assessment of it aligns with present-day consensus opinion (which takes the rearranged runes of this riddle to spell "OE *higoræ*", or "magpie, jay").

26 "Qui vero hæc omnia præsertim tot à se visa adeo mystice describit, dramatis persona est, quæ de se etiam multa ænigmatice dicit": (Hickes 1703–1705, vol. 2, p. 5.)

27 (Hickes 1703–1705, v. 2, p. 5.)

28 For the Conybeare brothers and the *Illustrations*, see (Niles 2015), 198–204; (Jones 2018), 1–3 and passim.

29 Conybeare, *Illustrations*, pp. 208–13.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. lxxvii–lxxxv.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

32 See (Niles 2015, pp. 223–29).

33 Thorpe, *Codex exoniensis*, p. 527.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 527, 403.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 527; (Niles 2015, p. 229).

36 Ludvig Müller had offered "*scutum*" ("shield") for *Riddle 5* and "*liber*" ("book") for *Riddle 26* in his (Müller 1835, p. 63).

37 (Dietrich 1859; Dietrich 1865).

38 (Wyatt 1912, p. xiv).

39 In the same year, Jacob Grimm had announced the identical discovery, but it seems as though Grimm had unintentionally appropriated the idea from Kemble. See (Dilke and Schneider 1941), at 468.

40 (Leo 1857).

41 (Dietrich 1859, p. 488).

42 (Brooke 1892, p. 145). For more on Brooke, see (Niles 2016, pp. 10–12).

43 See Cynewulf's reconstructed career in (Brooke 1892, pp. 374–77).
 44 (Brooke 1892, p. 143).
 45 (Ibid, p. 372).
 46 For details, see (Williamson 1977, pp. 5–6).
 47 See, for example: (Tiffany 2001; Paz 2017; Soper 2017.)
 48 In addition, see (Karkov 2011, pp. 25, 152, 219, and in general chp. 4) "Object and Voice" (pp. 135–78); (Tilghman 2014).
 49 Paz, *Nonhuman Voices*, 6.
 50 (Bentinck 1907, pp. 45–71, at 66).
 51 Bentinck Smith, "Christian Poetry", 66; M.R. James, "Latin Writings in England to the Time of Alfred", in (Bentinck 1907, pp. 72–96, at 85). In acknowledging Bentinck Smith as James's colleague, I am not suggesting that she enjoyed the same privileges at Cambridge. On the contrary, for some details of the specific obstacles Bentinck Smith faced in her academic career, see (Dyhouse 1995), at 471. It should also be noted that James himself was an outspoken opponent of the equal rights of women at Cambridge: see (Jones and James 2011, pp. xiv–xv; Murphy 2017, pp. 145–57).
 52 (James 1911), front matter.
 53 Endpaper advertisement in (Glover 1904).
 54 See (Pfaff 1980; Cox 1983; Dennison 2001).
 55 James wrote of Humfrey Wanley, "His work is of so high a quality that it cannot be passed over. It has been for two centuries indispensable to the students of Anglo-Saxon": quoted in (Pfaff 1980), p. 270. Pfaff notes that James "undoubtedly [. . .] consulted the older master at each relevant MS". Indeed it is just possible that Wanley's given name receives a nod in the title character of James's later story "Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance", a tale that turns on prominent metaphors of library cataloguers in haunted labyrinths. For more on this story, see (Murphy 2017, pp. 140–45).
 56 Cited in (Pfaff 1980, p. 128).
 57 (Gollancz 2011).
 58 (Pfaff 1980, p. 270, n. 24), notes that James's work on manuscripts containing Old English "reveals in a most impressive way how much his eye—which was not that of a trained 'Saxonist'—caught".
 59 (James and Ramsay 1929, p. 110; Alington 1934, p. 16).
 60 Cited in (Cox and James 2009, p. 312). I agree with Cox and with (Jones and James 2011, p. 435), that "'Oh, Whistle,'" was "probably written 1903; first read Christmas 1903". This date is based on the account of H.E. Luxmoore (James's Eton tutor and lifelong friend) who records hearing James read the story "Fur flebis" during the 1903 Christmas season at King's College (*Letters of H.E. Luxmoore*, 113). As noted above, Luxmoore seems to be corroborated by the diary entry of A.C. Benson for December 1903. Inserted into a copy of *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (Eton College Archives Lq.4.07) are notes in the hand of James memoirist Shane Leslie stating that "'Oh, Whistle'" was "read at Christmas 1902". It seems unlikely, however, that James would have read the same story two Christmas seasons in a row, especially since many of the same men made up his audience each year. A partial record of James's original audience is found written on the blank spaces of a copy of the Greek New Testament, which served for James as a "kind of diary": Cambridge University Library MS Add 7517. At any rate, the question of whether the story was written and read in 1902 or 1903 makes no difference to the argument I am presenting here.
 61 James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, p. 200.
 62 James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, p. 183.
 63 For example, the work on the *Exeter Riddles* in (Paz 2017) is indebted (see p. 4) to (Bogost 2012), which includes a chapter on "Ontography: Revealing the Rich Variety of Being" that opens with a discussion of James's "Oh, Whistle". Both Bogost and Paz (pp. 4, 16, 45) are influenced by the object-oriented philosophy of Graham Harman, who explicitly borrows the term "ontography" from James's "Oh, Whistle" in (Harman 2011, p. 124).
 64 (Morton and Klinger 2019, p. xiii). Such assessment of the influential importance of this story is a widespread critical commonplace and it seems unnecessary to multiply references here. In general, James's fiction is credited with having "established the template that the other writers—consciously or not—would follow" in various sub-genres of horror fiction and film: (Fisher 2012, p. 21). The influence of James's "Oh, Whistle" is often acknowledged by modern masters of supernatural fiction through frequent allusion and homage. For instance, Susan Hill's contemporary classic *The Woman in Black* (1983, subsequently adapted for television, a major motion picture, and the second-longest running stage play in West End theatre history) has titled its climactic chapter, "Whistle and I'll Come to You", while Michael Chabon declares James's tale to be "one of the finest short stories ever written": (Chabon 2009), p. 121. Stephen King's most recent horror novel, *Later* (London: Titan Books, 2021), adopts as its central feature the idea of whistling up a malevolent ghost: "'I told it what you told me to say, Professor. That if I whistled, it had to come to me. That it was my turn to haunt it'" (166). Even the newest *Ghostbusters* film (*Ghostbusters: Afterlife*, November 2021) features a ghost-sensitive whistle.
 65 (Lane 2012, p. 105). Lane notes that "Oh, Whistle" is "by general consent, his finest and most anxiety-shrouded work" (108). It is impossible here to make a full case that this story was a turning point in James's development of a more "reticent" approach,

but many of his earlier stories do seem to involve more overt, lurid demonic horrors (“Canon Alberic’s Scrap-book”, 1893) or even diabolical surgery (“Lost Hearts”, 1893), while many stories that follow take a more “enigmatic” approach, echoing many elements of “Oh, Whistle”. For example, “The Treasure of Abbot Thomas” (1904) is organized quite explicitly around riddling effects (Murphy 2017, pp. 31–40), while the next tale James is known to have written, “A School Story” (1906) echoes even more precisely the riddle of the whistle (see below). In “The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral”, (first published in *The Contemporary Review* in 1910) James seems to return to Old English prosopopoeia as a source of ghostly voicing. That tale concludes with a poem, which is reported to have been “drempt” and recorded on a scrap of paper found concealed within the carving. There can be little doubt James found inspiration in *The Dream of the Rood* (as well as the *Exeter Riddles* and object inscriptions, such as the Brussels reliquary) for the opening lines of this “dream”: “When I grew in the Wood/I was water’d wth Blood/Now in the Church I stand . . .”: (James 1911, p. 166). Though not in quite the same way, *Beowulf* also seems to have played a role in James’s post-war classic, “A Warning to the Curious” (1925): see (Edwards 2013; Murphy 2017, pp. 165–84).

James, “Some Remarks”, p. 171.

My own previous work on this story has focused on unriddling the famous crux of the whistle’s inscription (see below), but in that discussion I overlooked the connection to the Exeter Book and its scholarly reception explored here. The present discussion, then, may be considered a companion to (Murphy 2017, pp. 40–51).

(Smith 1879, p. 185). That James here links Old English poetry with the works of Burns of course raises specters of great ideological complexity, given that Scots was often regarded by 18th- and 19th-century authorities as “a dialect of the Saxon or Old English with some trifling variations” or even a “purer” form of Old English than had survived in modern standard English: see (Kidd 2002), quoted at 25. The use of local eye-dialect in “Oh, Whistle” (“Ow, I see it wive at me out of the winder”) only underscores that link, the potential Unionist implications of which might well have had some appeal to the politically conservative James (see Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 99, 397). At any rate, the comparison of Burns to the Exeter Book was not without precedent: (Wright 1842, p. 79) solves *Riddle 28* as “John Barleycorn”, which (Brooke 1892, p. 152), accepts, citing the full text of Burns’s famous version of the song.

See, for example, (Pincombe 2007; Jones and James 2011, p. xxiv; Dinshaw 2012, p. 99; Armit 2014, pp. 150–79, at 162–65; O’Sullivan 2016, at 54; Ibitson 2021, pp. 809–26).

(James 1911, p. 13).

See (Murphy 2017, pp. 45–51). Recent editions have begun to restore the original fylfots. For example, see (James 2017) and (Morton and Klinger 2019).

(Niles 2006, pp. 219–25).

(James 1904, pp. 199–200).

Cited and translated in (Page 1973, p. 194).

Cited and translated in (Karkov 2011, p. 161).

Cited and translated in (Karkov 2011, p. 158). For more on such inscriptions, see also (Bredehoft 1996). An echo of the formula of “*N me fecit*” shows up in James’s late tale, “The Malice of Inanimate Objects” (1932), where a man is menaced by a kite bearing the letters “I.C.U.”: see (Jones and James 2011, pp. 397–400, at 399 and 400).

This signature “I-You” riddling dynamic has recently been emphasized by (Frederick 2020, pp. 230–31).

This particular effect has been often imitated, as in the title of Sarah Perry’s deliciously vicious tale, (Perry 2017).

See (Niles 2006, pp. 225–34).

See for example (Leslie 1961, pp. 13–15; Williamson 1977, p. 315; Klinck 1992, p. 57), considers the question unanswerable. Cf. (Niles 2006), pp. 225–34.

(Elliott 1955, pp. 1–8, at 5). (Niles 2006, pp. 232–33), argues that the speaker is “*the ship’s personified mast*” and further explains “The voice that issues from the ship itself calls attention to the runes as material signs while at the same time, apparently, sounding out either their names or their phonetic values”.

(Niles 2019, p. 127).

(Schaefer 1991, pp. 124–25), accounts for the prominence of the “poetic I” in Old English poetry in the context of early medieval vocalicity and the necessity of rendering texts in performance intelligible to contemporary audiences via a “vicarious voice”.

(Niles 2006, p. 214).

The first and most sensible answer to the question of “why a whistle?” is surely “why not?” However, it is true that many other explanations for James’s whistle continue to proliferate, ranging from the folklore of Jutland to an accident involving a friend of James who is said to have died from a fall when his horse was spooked by a whistle-like sound. See (Simpson 1997, pp. 9–18), at 15; (Rigby 2020). Later writers of fiction indebted to James allude to the folkloric idea so often that it may indeed now be gaining currency: “They say that if you whistle, the souls of the dead will draw nearer”: (Paver 2010, p. 96).

(Blackburn 1900).

By 1903, James may well have already begun work on his discussion of Aldhelm’s enigmas for the *Cambridge History* published in 1907.

- 88 As (Lees and Overing 2019, at p. 59), remark: “What is at stake here, finally, is a message about an internalized conversation to which no-one else is privy”:
- 89 (Blackburn 1900, pp. 2, 3).
- 90 For instance, (Orchard 2021, p. 439), notes that “it is not at all clear that [Riddle 60] is not part of *The Husband’s Message*”. For a recent wholesale reevaluation of textual divisions in this part of the Exeter Book, see (Ooi 2021).
- 91 (Morley 1888, p. 38).
- 92 (Dietrich 1859, p. 477).
- 93 (Padelford 1899, p. 51). Of course, by “sixty-first riddle”, Padelford means *Riddle 60*.
- 94 In keeping with my argument, it seems most appropriate to present the edited text and its translation as it appears in (Blackburn 1900, pp. 6–9).
- 95 See for example (Nelson 1978; Hayes 2008; Ramey 2013).
- 96 (Niles 2006, pp. 131–32).
- 97 (Brooke 1892, p. 135).
- 98 In his introduction, (James 1931), at p. viii. identifies Burnstow as Felixstowe.
- 99 (Armitt 2016, pp. 95–108, at 99; Macfarlane 2015), citing Mark Fisher in a 2013 audio essay; (Thompson 2021, p. 1).
- 100 James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 195, pp. 204–5. (Paz 2020, at p. 205) has compellingly argued that the Exeter collection’s opening storm riddles serve as a meta-riddlic reflection on the genre’s effects on the solver’s mind: “Just as we try to articulate a solution and close the game down, the riddle carries on, swept away by the storm”.
- 101 (James 1904, pp. 221–23).
- 102 Text and translation as presented in (Blackburn 1900, pp. 6–7), with Blackburn’s “breeze” altered to “wind”.
- 103 (Thorpe 1842, p. 470).
- 104 (James 1904, p. 205).
- 105 Text and translation as presented in (Blackburn 1900).
- 106 (James 1904, p. 223). See *Riddle 30b*, line 6: “*þær mec weras ond wif wlonce gecyssað*”, “where proud men and women kiss me”.
- 107 See (James 1904, p. 198): “he stopped for an instant to look at the sea and note a belated wanderer stationed on the shore”.
- 108 I cannot resist pointing out, however, one more curiosity. The whistle is discovered specifically when Parkins investigates a section of the ruin disturbed by activity that is never explained: “a patch of the turf was gone—removed by some boy or other creature *ferae naturae*”. Why has some unknown person been scratching at the turf? I will only note that the most obvious way to anagram the runes of *The Husband’s Message* yields “*sweard*”, or “turf”, a word that has made frustratingly little sense to scholars attempting to interpret the Old English poem, no matter how hard they scrape at its surface.
- 109 James wrote, “I count it no depreciation of an author to show that some old tale may have been at the back of his mind when he was devising his new one”: (James 1924, p. xii).

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Article

Tearas Feollon: Tears and Weeping in Old English Literature

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Abstract: This contribution surveys the range of images of weeping in Old English literature, concentrating particularly on weeping due to suffering, grief and unhappiness, and on tears of compunction, but examining other types of weeping as well, including supplicatory and sympathetic weeping (these latter are found in prose but not in poetry). Taking account of contemporary theory, the study understands weeping to be a physical manifestation of distress, but also to function as a social gesture, as reflected in the circumstance that most weeping in Old English is public rather than private. It is noted that saints do not normally weep in the literature despite the suffering they typically endure, and also that in traditional Old English poetry weeping is seen as not appropriate for men, or at least for men in the prime of life. Some of the most interesting instances of weeping in Old English, however, are to be found in episodes that appear to contradict or problematize such expectations, as is illustrated by the examination of a number of relevant examples. The references to weeping cited in this study are in the majority of cases based on Latin models, and reflect the wider Christian literary tradition in the early Middle Ages, rather than being specific to Anglo-Saxon England; but, in both religious and secular works, Old English writers are shown to be thoughtful and imaginative in their treatment of weeping and to deploy images of it to forceful emotive effect.

Keywords: Anglo-Saxon culture; medieval Christian tradition; emotions; hagiography; Old English literature; Old English poetry; Old English prose; Latin literature

1. Introduction

Old English literature abounds in images of people weeping (adults, that is, not children). Occasionally their tears are of joy, but much more typically they are of distress due to suffering, grief or unhappiness, which are themes of abiding concern to writers of the period. The themes of suffering, grief and unhappiness are often expressed, particularly in the poetry, without explicit reference to tears and weeping: there is no weeping as such in *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer* or most other “elegiac” poems, for example.¹ In many texts, however, the imagery of weeping lends intensity to the feelings portrayed, as the vocabulary of tears—*wepan*, *bevepan* and *tear* (as well as rarer terms, including *greotan* and *þotorian*, and poetic ones, such as *gretan* and *reotan*)—is deployed to emotive effect. In addition to such terms, I understand the noun *wop* and its derived adjectives *wopig* and *woplic* to be expressive of weeping: *wop* is often translated as the abstract “lamentation”, which can indeed be appropriate, but the connotation of weeping was surely felt by Anglo-Saxon audiences.²

In some of the most powerful passages in Old English, tears signify raw personal emotion. Famously, for example, in *Beowulf* King Hrothgar weeps at the departure of Beowulf from Denmark knowing that he will never see him again: “hruron him tearas/blondenfeaxum” (Fulk et al. 2008, ll. 1872–73), “tears fell from him, the grey-haired one”.³ Elsewhere, tears are prompted by the experience of misfortune endured or being in an unhappy situation, such as that of the speaker in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, who is “reotugu” (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, p. 179, l. 10), “tearful”, about her separation from Wulf, or of the speaker of *The Wife's Lament*, who laments that she must sit the summerlong day and weep in her place of enclosure:

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Þær ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg;
þær ic wepan mæg mine wræcsipas. (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, p. 211, ll. 37–38)

There I must sit the summerlong day; there I can weep for my journeys of exile.

In translated texts, Boethius/Mind, the speaker in the Old English *Boethius*, is among those who weep in the face of misfortune. In Meter 2, slightly expanding on the Latin original, he sings his sad lament “weighed down by weeping” (*wope gewæged*, Krapp 1932a, l. 3), and he is preoccupied by “this sobbing” (*ðes geocsa*, l. 5) (in the Latin, his verses water his face with true tears: *veris elegi fletibus ora rigant* [Stewart and Rand 1918, Meter 2, l. 4]).

Indeed, in what is overwhelmingly a literature of Christian teaching and understanding, the world itself is seen as a place of weeping, a *convallis lacrimarum*, “vale of tears” (Roman Psalter, Weber 1953, Psalms 83:7; Vulgate (Edgar and Kinney 2011–2013) *vallis lacrimarum*),⁴ or as the verse *Paris Psalter* expresses the image, “ðisse sargan dene/þær hi teara teonan cnyssað” (Krapp 1932b, 83:5, ll. 4–5), “this sorry valley, where the troubles of tears oppress [people]”. In this spirit, the author of Homily 5 of the *Blickling Homilies* declares that on earth one’s body must live in weeping, sadness and pain (*on wope & on unrotnesse & on sare his lichoma sceal her wunian*, 59, l. 36–61, l. 1) (Morris 1874/1876/1880, pp. 54–64).

Only in heaven, as *Blickling* Homily 8 reminds its audience (Morris 1874/1876/1880, pp. 96–107), are sorrow and weeping absent—“ne [bið] sorg ne wop” (p. 103, l. 36)—and it is the purpose of life on earth to attain the salvation of eternal life in heaven, weepingly fearing God’s judgement and repenting one’s sins in order to do so. Homily 4 of the *Vercelli Homilies* preaches, “Men þa leofestan, ic eow bidde 7 eaðmodlice lære þæt ge wepen 7 forhtien on þysse medmiclan tide for eowrum synnum, for þan ne biðð eowre tearas 7 eowre hreowsunga for noht getealde on þære toweardan worulde” (ll. 1–4), “My dear people, I ask you and humbly teach that you weep and fear for your sins in this short time, because your tears and your sorrows will be reckoned as nothing in the world to come” (Scragg 1992, pp. 87–110).

In including references to weeping, Old English is hardly unique among medieval literary traditions (Gertsman 2011; Kottler 1996; Lutz 1999; Vingerhoets 2013). Indeed, a large proportion of mentions of weeping in Old English derives directly from Latin sources and reflects participation in the wider traditions of Latin Christendom, with the Bible in particular providing a foundational range of images of weeping (Hvidberg 1962; Lange 1996; McEntire 1990). In Old English prose in particular, references to weeping are in the large majority of cases translated or adapted from Latin sources; many Old English verse texts are also adapted from Latin sources, but these are freer in their treatment of weeping. Thus, though often interesting (as I would argue), most references to weeping in Old English are unexceptional, conforming as they do to inherited literary convention. Some examples, however, stand out as worthy of special note, as I highlight in the analysis below.

The treatment of weeping in Old English conforms to inherited literary convention, which is itself grounded in the cultural practice and expectation of what has been referred to as its “emotional community” (Jorgensen 2015, p. 8, following Rosenwein 2006). According to Darwin’s celebrated characterization, weeping is a physical response to pain or distress: “Weeping seems to be the primary and natural expression [...] of suffering of any kind, whether bodily pain short of extreme agony or mental distress” (Darwin 1998, pp. 157–58). But current researchers stress the social as well as “natural” aspect of weeping behavior in adults: weeping as performative and gestural. Vingerhoets emphasizes that, although weeping can take place in private as well as in public (Vingerhoets 2013, pp. 142–43), it is “a compelling social behavior”, which “signals the need for assistance when an individual is feeling alone, or helpless to meet their own needs” (*ibid.*, p. 73). Collective weeping, widely found in Old English, is obviously social in nature, expressing communal solidarity and bonding; but even in scenes in Old English where it is individuals who weep, they usually have an audience.

Weeping in private does occur in Old English (rarely, and only in prose translations of Latin texts), but normally weeping is in public.⁵ This is particularly true of hagiography, which provides the majority of instances of weeping in our corpus. Hagiography takes place in a public arena in which the saint interacts with others in word and deed, demonstrating his or her sanctity before witnesses. Similarly, in traditional Old English poetry emotions are played out in public, whether those are the joys of the hall or Hrothgar weeping at Beowulf's departure.

A further point about Darwin's characterization of weeping as the expression of suffering is that while it may be true enough for much weeping, including much of that in Old English, it manifestly does not account for all weeping, again including much in Old English. As outlined below, in addition to distressful weeping, we also find other types of weeping in our texts, such as supplicatory weeping, which is aimed at eliciting a specific response from an addressee, and sympathetic weeping, which occurs on behalf of others; and since weeping is a complex a behavior, the tears portrayed can signify more than one emotion at once: mixed or conflicting emotions can trigger weeping.

Vingerhoets also points out that Darwin excludes "positive" weeping from his characterization (ibid., pp. 80, 87–91), again as occasionally found in Old English; nor does the great man account for fervent religious weeping, a form of weeping particularly conspicuous in Anglo-Saxon texts in the expression of compunction, in which weeping is inspired by internal feeling rather than by an external stimulus; such weeping need not be private, but it does not seek to appeal to an audience.

Before focusing on tears of compunction, I turn in the next section of the essay to the most common tears portrayed in Old English writings, those of distress due to grief or suffering. Here it will be convenient to consider prose and poetry separately because of distinctive features of the poetry; it is also appropriate to consider poetry separately in a contribution in honor of Jack Niles.

2. Tears of Distress

2.1. Prose

Among the tears of distress most frequently mentioned in Old English prose texts are those of grief at the death or departure of a loved one. Such tears, which are often collective, are a familiar topos in saints' lives and, as reflected in the close Old English translation of *Apollonius of Tyre*, romance. In *Apollonius*, the protagonist's people weep at his sudden disappearance: "Ðar wearð ða micel morcning and ormæte wop" (Goolden 1958, p. 8, ll. 24–25), "Then there was much grief there and excessive weeping".⁶ Among representative instances of collective tears of grief in Old English prose saints' lives are those portrayed in the translation of the legend of Saint Andrew's conversion of the cannibalistic Mermedonians, where the inhabitants of the city, newly converted, are distressed by the premature departure of Andrew. According to the *Acts of Matthew and Andrew in the City of the Cannibals* (closely following its Latin source: see Allen and Calder 1976, pp. 14–34), as Andrew prepares to depart, "him fylgede mycel manigo þæs folces wepende and hrymende", "a great crowd of the people followed him weeping and calling out" (Cassidy and Ringler 1971, p. 218, l. 313). Other instances of communal weeping in grief include, in the *Life of Saint Machutus*, the kinsmen of Machutus lamenting (*potorigende*, ll. 9, 22, "weeping") his departure from them (Yerkes 1984), and, in the *Old English Martyrology*, brethren weeping at the time of Saint Eostorwine's death (Rauer 2013, p. 62).

Grief on the part of *individuals* is also portrayed in Old English prose writings. In *Æfric's Lives of Saints*, Saint Eugenia's mother weeps (*weop*) after the saint's death (Skeat 1881–1900, I, pp. 24–51, l. 415). In the *Life of Saint Guthlac* (Gonser 1909), following the Latin original (Colgrave 1956, chp. 50), Guthlac's attendant Beccel weeps as his master's death approaches: "he þa swyþe weop and geomrian ongan, and mid mycelre uneðnysse his eagospind mid tearum gelomlice leohte" (chp. 20, ll. 33–34), "he wept very much and began to lament, and with great anguish he caused his cheeks to shine with tears"; later,

King Æthelbald visits Guthlac's grave, "wepende mid tearum" (chp. 21, l. 9), "weeping with tears" (Colgrave 1956, chp. 52, reads "lacrimans").

Tears of grief are profusely shed by Paphnutius in the *Life of Saint Euphrosyne* (Skeat 1881–1900, II, pp. 334–55) at the disappearance of his daughter, who has disguised herself as a man and secretly joined a monastery, and by the protagonist in the *Life of Saint Eustace* (Skeat 1881–1900, II, 190–219)⁷ when he loses his wife and sons, the sons being presumed dead and the wife believed to have endured a fate worse than death. In both of these cases, however, there is an element of selfishness in the distress of the weeper. Robin Norris has explored the "sinful sorrow" of Eustace, who sees himself as suffering more than even Job (Norris 2011, p. 97). Such excessive sorrow is the sin of *tristitia* much warned about by Anglo-Saxon homilists, as Norris explains. Ælfric, for example, defines *tristitia* as:

ðissere worulde unrothnysc
 þæt is þonne se man geunrotsod ealles to swyðe
 for his æhta lyre þe he lufode to swyðe.
 and cid þonne wið god. and his synna geeacnað. (Skeat 1881–1900, I, pp. 336–63,
 ll. 289–92)

the sorrow of this world, that is when a person sorrows all too much for the loss of his possessions and complains then against God, and increases his sins.

Eustace eventually accepts his lot, though not before contemplating suicide (l. 181) and voicing much self-centered lamentation. He begs God not to spurn his tears of distress (*mine teares ne for-seoh*, ll. 196–97), and travels on his way weeping (*wepende*, l. 213).

In the same volume as the Norris study, Stephen Stallcup draws attention to the motivation of materialism in Paphnutius's unhappiness at the loss of Euphrosyne (Stallcup 2011). He grieves for his daughter in terms that highlight the themes of ownership and commodity. One might add that Paphnutius's grief is self-pitying, thereby like that of Eustace straying into the area of *tristitia*. He even weepingly (*wepende*) rebukes his dead daughter for making him suffer (ll. 305–08).

Such excessive tears are worldly, and reflect, as Stallcup puts it, a "poor spiritual state" (p. 22). The same could be said about Boethius/Mind weeping, as mentioned above, whose grief was not about death or departure but rather the perceived worldly misfortunes that had come upon him. Wisdom reproaches him sternly: "Ac hwi tiolast þu þonne to wepanne butan andweorc?" (Prose 6, Section 6), "But why then do you give yourself up to weeping without reason"? This reworks Lady Philosophy's demand in the Latin original that Boethius cease his weeping, since fortune has not really turned against him: "Quare sicca iam lacrimas" [II, prose IV, l. 30], "Hence dry your tears now" (For the prose version of the Old English *Boethius*, see Godden and Irvine 2009).

Tears of distress arising from causes other than death and departure include those of the damned souls in hell, as highlighted, for example, in *Vercelli Homily 9* (E), who "wepað heora synna swiðe bitterlicum tearum" (Scragg 1992, ll. 135–36), "weep for their sins with very bitter tears". The devils vanquished by the saint in the prose *Guthlac* are seen "to weep exceedingly and mourn" (*wepan swyþe and geomerian*, Gonsler 1909, chp. 5, l. 274) that their powers have been shattered by Guthlac.

Assorted "good" distressed weepers are the mother who accidentally leaves her child at Saint Clement's sepulchre, which was soon to be flooded by sea water (Rauer 2013, p. 218; also Ælfric's life of Cuthbert in Clemoes 1997, pp. 497–506, ll. 134–35); the travelers terrified by a storm at sea in the *Life of Saint Giles* (Treharne 1997, pp. 131–47 (text), 148–62 (translation)), (ll. 69–71); and the Christian people of Ephesus persecuted by the emperor Decius in the *Legend of the Seven Sleepers*. Such instances are usually inherited from Latin sources; but it is notable that in the case of the *Seven Sleepers* the reference to weeping is added in the Old English version, intensifying the emphasis on distress: "ðonne weopon and geomredon þa þe on God belyfdon" (Magennis 1994, l. 36; Skeat 1881–1900, I, l. 40), "then those who believed in God wept and lamented"—the Latin has "luctus adprehendebat omnes fideles et miseria" (ll. 14–15), "grief and misery seized all the faithful".⁸

2.2. Saints

There is one category of individuals in Old English prose, however, who normally do not weep in distress no matter how sorely afflicted: God's saints. The saints celebrated in Old English hagiography, as more widely in medieval tradition, are typically awe-inspiring figures of perfection, who have risen above ordinary human limitations to reflect the radiance of heaven in their life on earth. They are serene and composed in the face of their own suffering, super-human in their fortitude and unwavering in their piety: admirable, though not easy to identify with. Ælfric, the most prolific vernacular Anglo-Saxon hagiographer, is particularly assiduous in accommodating his saints within this template, smoothing out perceived departures from it in his sources, and erasing inherited signs of frailty or weakness in the saints (see [Whatley 1997](#); [Whatley 2002](#); [DeGregorio 2001](#)).

If saints weep, it is mostly in sympathy for the distress of others, as when Saint Giles is moved by entreaties on behalf of an ill man—"dyde his gebede mid gelomlicen tearan agotennesse" ([Treharne 1997](#), ll. 223–24), "he said his prayers with frequent pouring forth of tears"—or Saint Martin in the *Blickling Homilies*, who in weeps as he raises an unbaptized man from the dead: "weop he & eode into him. & him wæs þæt swiþe mycclre weorce þæt he swa ungelufwad forðferan sceolde" ([Morris 1874/1876/1880](#), p. 216, ll. 21–22), "he wept and went in to him, and that was painful to him that he should pass over unbaptized"; in Ælfric's version of the life of Saint Martin in *Lives of Saints* it is said that Martin was "very sad" (*micclum dreorig*, [Skeat 1881–1900](#), II, l. 213) about this untimely death, but weeping is not mentioned.

Rather than weep in distress, Saint Laurence famously jokes with his persecutor on his hot grill, asking him to turn him over since he is done on one side (see [Clemoes 1997](#), pp. 418–28, ll. 217–19); upon having her breast cut off, Saint Agatha sternly rebukes her oppressor, telling him, "ic habbe mine breost on minre sawle . ansunde", "I have my breast in my soul, uninjured" ([Skeat 1881–1900](#), I, pp. 194–209, l. 126); Saint Cuthbert serenely stands in the cold sea all night in self-mortification (see [Godden 1979](#), pp. 247–48, l. 126). These saints, like a host of others, are superhuman in their heroism.

There are some exceptions to the rule that saints do not weep in distress. In the *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt* the repentant Mary weeps much at the time of her conversion from a life of debauchery and during her first years in the desert ([Magennis 2002](#); [Skeat 1881–1900](#), I, pp. 2–53).⁹ But she is not yet a saint at that stage: unusually, Mary is a saint who develops into sanctity. By the time she meets the monk Zosimus, the narrator of her story, she has achieved a state of transcendent holiness, having moved beyond tears to become a sublime figure of otherworldly serenity. Zosimus weeps much in her presence as he strives to advance spiritually: Mary is the saint, humble but resplendent, while Zosimus is the seeker after enlightenment.

Saint Andrew weeps in distress in the Old English *Acts of Matthew and Andrew*. Andrew weeps as he is being tortured by the townspeople; his co-apostle Matthias has also wept earlier in the story, blinded, imprisoned and condemned to death: "he wæs simle to Drihtne biddende mid myclum wope" ([Cassidy and Ringler 1971](#), ll. 13–14), "he was continually praying to God with much weeping". Andrew is dragged through the streets, his blood flowing over the ground like water (ll. 209–10), and he weeps (*weop*, l. 213) in his agony. In an un-saintlike outburst, he even complains to God about his extreme suffering, resigned to his own human weakness:

And he cigde mid mycle wope to Drihtne and cwæp: "Min Drihten Hælend(e) Crist, me genihtsumiað þas tintrega, for þon ic eom geteorod. Min Drihten Hælend(e) Crist, ane tid on rode þu þrowodest, and þu cwæde: "Fæder, for hwon forlæte þu me"? Nu iii dagas syndon syððan ic wæs getogen þurh þisse ceastre lanum. Þu wast, Drihten, þa menniscan tyddernysse". (ll. 240–44)

And he called out to the Lord with much weeping and said, "My Lord Savior Christ, these torments are enough for me, for I am exhausted. My Lord Savior

Christ, once you suffered on the cross, and you said, “Father, why have you forsaken me”? Now for three days I have been dragged through the lanes of this town. You know human weakness, Lord”.

The Andrew text (along with the poem *Andreas* to be discussed below) is a translation of one of a distinctive, and early, type of hagiographical narrative, the apocryphal acts of the apostles, in which the protagonist is a developing figure rather than the usual paragon of perfection. Some of these acts were closely translated into Old English, though it is notable that Ælfric in particular had qualms about how saints were portrayed in them. Michael Lapidge characterizes the Andrew story as “non-hagiographical” (Lapidge [1991] 2013, p. 260), and Ivan Herbison explores the genre of apocryphal acts in more detail, noting, for example, the influence of Greek romance on it (Herbison 2000, pp. 190–91). From the perspective of idealizing medieval hagiography, Andrew is a highly untypical saint.

Another apostle who weeps in distress is the great Saint Paul in the apocryphal *Passion of Saints Peter and Paul*, a narrative about the contest between the apostles and the magician Simon. As the *Blickling Homilies* version of this has it, as Simon flies in the air in a demonstration of his powers: “Ʒa ahof Paulus up his heafod. Ʒa wæron his eagan gefyllede mid tearum, & he geseah Simon fleogende” (Morris 1874/1876/1880, pp. 189, ll. 36–190, 1), “Then Paul raised up his head. Then his eyes became filled with tears, and he saw Simon flying”. Here the Old English corresponds to the Latin source, which reads, “Cumque eleuasset caput Paulus lacrimis plenus oculos [variant reading: oculis lacrimis plenis] et uidisset Simonem uolantem” (Lipsius and Bonnet 1891, p. 165, ll. 19–20), “And when Paul raised his head, his eyes full of tears, he saw Simon flying”. In this instance, Paul shows that he is not yet the perfected saint. Scott DeGregorio writes that the episode of Simon flying “is of interest for its humanized depiction of the apostles”. He continues, “Their feelings and emotions are laid bare, exposing them as human, fallible creatures. They appear weak and uncertain of themselves” (DeGregorio 2001, p. 87). DeGregorio’s article demonstrates that Peter and Paul display such signs of weakness throughout the narrative.

Other weeping protagonists in hagiography are also confined to untypical saints’ lives, such as that of Mary of Egypt, mentioned above, and we have seen that Eustace weeps in his time of loss and misfortune, complaining to God in the same manner as Andrew. But the part of the Eustace legend in which the weeping occurs is really a romance narrative with a happy outcome, Eustace and his family reunited in the end. After this happy outcome, the story morphs into a conventional *passio*, in which Eustace and his family go to their deaths serenely glorifying God: no sign of weeping here.

In the *Legend of the Seven Sleepers*, in which we have noted the communal weeping of the persecuted community in Ephesus, the seven saints themselves weep profusely. These saints are essentially passive figures in what is a tale of wonder rather than a regular saint’s life; they function as unknowing instruments in a larger divine plan to confirm to the faithful the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. They are unlikely heroes in their all-too-human fearfulness and anxiety to avoid being captured. Faced with the prospect of arrest, “hi Ʒonne ða seofon geomredon and weopon” (Magennis 1994, l. 111; Skeat 1881–1900, II, l. 125), “the seven then lamented and wept”. Later they hide from the emperor in a cave outside the city, where “ða wurdon heora eagan afyllede mid tearum” (Magennis 1994, l. 222; Skeat 1881–1900, l. 244), “then were their eyes filled with tears;” “hi on wope wæron and hi on uneaðnysse spræcon” (Magennis 1994, l. 225; Skeat 1881–1900, II, ll. 246–47) “they were in tears and spoke anxiously”; and “Ealle him wæron gehefode ða eagan of ðam menigfealdum biterlicum tearum Ʒe hi ðær aleton” (Magennis 1994, ll. 227–228; Skeat 1881–1900, II, ll. 249–50), “Their eyes were all made heavy by the copious bitter tears that they let fall there”.

Malchus, one of the seven who sneaks into Ephesus upon waking from the miraculous sleep not realizing that 365 years have passed since they fell asleep, is bewildered at the changes that he sees in the city and terrified at the hostile reception he receives. Rather than a powerful saint, he is a fearful youth, all alone, who wilts under the threats that oppress him. As he is led through the city and abused by the inhabitants, “him eall Ʒa

eagan floterodon and bitere teares aleton" (Magennis 1994, ll. 599–600; Skeat 1881–1900, II, l. 655), "his eyes all fluttered and let bitter tears fall"; and, being cross-examined by the city official, "he ofdræd sloh adun þærrihte and hine sylfne astræhte ætforan eallum þam folce, and cwæð to heom eallum mid wependre stefne" (Magennis 1994, ll. 660–61; Skeat 1881–1900, II, ll. 718–20), "he threw himself down at once, terrified, and prostrated himself before all the people, and he addressed them all with a weeping voice".

What is particularly notable about the treatment of tears in the *Seven Sleepers* is that, uniquely among vernacular Anglo-Saxon hagiographers, the Old English writer adds to the Latin source in reporting them. Some of the weeping is there in the source, but overall the reference to distress is more generalized in the Latin. We have already noted (pp. 4–5, above) that the mention of the distress of the Christian community in Ephesus is intensified in the Old English by the specific mention of weeping (not present in the original). Similarly, reference to weeping is added in the account of the misery of the seven sleepers themselves at the time of persecution in Ephesus (Magennis 1994, l. 111; Skeat 1881–1900, l. 125): the corresponding Latin reads "gemebant" (l. 44), "they groaned". The mentions of the seven weeping in the cave (Magennis 1994, l. 222; Skeat 1881–1900; Magennis 1994, l. 244, 227–28; Skeat 1881–1900, II, ll. 249–50) are taken directly from the Latin (ll. 111, 113), but the Old English adds a further reference to weeping in the cave when it declares, as mentioned above, that "hi on wope wæron and hi on uneaðnyse spræcon" (Magennis 1994, l. 225; Skeat 1881–1900, II, ll. 246–47), "they were in tears and spoke anxiously"; the Latin reads, less specifically, "sedentibus ipsis in luctu et loquentibus ipsis ad invicem" (ll. 112–13), "sitting in grief and talking to each other".

The focus on the weeping of the unhappy Malchus during his travails in Ephesus is also increased. The reference to him weeping as he is dragged through the city—"him eall þa eagan floterodon and bitere teares aleton" (Magennis 1994, ll. 599–600; Skeat 1881–1900, II, l. 655)—is inherited from the Latin, which reads "oculi eius lacrimabantur" (l. 285), "his eyes wept", but the Old English presents a sharper image. In addition, the account of Malchus weeping under the harsh questioning of the city official—"and cwæð to heom eallum mid wependre stefne" (Magennis 1994, ll. 660–61; Skeat 1881–1900, II, ll. 718–20)—is the contribution of the Old English writer; there is nothing corresponding to this in the Latin, which simply has "et dixit eis" (l. 309), "and said to them".

The expansion of weeping references in the Old English version of the Seven Sleepers legend is consonant with the translator's general approach of humanizing the story and presenting Malchus and company as ordinary people in an extraordinary situation; but this approach is completely at odds with the model of idealizing hagiography typical of medieval saints' lives, certainly those of the kind favored by Ælfric. Interestingly, Ælfric has a (much abbreviated) version of the story of the Seven Sleepers in his second series of *Catholic Homilies* (Godden 1979, pp. 247–48), in which he removes all elements of human interest and does not even mention the hapless Malchus. Ælfric highlights the glory of the miracle of the saints' resurrection but has no interest in their experience or feelings (see further Magennis 1996).

Ælfric also has a version of the contest between Saints Peter and Paul and the magician Simon in his first series of *Catholic Homilies*. Here, unlike in the *Blickling* version, there is no mention of Paul weeping as Simon flies in the air. Paul addresses Peter with words of encouragement and bends his knees in prayer, but shows no sign of despondency (Clemoes 1997, pp. 388–99, ll. 236–38). As shown by Malcolm Godden, Ælfric used the same source as the *Blickling* translation for his version of the Peter and Paul legend, though supplemented by other material, but he treats that source with considerable freedom (Godden 1996, p. 210; Godden, 2000, pp. 269–71). In his detailed analysis comparing the *Blickling* and Ælfric versions, DeGregorio explains the purpose of Ælfric's revisions of the Latin source as to accommodate the saints within his required model of sanctity:

Consistently he tones down the humanizing—and from his point of view potentially unsettling—details manifest in the inherited story; his apostles thus emerge as powerful iconic presences who easily triumph over evil, serenely en-

dure persecution, and whose faith in God never once wavers (DeGregorio 2001, p. 89).

In the episode of Simon flying, Ælfric, unlike the *Blickling* homilist, is at pains to present Paul (and also Peter) as a flawless saint. The non-appearance of weeping on the part of Paul is very much in line with Ælfric's overall handling of the legend.

It is no surprise that Ælfric steers clear completely of the other anomalous lives discussed here, that is, those of Mary of Egypt, Andrew and the Mermedonians, and Eustace (even though the lives of Mary of Egypt and Eustace, along with the Acts of Peter and Paul and the Seven Sleepers, were in the Cotton Corpus Legendary, the major source for his saints' lives [Jackson and Lapidge 1996]). Like the vast majority of saints celebrated in medieval hagiography, Ælfric's saints do not weep in distress.

2.3. Poetry

Many of the same kinds of images of weeping found in Old English prose also occur in poetry. However, Old English poetry has few depictions of men weeping, since the poetry inherited from the "heroic" value-system of Germanic secular tradition an understanding that weeping is not appropriate for men, at least men in the prime of life (see Pàroli 1990; O'Brien O'Keefe 1991). This understanding is also reflected in the eddic verse of Old Norse, which has no images of men weeping. As I show below, there are (rare) examples of tears of compunction shed by men in religious poetry; but as a general rule it is women who weep in the poetry, not men, or at least not individual men. Communities, including men, may be portrayed as weeping collectively in grief or fear, but rarely do we encounter a weeping male individual. Even the speaker in the Exeter Book "inkhorn" riddle 93 (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, pp. 241–42), portrayed as a wounded warrior when severed from its animal's head, does not weep from its injury:

No ic þa stunde bemearn,
ne for wunde weop, ne wrecan meahte
on wigan feore wonnscaft mine. (ll. 20–22)

Not at all did I mourn the time, weep from the wound, nor could I avenge my misfortune on the fighter's life.

Women weep. The female speakers in *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* do so, of course (see above, pp. 1–2). So too does Sarah's Egyptian maidservant Hagar in *Genesis A* in addition to the biblical text:¹⁰ as she flees to the wilderness, having been cast out by Abraham and Sarah, Hagar exclaims elegiacally,

Nu sceal tearighleor
on westenne witodes bidan,
hwonne of heortan hunger oððe wulf
sawle and sorge somed abregde. (Krapp 1931, pp. 1–87, ll. 2276–79)

Now with tear-stained cheek I must await my fate in the wilderness, until hunger or wolf seize soul and sorrow together from my heart.

The Fortunes of Men has an image of a woman weeping as her child dies in a fire:

reoteð meowle,
seo hyre bearn gesihð brondas þeccan. (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, p. 155, ll. 46–47)
the woman weeps, who sees flames covering her child.

Also, the warrior queen Elene weeps in her urgent desire to find the nails from Christ's cross in Cynewulf's poem on her:

A min hige sorgað,
reonig reoteð, ond geresteð no
ærþan me gefylle fæder ælmihtig,
wereda wealdend, willan minne. (*Elene*, Krapp 1932a, pp. 66–102, ll. 1081–84)

My mind will always sorrow, mournful it will wail and get no rest at all until the almighty father, ruler of hosts, fulfil my desire.

The vivid word *reoteð* provides an intensity not paralleled in the Latin original.¹¹

Collective weeping is also familiar in the poetry. There are several instances in *Beowulf*, as well as portrayals of lamentation in which weeping is not specifically referred to. The inhabitants of Heorot weep as a result of Grendel's first attack: "þa wæs æfter wiste wop up ahofen,/ micel morgensweg" (Fulk et al., ll. 128–129), "then after the feasting weeping arose, great clamour in the morning" (or might *wop* be translated as "lamentation" here?). Elsewhere, Hrothgar tells Beowulf that, in the face of the vengeance enacted by Grendel's fearsome mother, many a thegn weeps in his spirit (Fulk et al. 2008, on *sefan greoteþ*, l. 1342), and, after the death of Beowulf, his followers mourn his body "with gushing tears" (*wollenteare*, l. 3032) and the smoke from his pyre is "wope bewunden" (l. 3146), "mingled with weeping/lamentation", as it rises up in the sky. In a striking personification in the course of Hrothgar's description of the sinister approaches to Grendel's mere, *Beowulf* also has an image of the skies weeping (*roderas reotað*, l. 1376).

In *Andreas* (Krapp 1932a, pp. 3–51), in a parallel to a scene in the prose *Acts of Matthew and Andrew* alluded to above (p. 3), the Lord tells the saint as he prepares to leave the city prematurely that the weeping and mourning minds of the people of Mermedonia have come before him (*Hira wop becom/murnende mod*, ll. 1666–67); the Lord instructs Andreas to stay on and complete his mission. The *Andreas* poet also relates that, when Andreas eventually does leave Mermedonia, the people weep again at his departure: "Stodon him ða on ofre æfter reotan" (l. 1712), "They stood on the shore then weeping after him". This second mention of weeping in *Andreas* is an emotive addition on the part of the Old English poet with no equivalent in the prose version or Latin analogues (see North and Bintley 2016, pp. 4–6); as suggested by Francis Leneghan, it draws upon a traditional motif of Old English narrative poetry, that of the departure of the hero (Leneghan 2019).

Other collective weepers in Old English poetry are Christ's followers overcome by grief in *Christ II* (*The Ascension*) as their Lord ascends to heaven;¹² the sinful people awaiting God's judgement on the Last Day in *Christ II*,¹³ *Christ III* (*The Judgement*)¹⁴ and *Judgement Day II*,¹⁵ and the souls in hell enduring their torment. In *Judgement Day II*, the eyes of the damned weep in the eternal fires—"Hwilum þær eagan ungemetum wepað/for þæs ofnes bryne" (ll. 194–95), "There at times eyes weep exceedingly from the burning of that oven". Hell, according to *Christ and Satan* (recalling Matthew 8:12 etc.), is a place

þær is wom and wop wide gehered,
and gristbitungc and gnornungc mecga (Krapp 1931, pp. 135–58, ll. 332–33)

Where noise and weeping are widely heard, and the gnashing of teeth and the lamentation of men.

In *Guthlac B*, thought by some to be authored by Cynewulf (see Bjork 2013, p. 11), the devils will not have long to wait before raising up weeping (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, p. 75, *wop ahofun*, l. 905) after they have been defeated by the saint. In *Christ and Satan* (Krapp 1931), the devils lament their life in hell, without mention of tears, however, while in *Genesis B*, far from weeping, Satan, shackled in hell after his downfall, expresses fierce defiance of God. He casts himself not as a cowed figure of weakness but as an active heroic leader who will exact vengeance on his enemy (Krapp 1931). There is also reference to collective weeping in the *Paris Psalter*, following the Book of Psalms.¹⁶

But some individual males *do* weep in the poetry. Most notable among these is Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, who weeps at the departure of Beowulf from Denmark:

Gecyste þa cyning æþelum god,
þeoden Scyldinga ðegn bet[e]stan
ond be healse genam; hruron him tearas
blondenfeaxum. Him wæs bega wen
ealdum infrodum, oþres swiðor,

þæt h[i] seoðða(n no) geseon moston,
modige on meþle. (Fulk et al. 2008, ll. 1870–876)

Then the king, noble by lineage, the prince of the Scyldings, kissed the best thegn and took hold of him around the neck; tears fell from the grey-haired one. To him, old and wise, there was the expectation of two things, one the stronger likelihood, that they would not at all be permitted to see each other afterwards, noble-spirited ones speaking together.

Some critics have taken a straightforwardly sympathetic view of Hrothgar's behavior here, and the tears are indeed deeply affecting (see Irving 1987, pp. 263–64; Chickering 1977, p. 37; Wright 1967). By contrast, Mary Dockray-Miller argues that the king's weeping is reflective of his weakness and "fading masculinity" (Dockray-Miller [1998] 2006, p. 445).¹⁷ Drawing upon the theory of the one-sex model of gender difference (see Laqueur 1992) as discerned by Carol Clover in her analysis of Old Norse literature (Clover [1993] 2006), Dockray-Miller compares the reactions of Beowulf and Hrothgar as they part. Beowulf, at the pinnacle of his manhood, does not reciprocate Hrothgar's outpouring of emotion—"he þone breostwylm forberan ne mehte" (Fulk et al. 2008, l. 1877), "he could not restrain the welling emotion"—but instead remains silent after Hrothgar's display, his mind being on other things (Dockray-Miller [1998] 2006, p. 458). In Clover's terms, Hrothgar's tears reflect "the disabled masculinity" of the old (Clover [1993] 2006, p. 414, n. 68). His weeping defines him as no longer an active warrior and is seen by Dockray-Miller in a negative light: Hrothgar is unmanly.

I would argue, however, that the image of Hrothgar weeping is one intended to elicit sadness rather than criticism. His weeping is a poignant reflection of the reality that he is now an old man who no longer has the vigor of youth. As such, it is not unexpected for him to weep, and he makes no attempt to conceal his tears: in the heroic world, weeping is allowable in the elderly. In weeping, Hrothgar acknowledges his own fading masculinity but also his awareness of the sadness of things, an awareness lacking in the young hero. Later in the poem, Beowulf speaks of Hrothgar lamenting his lost youth: "gioguðe cwiðan" (l. 2112).

As brought out by Kirsten Mills, the emotions of Hrothgar are complex in this scene: the interplay of his feelings "indicates an appreciation on the part of the poet and audience for the intricacies of emotional states" (Mills 2016, p. 175). Mills views Hrothgar's tears in a positive light, arguing indeed that they indicate his authority: "He is in control, publicly performing the emotions he wishes to display, while hiding the emotions he prefers not to reveal" (an allusion to the "dyrne langað", "secret longing", of Hrothgar mentioned a few lines later (l. 1879)). It seems to me that Beowulf is the one in control in the farewell scene, but Hrothgar's tears, while not positive, are not to be disparaged. They should be understood as acceptable behavior in an old man, bearing out the fact that he is an old man.

There is much other lamentation in *Beowulf*, including that of the "last survivor" (ll. 2244–70) and the old man whose son has died on the gallows (ll. 2444–62), but in none of these is weeping specifically mentioned. The only other possible individual male weeper in *Beowulf* (if we take *wop* to denote weeping in the relevant verse) is the unheroic Grendel—hardly a role model for a warrior seeking renown—who is heard by the Danes to raise up *wop* (l. 785) in his fight with Beowulf.

Another inglorious warrior is the gold-adorned enemy of the inanimate speaker in Exeter Riddle 71 ("sword"?). (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, p. 232), who weeps under the speaker's attack:

Wepeð hwilum
for minum gripe se þe gold wigeð. (ll. 5–6)

At times he weeps because of my attack, he who wears gold.

This enemy lacks the self-control shown by the wounded speaker in the inkhorn riddle.

A weeping male in religious poetry is the attendant of Saint Guthlac in *Guthlac B*. As in the Old English prose *Life of Saint Guthlac* (see above, 3–4), though with more elaboration, he weeps at the news that Guthlac is soon to die:

Pa wæs wop and heaf,
geongum geocer sefa, geomrende hyge
[...], He þæs onbæru
habban ne meahte, ac he hate let
torn þoliende tearas geotan,
weallan wægdropan. (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, p. 79, ll. 1047–48, 1054–57)

Then there was weeping/lamentation and mourning, a sad mood for the young man, a grieving mind ... He could not keep his feelings in check but, enduring his grief, he let his hot tears pour forth, welling drops.

The *Guthlac B* poet also contributes an emotive description of the attendant's weeping on his journey to inform Guthlac's sister of his death:

Him þæs wopes hring
torne gemonade. Teagor yðum weol,
hate hleordropan, ond on hreþre wæg
micle modceare. (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, p. 87, ll. 1339–42)

An outpouring of weeping distressingly reminded him of [Guthlac's death]. His tears welled in waves, hot drops on his cheeks, and in his breast, he bore great grief of spirit.¹⁸

This added detail (it is not in the Latin) enhances the sense of the attendant's love for his master. We have seen similar displays of grief in prose saints' lives, but it is significant, in a poetic context, that the weeper in *Guthlac B* is a servant rather than someone from the elite class that Old English poetry normally focuses on. In *Guthlac B* the attendant does not even merit a name (he is Beccel in the prose version and its source). Earlier he had been portrayed as lacking in courage—"ða afyrht wearð/ar elnes beloren" (ll. 1326–27), "then he became frightened, the messenger, dispossessed of courage"—and as "unhyðig" (l. 1138), "unhappy", rather than displaying heroic resolution.

In *The Dream of the Rood* (Krapp 1932a, pp. 61–65), the speaking cross relates that it and the two other crosses on Calvary stood weeping (*greotende*, l. 70) after the death of Jesus. The cross portrays itself as a wretched figure in the first part of the poem, abject and passive, while Christ is presented as an active warrior, a young hero, strong and resolute (*strang ond stiðmod*, l. 40). Christ the heroic figure does not weep, but the cross and his companions, lesser beings, express their grief through tears. Of course, if any event in world history was deserving of the tears in Anglo-Saxon England it was the death of Christ. Indeed, the cross exclaims that all creation wept at the time of his death (*weop eal gesceaft*, l. 55).

The two other male figures who weep in distress in Old English hagiographical poetry are more problematic: Matheus and Andreas in *Andreas* (Krapp 1932a, pp. 3–51). Not only are Matheus and Andreas saints (and we have seen in a previous section that saints normally do not weep in distress); they are also presented in *Andreas* in the language of Germanic heroism—they are mighty warriors, and as such should not weep. But they do: a double incongruity.

Influenced by secular traditional poetry, and particularly by *Beowulf* (see Riedinger 1993; Powell 2002; Orchard 2016; North and Bintley 2016, pp. 62–81), *Andreas* begins by describing the twelve apostles in Germanic terms as heroic figures: they are valiant in war (Krapp 1932a, *fyrðhwate*, l. 8), strong warriors (*rofe rincas*, l. 9). Then the poet focuses in on Matheus:

Eadig ond onmod, he mid elne forð
wyrðode wordum wuldres aldor. (ll. 54–55)

Blessed and resolute, with courage he continued to show honor in his words towards the Lord of glory.

In the very next sentence after this expression of praise for the saint's *ellen*, "courage", however, Matheus is presented as weeping with miserable tears (*wepende werægum tearum*, l. 59) due to his torments at the hands of the Mermedonians. He vows to God that he is willing to endure death (ll. 72–75), but the tears are incongruous in their poetic context.

The tears of Matheus might be viewed as excusable, in that he is not the protagonist of the legend but a passive figure in need of rescue by the powerful Andreas, but the idea of a passive saint is in itself an incongruity: Matheus is still an apostle, and he is portrayed as heroic. In addition, the powerful Andreas himself succumbs to weeping in his time of torment in Mermedonia. The narrative is replete with references to Andreas's prowess, for example, as he prepares to set out on his mission: he is "bold in thought" (*briste on gebance*, 237), "a brave-spirited warrior" (*cempa collenferhð*, l. 538), "hard in battle" (*wiges heard*, l. 839) and so on. But in his time of trial Andreas weeps as he recounts the extent of his suffering: "weop werigferð" (l. 1400), "he wept weary in his spirit", taking heart eventually when God promises to protect him and tells him not to weep: "Ne wep þone wræcsid" (l. 1431), "Do not weep for your wretched experience".

The *Andreas* poet clearly wishes to adhere to the details of the story as they were inherited from the Latin source (North and Bintley 2016, pp. 4–6), and so faithfully transmits the references to Andreas and Matheus weeping during their torment. The saints express emotion in a human way: they are flawed individuals from the genre of apocryphal acts of the apostles, as discussed above (p. 8), rather than figures of perfection. God has to rebuke the "sinful" Andreas (*synnig*, l. 921) for showing reluctance about undertaking his mission to Mermedonia (ll. 926–32) and again when he ends his ministry there prematurely (ll. 1669–74). As suggested by Herbison, the *Andreas* poet gets himself into something of a generic bind in converting intractable source material into "regular" hagiography (Herbison 2000). The incongruity of *Andreas* is that, while including inherited humanizing details typical of the apocryphal acts, the poet also follows the idealizing approach of hagiography as adapted to the mode of traditional Old English poetry, in which heroes are beyond human frailty and negativity. This incongruity is apparent in the inclusion of apostolic tears as well as in the wider range of features noted by Herbison.

3. Tears of Compunction

The emotion of compunction is the cause of some of the most copious tears in Old English writings. Compunction is a special kind of distress: it is that "pricking" or "stinging" (Greek *katanyxis*, Latin *compunctio*, Old English *inbryrdness* [on the Old English vocabulary of compunction, see Izdebska 2020, pp. 85–86; Thornbury 2007; McEntire 1990, pp. 81–88]) of the heart that "may strengthen [one's] relationship with God and effect [one's] own salvation" (McCormack 2015, p. 145). Developed originally in the Eastern church (see Mellas 2020, pp. 1–24; Hunt 2004; Chryssavgis 2004; Hausherr and Hufstader 1982), the idea of compunction became a central feature of Christian spirituality in the early medieval West, where its principles were most influentially propounded by Gregory the Great (see Williams and Steenbrugge 2020; McEntire 1986, 1990). Gregory discusses compunction in his *Dialogues* (de Vogüé 1978–1980, II, pp. 398–402), which were widely known in Anglo-Saxon England and indeed translated into Old English (Hecht; see Lapidge 2006, p. 304). Among thinkers who took up Gregory's understanding of compunction was Alcuin of York in a passage in his *De virtutibus et vitiis* (PL 101, 613–38D), a work also widely known in Anglo-Saxon England and also translated into Old English (Warner 1917, pp. 99–100; see Szarmach 1990; Lapidge 2006, p. 251; Clayton 2013).¹⁹

Gregory recognizes two kinds of compunction, as transmitted in the Old English version of the *Dialogues*:

soðlice ealdorlice syndon tu cyn þære inbryrdnesse, þæt is, þonne seo sawl þyrsteð 7 lysteþ 3odes rices, ærest heo byþ inbryrded mid e3e 7 æfter þon mid lufan. Ærest heo swænced hi sylfe mid tearum, þonne heo 3emynað þa 3yltas hire yfelra dæda 7 ondrædeþ, þæt heo scyle for þam þrowian þa ecan cwicsusla; 7 þonne heo byð mid lan3re nearonesse þære 3nornun3e forht 7 3eswænced 7

fornæmed, þonne æt nehstan byþ acænned of bældre forzifnesse sorhreasnes, 7 þæt mod byþ inæled in þære lufan heofonlicra zefeana, 7 seo sawl, þe ær weop, þæt heo ne sceolde beon zelæded to þam ecan wite, heo onzinned æfter þan weopan biterlice, forþon þe hire þynceð lanȝ seo ylding 7 seo uferung, hwæne heo came to zode. (Hecht 1900, pp. 244–45, ii. 34)

In truth there are principally two kinds of compunction, that is, when the soul thirsts for and desires the kingdom of God, first it is stimulated with fear and after that with love. First it oppresses itself with tears when it remembers the sins of its evil deeds and fears that it must suffer eternal hell-torment for them; and when it is afraid and oppressed and worn out with the long-lasting distress of lamentation, then finally the security of having been boldly forgiven will be born, and the mind will be inspired in the love of heavenly joy, and the soul, which previously wept that it should not be led to eternal torment, will begin after that to weep bitterly because the wait and the delay seem long to it until it may come to God.²⁰

Compunction is an emotion particularly associated with monastic spirituality as affirmed by the Rule of St. Benedict (White 2008, chp 4, p. 18),²¹ but in Anglo-Saxon England (as elsewhere) it is also widely urged upon the faithful more generally. McEntire stresses the importance of sermons in transmitting the doctrine to laypeople (McEntire 1990, pp. 92–108).

Ælfric adopts Gregory’s distinction when he writes in Homily 9 of the first series of his *Catholic Homilies*,

On twa wisan byð se mann onbryrd ærest he him ondræt hellewite 7 bewæpð his synna syððan he nimð eft lufe to gode; þonne onginð he to murcnienne 7 þincð him to lang hwæne he beo genumen of þyses lifes earfoðnyssum. 7 gebroht to ecere reste.²² (Clemoes 1997, ll. 89–92)

In two ways is a person stimulated to compunction: first he fears the torment of hell and weeps for his sins; afterwards he again feels love for God; then he begins to grieve and it seems to him too long until he be taken from the afflictions of this life and brought to eternal rest.

Most references to tears of compunction in Old English prose texts are to the former kind, those of penitence and remorse for past sins. Thus, to give a few instances from a range of literature, *Blickling* Homily 5 speaks of overcoming the threat of hell with “fasts and prayers and the shedding of tears” (*mid fæstenum & mid gebædum & mid teara gytum*, 61, ll. 19–20) (Morris 1874/1876/1880, pp. 54–65). In Homily 3 of his second series of *Catholic Homilies*, Ælfric directs that each member of the faithful should “weep for their sins and atone for them with true repentance according to the direction of wise teachers” (*he sceal his synna bewepan. and mid soðre behreowsunge gebetan æfter wisra lareowa tæcunge*, ll. 226–27) (Godden 1979, pp. 19–28). I have already referred to the beginning of *Vercelli* Homily 4, which urges people to weep and fear for their sins (p. 2, above).

Among narrative texts, tears of compunction are shed, for example, in the *Old English Martyrology*, where the penitent sinner Saint Pelagia weeps profusely: “weop heo sona swa ðæt hyre fleowon þa tearas of ðam eagum swa swa flod” (Rauer 2013, p. 202), “she wept at once so that her tears streamed from her eyes like rivers”; Saint Mary Magdelene does likewise (Rauer 2013, p. 133). Particularly copious are the tears of compunction of another penitent sinner, Saint Mary of Egypt, whose moment of conversion comes at the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. According to the account of her conversion that Mary gives in the *Old English Life*,

Pa onhran soðlice min mod and þa eagan minre heortan hælo andgit, mid me sylfre þendende þæt me þone ingang belucen þa unfeormeganda minra misdæda. Ða ongan ic biterlice wepan and swiðe gedrefed mine breost cnyssan and of

inweardre heortan heofende forðbrigan þa geomorlican siccetunga. (Magennis 2002, ll. 484–89; Skeat 1881–1900, II, ll. 424–29)

Then knowledge of salvation truly touched my mind and the eyes of my heart, when I reflected that the inexpiable circumstances of my misdeeds had closed the entrance against me. Then I began to weep bitterly and to beat my breast in great tribulation and, from deep in my heart, to bring forth sorrowful sighs.

Mary recounts how she ran weeping on her journey to the River Jordan (*wepende be þam siðfæte arn*, Magennis 2002, l. 570; Skeat 1881–1900, II, ll. 494–95) and how she wept continually as she began her solitary life of repentance in the desert, strengthened by her devotion to the Virgin Mary (Magennis 2002, ll. 629–30, 735–38; Skeat 1881–1900, II, ll. 541–42, 546–49).

The *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt* also has what may be seen as tears of compunction of the second kind, tears of desire for heaven. These occur in the response of the monk Zosimus to his encounter with Mary. To Zosimus, as to the reader of her *Life*, Mary is a superior being, a manifestation of heavenly perfection in the world, and he continuously weeps in her presence. Some of Zosimus's tears arise from self-pity and misplaced grief, but he also weeps in awe and desire for the transcendence that Mary represents. She walks on water, can recite the *Credo* and *Pater noster* even though she has never been taught them, and somehow she knows Zosimus's name and details about his monastery; at the time of her death she leaves a written message for Zosimus, despite having told him that she had never learned to read or write. In the face of such supernatural powers, Zosimus is overcome with weeping: he weeps as she begins the salutary story of her life—"Se ealda mid tearum ofergoten ongan bitterlice wepan" (Magennis 2002, l. 359; Skeat 1881–1900, II, l. 322), "The old man suffused with tears began to weep bitterly"—and as she continues it—"soðlice þa eorðan mid tearum ofergeotende" (Magennis 2002, l. 408; Skeat 1881–1900, II, l. 363), "truly soaking the ground with his tears".

Tears of desire for heaven are also shed by Ælfric's Saint Agatha in his *Lives of Saints*, fervent in her wish for martyrdom—"Ðis heo cwæð mid wope" (l. 22), "she spoke this with weeping" (Skeat 1881–1900, I, pp. 194–209, l. 22)—while in Ælfric's life of Saint Cuthbert in the second series of his *Catholic Homilies* the hermit Herebert prays "with eyes fluttering with tears" (*mid floterendum tearum*) that he may travel to heaven at the same time as Cuthbert (Godden 1979, pp. 81–92, ll. 314–15). Elsewhere, Ælfric preaches that we should long for heaven "mid modes geomerunge 7 mid manegum tearum", "with lamentation of the mind and with many tears" (Pope 1967/1968, II, pp. 567–83, l. 146). In the *Old English Martyrology* it is reported that Saint Lupus was accustomed to praying in tears (*on wependum gebedum*, Rauer 2013, p. 146), and in the anonymous *Life of the Seven Sleepers* there may be an element of compunction in the tears that the emperor Theodosius sheds over the risen saints, figures of heavenly transfiguration: "he þa beclypte hi ealle, and for þære micelan blysse synderlice he weop ofer ælcne" (Magennis 1994, ll. 756–57; Skeat 1881–1900, ll. 823–24), "then he embraced them all, and because of his joy he wept over each of them separately". As he weeps over them, it seems to Theodosius that he is standing before God himself in his majesty: "and nu me þincð eac swilce ic stande gesewenlice æt his wuldorfullan mægenþrymme foran and his agene stefne gehyre" (Magennis 2002, ll. 761–62; Skeat 1881–1900, ll. 827–30), "and now it seems to me also as though I stand visibly before his glorious majesty and hear his own voice".

The theme of compunction has also been discerned in Old English poetry, specifically *The Wanderer* (see Palmer 2004), and one might also suggest that this theme provides the motivating emotion in *The Dream of the Rood*; in neither of these poems, however, is compunction mentioned specifically.²³ Frances McCormack interprets the "bloody tears" (*blodigum tearum*, l. 1174) of Christ III (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, pp. 27–49) shed by personified trees at the time of Christ's crucifixion, as tears of compunction (McCormack 2015),²⁴ though these might also be taken to be tears of sympathy and grief: a few lines later it is stated that the trees "became sorrowful" (*unrot gewearð*, l. 1182) as they perceived the suffering of the Lord. Clearer-cut examples of tears of compunction come in the homiletic

piece *Judgement Day II* (Dobbie 1942, pp. 58–67) and the epilogue to Cynewulf's *Juliana* (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, pp. 113–133). In *Judgement Day II* the penitent speaker calls upon his eyes to send forth tears:

Ic bidde eow benum nu ða
 þæt ge ne wandian wiht for tearum,
 ac dreorige hleor dreccað mid wope
 and sealtum dropum sona ofergeotaþ,
 and geopeniað man ecum drihtne. (ll. 33–37)

I ask you now then with supplications that you do not at all turn aside from tears but that you drench my sorrowing cheeks with weeping and at once flood them with salty drops and that you reveal my guilt to the eternal Lord.

Judgement Day II mentions tears of compunction again as it preaches the necessity for repentance while there is still time:

Nu þu scealt greotan, tearas geotan,
 þa hwile tima sy and tid wopes;
 nu is halwende þæt man her wepe
 and dædbote do drihtne to willan. (Dobbie 1942, ll. 82–85)

Now you must weep, pour forth tears, while there is time and tide for weeping; now it is salutary that one weep here and make repentance according to the Lord's will.

The reference to compunction at the end of *Juliana* comes in a strikingly personal passage, in which the speaker declares,

Sar eal gemon,
 synna wunde, þe ic siþ opþe ær
 geworhte in worulde. Þæt ic wopig sceal
 tearum mænan. (ll. 709–12)

I remember all the pains, the wounds of sin, that I did in the world, recently or in the past. Weeping I must sorrow for that with tears.

He laments that he has felt shame too late for his sinful deeds (*Wæs an tid to læt/þæt ic yfeldæda ær gescomede*, ll. 712–13). In this epilogue, as he contemplates his own death, the speaker imaginatively applies the image of tears of compunction as part of an emotional recognition of his own unworthiness and his need for intercession from Saint Juliana and from anyone who recites his poem (*þe þis gied wræce*, l. 719).

The *Juliana* image is also notable as an original contribution by Cynewulf rather than being translated or adapted from a Latin source, as is the case with most of the instances referred to in this section. Even *Judgement Day II* very much takes its lead in the portrayal of tears from images in its source, Bede's poem *De die iudicii* (Fraipont 1955, pp. 439–44; Allen and Calder 1976, pp. 208–12).²⁵

Tears in Old English are almost invariably the result of external factors and are usually shed in some kind of social context. The tears of compunction, on the other hand, spring from personal introspection, and lack a social dimension. They may be shed in the presence of others (Mary of Egypt asking the Virgin Mary for aid, for example, or Theodosius weeping before the Seven Sleepers), but they are not aimed at anyone other than the self in the recognition of its relationship to God. Nor are tears of compunction gendered, even in Old English poetry: "Cynewulf" sheds tears of compunction in *Juliana*, thereby rejecting the values of the secular heroic world with its disapproval of male weeping, while the preaching in *Judgement Day II* may be seen as directed at both men and women.

4. Other Tears

Tears of *supplication* are a fairly familiar theme in religious prose (but not in extant verse²⁶). Such tears can accompany fervent entreaty of the Almighty, as in *Blickling Homily*

7 (Morris 1874/1876/1880, pp. 82–97), in which the holy souls in hell beg Christ “mid wependre halsunga” (ibid., 87, l. 8), “with weeping supplication”, for release as he harrows hell. According to *Vercelli Homily 15*, the Virgin Mary will weepingly ask her son to have mercy on the host of sinners at the Last Judgement: “þonne ariseð heo mid wependre stefne 7 gefealleð to Cristes cneowum 7 to his fotum” (Scragg 1992, ll. 143–144), “then she will arise with weeping voice and fall to Christ’s knees and to his feet”. The *Old English Martyrology* reports that Saint Gregory interceded with his tears and with his prayers (*mid his tearum ond mid his gebedan*, Rauer 2013, p. 64) for the soul of the pagan emperor Trajan (see O’Loughlin and Conrad-O’Brian 1993).²⁷

Examples of tears in supplication to saints are those of the *wylf*, “female servant”, in Ælfric’s *Life of Saint Swithun* (Skeat 1881–1900, II, pp. 440–71), who, condemned to be flogged, begs Swithun to help her: “mid wope clypode to ðam halgan swyðune þæt he gehulpe hire earmre” (ll. 169–170), “she called out with weeping to the holy Swithun that he help her in her wretchedness”. In the prose *Life of Saint Guthlac* (the episode is not included in the *Guthlac* poems), relatives of the nobleman Hwætred ask the saint, “wepende” (Gonser 1909, chp. 12, l. 37), “weeping”, to exorcise the evil spirit that possesses him; interestingly, there is no mention of weeping at the corresponding point in the Latin original (compare chp. 41 of Felix’s *Vita*, Colgrave 1956).

The tears of supplication mentioned so far are “genuine” tears addressed sincerely to an authority figure. There is one example in Old English of feigned or manipulative tears (though it could be argued that to some extent all tears of supplication have an element of manipulation).²⁸ This comes in the Old English translation of chapters from the *Vitae Patrum*, where a monk is deceived by the fake weeping of a woman who wishes to seduce him: she approaches him “with a weeping voice” (*woplicre stefne*, l. 29) and “crying, lamenting” (*woperiende*, l. 32) (Assmann 1889, pp. 109–207, l. 32).²⁹ The monk has a narrow escape.

Tears of *sympathy* or *compassion* also occur occasionally in Old English hagiographical prose: tears of sympathy or compassion are one kind of weeping regarded as unproblematically appropriate for holy men and women. We noticed in an earlier section a couple of instances of saints weeping in sympathy, including one involving Saint Martin (p. 5, above). Martin also weeps in Ælfric’s *Life of Saint Martin* in *Lives of Saints* when he has pity on his fellow monks who are distressed that he is soon to die: “þa wearð se halga wer mid þysum wordum astyrod. and clypode mid wope” (Skeat 1881–1900, l. 1341–1342), “then the holy man became moved at these words and called out with weeping”; the episode is also in the *Blickling* version of the life of Martin (Morris 1874/1876/1880, p. 225, ll. 24–26). The transvestite Saint Euphrosyne weeps for her distraught father when he visits her in her monastery and does not recognize her in her monkly garb: “þa wearð heo eall mid tearum geond-goten” (*Life of Saint Euphrosyne*, Skeat 1881–1900, l. 234), “then she was all suffused with tears”. In one of the Old English lives of Saint Margaret it is the saint who is the object of pity, when women weep at the torment she must endure: “And ealle þa fæmnan þe þe þær stoden weopen bitterlice for þæm blode” (p. 118), “And all the women who stood there wept bitterly because of the blood” (Clayton and Magennis 1994, pp. 112–39, ll. 4–5).

Images of weeping in supplication and weeping in sympathy in Old English prose have invariably been transmitted from Latin sources. There is one occurrence of sympathetic weeping in the poetry, and it is an occurrence that is the contribution of the Old English poet rather than being inherited. In the free adaptation of Genesis in *Genesis A*, the narrator pauses in the account of the killing of Abel to comment that it is not in vain that we weep at this baleful story:

We þæt spell magon,
wælgrimme wyrd, wope cwīðan,
nales holunga. (Krapp 1931, ll. 995–997)

Not at all without cause can we lament that story with tears, that slaughter-grim fate.

The evoking of communal tears in response to the story of Cain and Abel, which brought violence to humanity, heightens the emotion of the narration. Such a touch, involving narrator and audience, is not paralleled elsewhere in the poem, however, or indeed elsewhere in Old English poetry.

Other kinds of weeping appear sporadically in the corpus. In the prose *Life of Saint Guthlac*, Beccel is deceived by the devil into wanting to kill the saint: regretting his sin, he confesses to Guthlac: “and þa sona mid tearum him his synne andette” (Gonser 1909, chp. 7, l. 32), “and then at once with tears he confessed his sin to him”. Beccel’s tears may be seen as denoting *shame*. Tears of shame are shed too in Ælfric’s account of the emperor Theodosius’s response to the rebuke of Saint Ambrose after an infamous massacre in Thessalonica: “He sæt þa on hys bure bitterlice wepende” (l. 80), “He sat in his room weeping bitterly”; “he beot hys breost, bitterlice wepende” (l. 131), “he beat his breast, weeping bitterly” (Homily 26 in Pope 1967/1968, II, pp. 762–69).³⁰

Tears of *reverence* or *awe* are portrayed in the *Life of Saint Euphrosyne*, where a one-eyed man weeps as he kisses the saint’s body and is healed by touching it (Skeat 1881–1900, l. 321). In the *Old English Martyrology*, Saint Eadberht weeps to learn of the uncorrupted state of Saint Cuthbert’s body (Rauer 2013, p. 98). The tears of Zosimus before Saint Mary of Egypt, mentioned above, express awe and reverence for her, an aspect of the compunction he experiences.

The other “positive” tears in Old English are those of *joy* or *relief*. Joy is expressed through weeping at the reuniting of families in the romance tales of Eustace and Apollonius of Tyre. Eustace weeps with great joy (*for micelre blisse weop*, *Life of Saint Eustace*, Skeat 1881–1900, l. 364) on being reunited with his wife, and the whole family weeps (l. 382), giving thanks to God, when the sons are also found. In *Apollonius of Tyre* Arcestrate weeps on being reunited with Apollonius (Goolden 1958, p. 38, l. 7), and all the local people join in: “And hig weopon ða ealle and eac blissodon” (p. 38, l. 12), “And they all wept and also rejoiced”.³¹ There is much weeping for joy in the *Life of Saint Nicholas* (Treharne 1997, pp. 83–100 (text), 101–117 (translation)): for example, a poor man weeps each time when Nicholas leaves gifts of gold for him on three nights (ll. 93, 102, 114–15).³² Similarly, in the *Life of Saint Giles* sailors weep when the saint calms a storm (Treharne 1997, l. 78); Giles himself weeps when the Lord shows him a place to live (l. 174) and again when he finds a water spring (l. 240). In the Old English translation of chapters from the *Vitae Patrum* a monk weeps for joy having been spared from sexual sin (Assmann 1889, l. 121).³³ In *Saint Mary of Egypt* Zosimus expresses joy (*wynsumigende*, Magennis 2002, l. 902; Skeat 1881–1900, l. 756) to find out Mary’s name after she has passed away, and he goes on to weep glorifying God at her miraculous journey (Magennis 2002, ll. 908–09; Skeat 1881–1900, ll. 761–62); this weeping may be seen as combining joy with reverence at such wonders, as well at sorrow at Mary’s passing.

In the romance-like (see further Anlezark 2006) biblical story of Joseph and his brothers transmitted in the Old English *Heptateuch*, Joseph sheds tears of joy at being united with his brothers: “And he weop and clypode hludre stemne” (Genesis 45:2, Marsden 2008, p. 79), “And he wept and called out with a loud voice”; and again, “And he clypte hira ælcne and cyste hig and weop” (45:15, Marsden 2008, p. 80), “and he embraced each of them and kissed them and wept”. As Jonathan Wilcox points out, however, the mention of Joseph’s tears is reduced in the Old English: verses 2 (“And he lifted up his voice with weeping”) and 15 of Genesis (“And Joseph kissed all his brethren and wept upon every one of them”) are translated, but not verse 14 (“And falling upon the neck of his brother Benjamin he embraced him and wept, and Benjamin in like manner wept also on his neck”). Wilcox sees in this omission a “downplaying” of weeping in a male authority figure, and wonders, “Is the biblical account too ready to show its lead protagonist in tears for the comfort of an Anglo-Saxon audience?” (Wilcox 2012, p. 29).

Joseph has also wept upon first seeing Benjamin, concealing this weeping from his brothers: “And he wearþ swa swiþe astirod, þæt him feollon tearas for his broþor þingon and he eode into his beddclyfan and weop” (43:30, Marsden 2008, p. 77), “And he was so

severely afflicted that tears fell from him on account of his brother's experiences and he went into his bedchamber and wept" (Wilcox 2012, p. 23), closely paraphrasing the Vulgate original. Here Joseph's emotions are more conflicted—he experiences joy, yes, but he has also deceived his brothers (who have tried to murder him) and continues to deceive them, and his feelings towards them are distinctly mixed.³⁴

Also mixed are the feelings of the protagonist in the *Life of Saint Eustace* when tracked down by former acquaintances in his place of seclusion. As noted above, Eustace weeps when eventually reunited with his family, but he also weeps earlier in the narrative in this scene in which he is visited by old companions who do not recognize him at first. Eustace is joyful at seeing them, but they also remind him of the successful life he once had but lost, and he is also anxious to keep his identity from them. As he serves them a meal, he "gemunde hu hi him ær þenod[on]. and ne mihte forberan þæt he ne weope. ac eode ut and þwoh his eagan" (Skeat 1881–1900, ll. 262–64), "remembered how they had served him and could not forbear to weep but went out and washed his eyes".³⁵ In this affecting scene, reminiscent of Joseph meeting Benjamin, Eustace is overcome by emotion but manages to conceal that emotion from his guests.

These scenes in the *Hexateuch* and the *Life of Saint Eustace* of individuals retreating to a private room to weep are instances of a trope that occurs elsewhere in hagiography/romance texts, including one translated into Old English: we noticed, above, the private weeping of Theodosius (I) when rebuked about a massacre he had been responsible for. Withdrawal from public view indicates a turbulence of the mind that the affected person, who is someone in authority, wishes to conceal from others. An analogous scene occurs in the *Legend of the Seven Sleepers* when Theodosius (II) is grieved and confused about a heresy that has sprung up in his time, though this scene does not specifically mention weeping among its signs of distress (Magennis 1992, ll. 359–60; Skeat 1881–1900, ll. 391–96).³⁶ Privacy to express emotion is not otherwise sought by people in Old English writings.

There is one instance of tears of joy in Old English poetry: in *Elene*. Elene weeps for joy at the recovery of the nails from Christ's cross:

Pa wæs wopes hring,
hat heafodwylm ofer hleor goten,
(nalles for torne tearas feollon
ofer wira gespon), wuldres gefylled
cwena willa. (Krapp 1932a, ll. 1131–35)

Then there was the sound of weeping, a hot surge from her head poured over her cheeks (not at all for grief did tears fall upon her filigree clasp), the desire of the queen was fulfilled with glory.

Unlike the prose instances of tears of joy, this striking image is an emotive addition on the part of Cynewulf to the inherited text.

5. Concluding Remarks

Tearas feollon widely in Old English prose and poetry, and most of them presented as appropriate and worthy; but some as inappropriate, including tears of *tristitia* and tears of distress shed by active males. Tears in Old English express individual or communal sorrow and pain (as well as other emotions), but, whether individual or communal, they do so almost invariably in a social setting, functioning gesturally in the presence of others. Only the practice of tears of compunction and the motif of tears shed in a private room lack this social dimension; in the latter case privacy is sought by a figure in authority who conceals his weeping, while in the former the person weeping looks inward, the presence of others being irrelevant.

The references to weeping cited in this study are mostly representative of the wider literary tradition in the early Middle Ages, with Old English texts, especially prose texts, passing on to vernacular audiences images inherited from Latin writings; in doing so, they

focus particularly on tears of compunction and tears of distress, familiar themes in early medieval Christendom. Yet close dependence on Latin originals can lead to incongruities, such as those that arise in the transmission of apocryphal acts and other untypical saints' lives, in which protagonists are shown not as perfected figures of sanctity in accordance with hagiographical convention but as flawed human beings who learn from experience. They shed unsaintly tears of distress. Some Old English translators seem unconcerned about such incongruity, and indeed the *Legend of the Seven Sleepers* (uniquely in Old English prose) actively embraces the humanity of its saints; but such portrayals are not acceptable to a purist like Ælfric.

Old English Christian poetry is freer in its treatment of sources, and has a number of images of weeping original to the vernacular works, not least in the poetry of Cynewulf (even more so if *Guthlac B* is accepted as Cynewulfian). Old English poetry also inherited from Germanic secular tradition an understanding that weeping is inappropriate in active men, an understanding that can be seen reflected in *Beowulf* but also in religious narrative, in which weeping is largely confined to women and groups. The idea of weeping as inappropriate for a hero leads to incongruity in *Andreas*, however, in which both Matheus and Andreas shed tears of distress in their times of torment. The Old English poet is faithful to the source in transmitting the weeping of the two saints, but thereby contradicts not only the idea of active men not weeping but also the principle that saints don't weep: a compound discrepancy. The compunctive weeping of "Cynewulf" signals his repudiation of the values of the heroic world.

The understanding that active men should not weep may be seen as operative in the culture more widely than traditional poetry, as Wilcox's argument that the *Hexateuch* translator deliberately reduces the male weeping in the Joseph story suggests. The idea that grown men should not weep also gives resonance to the weeping of the Seven Sleepers (heightened in the Old English), who come across as little more than children in their unheroic response to persecution.

We have also noted other kinds of tears in the Old English corpus, including those of supplication, sympathy and joy. Tears of these kinds are confined to specifically Christian literature, and, as with other weeping in Old English—with the exception of the motif of an authority figure withdrawing to an inner room—they are public. There are no tears of supplication in secular poetry, as sympathy is in short supply there, while joy (as noted by [Pàroli 1990](#), pp. 243–44; [Magennis 1992](#)) is associated with laughter, not tears.

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Abbreviations

ASS	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i> . Edited by J. Bollandus et al. 68 vols. Antwerp and Brussels: Johannes Meursium et al., 1643–1940.
ASPR	The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records. Edited by George Philip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie. 6 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–1953.
DOE	<i>Dictionary of Old English in Electronic Form, A-I</i> . 2018. Ed. Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2018. www.doe.utoronto.ca (accessed on 3 May 2021).
EETS	Early English Text Society:
OS	Original Series,
SS	Supplementary Series.
LS	<i>Ælfric's Lives of Saints</i> , ed. and trans. Skeat.
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> . Edited by J.-P. Migne. 221 vols. Paris: Garnier and J.-P. Migne, 1844–1864.

Notes

- 1 With the exception of *Beowulf*, all references to Old English poetry are to the six-volume Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (ASPR) edition; references to *Beowulf* are to (Fulk et al. 2008).
- 2 *Wop*, which is of course etymologically related to *wepan*, translates Latin words for weeping, as in “wop and toþa gristbitung”, “weeping and gnashing of teeth”, for “fletus et stridor dentium” (Matthew 13:42) (Liuzza 1994 and 2000, p. 28), and “wopes tid [...] hleahtres tid”, “a time of weeping and a time of laughter”, for “tempus flendi and tempus ridendi” (Ecclesiastes 3:4) (Scragg 1992, p. 222: Homily 11, ll. 28–29); we find rhetorical phrases such as *wop and hrop* and *heaf and wop*, indicating different aspects of distress, but not *wop and tearas* or the like; and *wop* is directly linked to tears in Old English poetry, as in *Elene*, where the saint experiences “wopes hring” (l. 1131) “the sound of weeping” as her tears flow, while in *Judgement Day II* the speaker’s sorrowing cheeks are drenched with weeping—“dreorige hleor . . . dreccað mid wope” (l. 35)—and the speaker in *Cynewulf’s Juliana* declares that he “must sorrow weeping (*wopig*) with tears” (*ic wopig sceal/tearum mænan*, ll. 711–12). *Elene* is ed. (Krapp 1932a, pp. 66–102; *Judgement Day II*, ed. Dobbie 1942, pp. 58–67; *Juliana*, ed. Krapp and Dobbie 1936, pp. 113–133).
- 3 Unattributed translations are my own.
- 4 References to the Latin psalms are to the Roman Psalter (Weber 1953), the version used for the *Paris Psalter*; other than for the psalms, Latin biblical references and quotations and their English translations below follow (Edgar and Kinney 2011–2013).
- 5 Even the weeping of the speaker in *The Wife’s Lament* is not private, since she tells the poem’s audience about it; and in a scene in *Guthlac B* highlighted below Guthlac’s attendant is alone when he weeps in grief at the saint’s death; but he would have wept anyway had someone been with him.
- 6 Goolden includes a text of the Latin original printed parallel to the Old English translation.
- 7 Although both *Euphrosyne* and *Eustace* are included in the main manuscript of Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*, neither is by Ælfric; the same is true of *Seven Sleepers* and *Mary of Egypt*, both of which are discussed below.
- 8 *Passio septem dormientium*, (Magennis 1994, pp. 74–91; also Skeat 1881–1900, I, pp. 488–541). See also ll. 57–58, 91 (Skeat 1881–1900, ll. 65–66, 102–3).
- 9 On *Saint Mary of Egypt*, see further, p. 14, below.
- 10 See Genesis 21:14; Hagar weeps at 21:16 (“she lifted up her voice and wept”), but her elegiac speech is contributed by the Old English poet. The Old English prose *Genesis* closely follows the Latin, reading “sarlice wepende”, “wept bitterly” (Marsden 2008, pp. 8–88, l. 46).
- 11 *The Acts of Saint Cyriacus*, ed. ASS, *Maius* I, 445–48; Allen and Calder 1976, pp. 60–68: compare chp. 12, “I shall not rest in this matter until the Lord grants my desire”.
- 12 (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, pp. 15–27): “þær wæs wopes hring” (l. 537), “there was the sound of weeping”.
- 13 (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, pp. 15–27), “[C]erge reotað/fore onsyn eces deman” (ll. 835–36), “the sorrowful ones will weep before the face of the eternal Judge”.
- 14 (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, pp. 27–49), “Beornas gretað,/wepað wanende wergum stefnum” (ll. 991–992), “Men will cry, lamenting with weary voices”; “þær hy arasade reotað ond beofiað/fore frean forhte” (ll. 1229–1230), “There, having been found out, they will weep and tremble, terrified before the Lord”; etc.
- 15 (Dobbie 1942, pp. 58–67): “Hwæt miht þu on þa tid . . . þearfe gewepan”? (l. 177), “What can you gain by weeping at that time?”
- 16 (Krapp 1932b, pp. 177–5–150). For example, at 79:5, l. 3: “Tyhtest us and fedest teara hlafe”, “You will instruct and feed us with the bread of tears”; following “cibabis nos pane lacrimarum” (Psalms 79:6); 136:1, l. 2: “þær we sittað and sare wepað”, “there we sit and weep sorrowfully”, following “illic sedimus et flevimus” (Psalms 136:1). In a couple of instances the *Paris Psalter* expands slightly on the Latin original: see mention of “ðisse sargan dene”, “this sorry valley”, above, p. 2; note also the “deorcum tearum”, “dark tears”, of 79:5, l. 4, where the adjective has been contributed by the translator (compare Psalms 79:6: “potum dabis nobis in lacrimis”).
- 17 Dockray-Miller also refers to Hrothgar’s “waning masculinity” (p. 452) and “faltering masculinity” (p. 458).
- 18 Although the attendant is alone in his weeping on this journey, his tears are not deliberately private: he would weep just as much if other people were present.
- 19 Clayton identifies the Old English translation of part of Alcuin’s *De virtutibus et vitiis* as the work of Ælfric (Ælfric’s translation does not include Alcuin’s account of *compunctio*).
- 20 As Old English *Alcuin* puts it, following Gregory’s distinction, “Of twifealden onbrerdnysse aspringeð 7 gewunigeð teares flowen; hwilon þone se mann, swa swa ic ær cwæð, gemuned his yfele weorc 7 for þan wepeð; hwilon eac, þone se gode mann for his gode weorcan wilneð, þæt he heonan mote, and he for þan wepeð, þe him lysteð Godes andweardnysse, 7 þæs gefean, þe he æfter swanc” (Warner 1917, p. 99), “The flowing of tears arises and continues from two kinds of compunction; sometimes when the person, as I said earlier, remembers their evil acts and weeps for that reason; sometimes also when the good person wishes because of their good works that they may travel hence and they weep for that reason, that they desire the presence of God and the joy that they have toiled for”.

- 21 In the cited passage Saint Benedict counsels his monks, “Confess your past sins to God each day in prayer with tears and sighs”. See also (Chryssavgis 2004).
- 22 McEntire notes that among Old English homilists, Ælfric is particularly “orthodox” in his understanding of the doctrine (McEntire 1990, pp. 99–108).
- 23 In *The Dream of the Rood* (Krapp 1932a, pp. 61–65) it is mentioned that at the death of Christ “all creation wept” (*Weop eal gesceaft*, l. 55); see also discussion of the three crosses weeping at the death of Christ, above, p. 11.
- 24 McCormack also draws attention to the “bloody tears of compunction” of Peter in the Old Saxon poem the *Heliand* after his denial of Christ (ibid., pp. 152–53).
- 25 On the importance of compunction in the writings of Bede, see (McEntire 1990, pp. 100–102).
- 26 There is perhaps an element of supplication in the tears of Andreas, however, as he complains to God about the extent of his suffering at the hands of the Mermedonians (see above, p. 12).
- 27 O’Loughlin and Conrad-O’Briain discuss the origin of the theologically suspect idea of baptism by tears. Baptism by tears also appears in the *Old English Martyrology* entry for the Holy Innocents: the mothers of the Innocents “were baptised by tears (*mid tearum gefyllode*) for the suffering they saw” (Rauer 2013, pp. 40–41).
- 28 On genuine and feigned/fake tears, see (Vingerhoets 2013, pp. 32–33; Lutz 1999, pp. 55–58).
- 29 Translating *Vitae Patrum*, 5.5.37, ed. PL 73, 884A (“plorans”).
- 30 Similarly, in Ælfric’s *Letter to Sigeward* (*On the Old and New Testament*) a young man repents his sinful ways, falling at the feet of Saint John: “[he] weop swiðe bitterlice, and he bifiende feoll to Iohannes fotum mid geomerunge and þoterunge, mid tearum ofergoten” (Marsden 2008, ll. 793–795), “he wept bitterly, and he fell trembling at the feet of John with groaning and wailing, suffused with tears”.
- 31 (Mills 2016, pp. 171–72), draws attention to one instance of men weeping at a reunion in a text with Anglo-Saxon connections, though not in Old English. This is in the eleventh-century *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, in which, with no suggestion of inappropriateness, the royal brothers Knútr and Haraldr weep, kiss and embrace on being reunited in Denmark. The *Encomiast* is perhaps drawing upon associations of refined weeping in the classical tradition (as reflected also in romance and hagiography), to which he was evidently indebted.
- 32 In addition, sailors weep at the feet of Nicholas, having been rescued at sea through his help (l. 209); other sailors weep at a miracle of an increase of grain (l. 264).
- 33 Weeping is not mentioned at the corresponding point in the PL edition: see *Vitae patrum*, 5.5.38, ed. PL 37, 885B.
- 34 In order to conceal his emotions from his brothers, Joseph retreats to a private room, or, as one variant of the Old English has it, a beer store, *beorclyfa*. It is likely that *beorclyfa* is a mistake for *burclyfa*, “inner room” (as suggested by DOE, s.v. *cleofa*); but, in a sensitive reading of the passage, Wilcox picks up on the *beorclyfa* reading, which would have made perfect (ironic) sense to an Anglo-Saxon audience: “The very idea of a beer-room, even if it was simply a place for storing the fermented drink, ought presumably to conjure up conviviality and happiness in an Anglo-Saxon audience, and those associations are appropriately inverted in the present scene of tension, when the leader who is orchestrating a scene of happiness finds himself in need of a place to go and weep” (Wilcox 2012, p. 25). As Wilcox notes, this variant also intensifies the image of weeping, reading “7 weop swiðe sar” (ibid., p. 23).
- 35 Closely following the Latin original: see ASS, *Sept.* VI, 131 (chp. 2.14).
- 36 “[H]e his lic for ðære sarignysse mid wacan hreafe scrydde, and wæs him ana cnihtleas on his inran bure, and hyne sylfne ðærinne beclysde”, “Because of his sorrow he put ragged clothing on his body and was on his own without a servant in his inner room, closing himself in there”.

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Article

Beowulf and the Hunt

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Abstract: The presence of hunting imagery in *Beowulf* has often been noted, but the significance of the figures of the stag and the wolf to the thematic design of the poem has yet to be fully explored. In this article, I first analyse the sustained presentation of the Danish royal hall as a stag, before exploring how the *Beowulf* poet exploited the various traditional associations of the wolf in the development of the figures of Grendel and Grendel’s mother. Finally, I consider the elaboration of the hunting imagery in the final section of the poem, which focuses on the Geatish Messenger’s account of the pursuit and killing of King Ongentheow by Eofor and Wulf, and the beasts-of-battle motif. The article concludes that the *Beowulf* poet made extensive use of animal and hunting imagery in order to ground his work in the lived experiences and fears of his audience.

Keywords: *Beowulf*; Old English poetry; animal studies; medieval hunting; monsters

1. Introduction

In his monograph, *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition*, John D. Niles argues that “the poem’s controlling theme is community: its nature, its occasional breakdown, and the qualities that are necessary to maintain it” (Niles 1983, p. 226).¹ Other scholars have examined, in depth, many of the various communal and courtly activities that are described in the poem, such as feasting (or, more accurately, drinking), boasting, speech making, the recitation of poems to the accompaniment of the harp, and the exchange of gifts.² However, relatively little attention has been paid to the poem’s interest in hunting. As a direct source of food and clothing, hunting was often a matter of life and death for early medieval communities.³ Yet, in early medieval England, as in the present day, the hunting of game was also an aristocratic and royal leisure pursuit.⁴ Bede, for example, casually mentions that King Oswine of Deira (d. 651) “had just come in from hunting” when he sat down to dine in his hall with Bishop Aidan (*Ecclesiastical History* III.14),⁵ while, at the end of the ninth century, Asser writes approvingly of the young king-to-be, Alfred: “An enthusiastic huntsman, he strives continually in every branch of hunting, and not in vain; for no one else could approach him in skill and success in that activity, just as in all other gifts of God” (*Vita Alfredi* 22).⁶ The most detailed account of hunting in Pre-Conquest England comes is provided by Ælfric’s *Colloquy on the Occupations*, a text that was originally written in Latin in the early eleventh century as a teaching tool, before an Old English gloss was added at a later date by an unknown author. In response to the master’s questions, the hunter explains that he hunts in the service of the king by using two main methods: in the first method, he sets nets (Latin: “*retia*”; Old English: “*max*”) and uses hounds to drive the animals into them, where he cuts their throats; in the second, wild beasts are chased by swift hounds and are caught without nets. When asked which animals he hunts, he responds that he catches “heortas 7 baras 7 rann 7 rægan 7 hwilon haran” (“harts and bears and does and goats and some hares”). Whatever he catches, he gives to the king in exchange for food, clothing, a horse, and armour.⁷ From these various accounts, it is clear that hunting played a major role in aristocratic culture throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.

Several scholars have highlighted the importance of hunting as a motif in *Beowulf*. William Perry Marvin (2006, pp. 17–44) argues that the first part of the poem reflects a shift

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in hunting practices, from a model based on the hunter consuming whatever is caught (the “immediate-return hunter”, i.e., Grendel), to one in which the spoils are shared out by a lord (the “delayed-return hunter”, i.e., Hrothgar). More recently, David Rollason has suggested that the location of the Danish royal hall, which “sat in a liminal position between forest on one side and more cultivated land on the other”, may hint at “the sort of political symbolism attaching to wild areas which we see attaching to forests in late medieval Germany” (Rollason 2012, p. 448).⁸ This article investigates how the poet exploited the traditional associations of two wild animals in particular, namely, the stag and the wolf, in order to dramatize the threats to communal life and royal society.

2. Stag

While scholars continue to debate whether the *Beowulf* poet was interested in the meaning of Germanic legendary names, such as *Beowulf* (“Bee-Wolf?”), *Wealhtheow* (“Foreign Slave?”), and *Unferth* (“Lacking in Courage?”),⁹ there can be no doubt that he was alert to the significance of the name of the Danish royal hall: *Heorot* (“Stag”).¹⁰ The allusion to the defence of *Heorot* by Hrothulf and Hrothgar in *Widsith* (lines 45–49) suggests that this title was probably not an original coinage of the *Beowulf* poet, but, rather, that it was already a feature of the Scylding legends that were circulating prior to the poem’s composition.¹¹ Nevertheless, as we shall see, the *Beowulf* poet fully exploits the potential of this traditional name of the Scylding hall by ascribing animalistic qualities to the building itself, and, as we shall see below, to its wolflike tormentor, Grendel.

Stags and other types of deer were in abundance in the forests of medieval England. Bede comments, in the geographical description of *Britannia*, in the opening of the *Ecclesiastical History*, that the island “is also noted for the hunting of stags and roedeer” (I. 1).¹² As we have seen, several centuries later, the king’s hunter in Ælfric’s *Colloquy* lists hart and doe among the animals that he hunts on behalf of the king, and, although Old English literature has surprisingly little to say about the type of food that was consumed at Anglo-Saxon feasts (Magennis 1999), the discovery of the remains of deer in close proximity to royal and elite residences indicates that deer were extensively hunted—and presumably consumed—by the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy (Sykes 2010, 2011). The stag was also prized as game on account of its valuable antlers, which were used for decoration as well as for practical purposes, such as to make ink-horns.¹³ Indeed, Isidore states that the deer’s Latin name, *cervus*, is derived from the Greek word for horn (κεραξ) (*Etymologies* XII.i.18; Barney et al. 2009, p. 248).¹⁴

Although the influence of hagiographical and homiletic motifs have been detected elsewhere in *Beowulf*, the poet does not seem to have drawn on the Christian associations of the stag/hart, which may not have been fully developed at the time of the poem’s composition.¹⁵ Recent scholarship on the dating of the poem has seen a return to the old consensus that *Beowulf* originated in an Anglian-speaking kingdom (i.e., Mercia, Northumbria, or East Anglia) in the seventh or eighth century.¹⁶ During this period, and perhaps stemming from its associations with aristocratic hunting, the stag was revered as a symbol of royal power, as is demonstrated by the great whetstone, or royal sceptre, that was found in the seventh-century Sutton Hoo ship burial.¹⁷ It is this royal association of the stag, together with its status as prized game, that the *Beowulf* poet exploits in his complex depiction of the Danish royal hall.

Heorot is first introduced with the narrator’s statement that, after achieving success in battle and after gathering a loyal warband, King Hrothgar gave orders for the building of a great hall (“heal-reced” (“hall-building”), line 68a; “medo-ærn micel” (“great mead-hall”), line 69a; “heal-ærna mæst” (“greatest of hall buildings”), line 78a), from which he dealt out rings to the old and young. Reflecting on his work, Hrothgar “scöp him Heort naman” (“decided to name the hall ‘Stag’”, line 78b). After describing how the Danish king was true to his word as well as his distribution of the rings and treasures (lines 80–81a), the

narrator presents a striking visual image of this towering stag-like structure,¹⁸ which is swiftly undercut by an allusion to its imminent destruction by fire.¹⁹

Sele hlífade

*hēah ond horn-gēap; heaðo-wylma bād,
lāðan līges— ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn
þæt se ecg-hete āpum-swēoran
æfter wæl-nīðe wæcnan scolde. (Emphasis added).
(Lines 81b–85)*

The hall rose up, *high and horn-gabled*; it awaited battle surges, of hateful flame—it was not long after that the sword-hatred between father-in-law (i.e., Hrothgar) and son-in-law (i.e., Ingeld) would awaken after deadly slaughter.

By emphasising, on the one hand, Heorot’s imposing size and, on the other hand, its vulnerability to attack, the poet may have had in mind the stag’s reputation as both a formidable and a timid creature.²⁰

The hall’s stag-like appearance is again to the fore in the account of Grendel’s night-time assault on Heorot, during which the monster stealthily advances under the cover of darkness towards the “horn-reced” (“horned-hall”, line 704a), before “onbræd þā bealohyðig, ðā hē gebolgen wæs, / recedes mūþan” (“he angrily tore open the hall’s mouth, when he was swollen with rage”, lines 723–24a).²¹ Stanley B. Greenfield notes that, although the collocation, *reced/hūs* and *mūþ(a)*, is a conventional formula for a door, which appears elsewhere in Old English verse, its appearance here in *Beowulf* is “peculiarly apt imagistically and syntactically” for two reasons: (1) Because the poet has already established the strength and hardness of the door (“fyrbendum fæst”, line 722a), and only now reveals that Grendel could open it with ease, reducing it “as it were, to a soft mouth, an easily-forced point of entry”; and (2) Because of Grendel’s fondness for eating his prey (Greenfield 1967, pp. 151–52).²² As Greenfield comments, such originality in the handling of traditional poetic diction is a hallmark of the *Beowulf* poet.²³ What is more, only in *Beowulf* does the formula of a building’s mouth form part of a broader pattern of zoomorphism. Of course, Grendel’s main goal in attacking Heorot is to kill and eat the men who dwell within it, and not to destroy the hall itself. However, in the context of the sustained depiction of the hall as a stag, Grendel’s tearing open of “recedes mūþan” might also evoke the violent taking down of a beast of prey by a fierce predator, such as a wolf.²⁴ By assaulting the hall itself, as well as its sleeping inhabitants, Grendel presents a challenge to the rapidly expanding royal authority that this building symbolises.²⁵

The poet deploys the image of the hunted stag a second time in Hrothgar’s description of the Grendelkin’s haunted mere. In order to impress upon Beowulf the dreadful nature of this place, the Danish king says that a stag (“*heorot*”) would rather be torn apart on the shore by a pursuing pack of hounds than venture into the water.²⁶

*Dēah þe hæð-stapa hundum geswenced,
heorot hornum trum holt-wudu sēce,
feorran geflymed, ær hē feorh seleð,
aldor on ðfre, ær hē in wille,
hafelan [beorgan];²⁷ nis þæt hēoru stōw. (Lines 1368–72).
(Emphasis added).*

Though the heath-stepper, oppressed by hounds, *the stag with its proud horns*, should seek the forest-wood, put to flight from afar, would rather give up his life, his spirit on the shore, than venture in to (protect?) his head; that is not a pleasant place

As Orchard notes, the pursued stag's great antlers ("heorot hornum trum") "cannot help but conjure images of the imperilled Danish hall, Heorot' ("horn-gēap", line 82b; "horn-reced", line 704a)" (Orchard 2003, p. 156). Given the stag's association with aristocratic buildings and its use as a symbol of royal power in Anglo-Saxon England, Grendel's twelve-year reign of terror in Heorot (lines 144–49a) might therefore also be viewed as an assault on the institution of kingship itself, which the wider Danish community was dependent on for protection and sustenance.²⁸ The paralysis of the terrified stag on the banks of the haunted mere mirrors the inertia of King Hrothgar, who sits powerless in the face of Grendel's nightly assaults on his hall (lines 129b–37, 144–59a, and 189–93).²⁹ In order to develop this predatory aspect of Grendel's character, the poet draws on various traditional associations of one of the most feared members of the animal kingdom, and the perennial enemy of the deer: the wolf.³⁰

3. Wolf

The characterisation of Grendel and his mother is celebrated for its complexity and ambiguity. Both figures have their roots in the folktale of the Two Trolls, in which a hero typically fights male and female trolls in a building, and then in a watery setting. At times, they are presented sympathetically, as human beings who suffer exile and grief, while, at other times, they are cast as demonic monsters, and as the descendants of Cain who are hostile to God and to humankind.³¹ Despite the general recognition that Grendel is sometimes associated with the figure of the wolf, relatively little attention has been paid to the poet's extensive use of lupine imagery in the characterisation of not only Grendel, but also his mother.³² In the discussion that follows, I highlight how the poet draws on the traditional associations of the wolf in order to cast Grendel and his mother, variously, as predators and as hunted vermin, as man-eating prowlers of the wilderness, and as outlaws and demons. Then, in the final section of this essay, I will discuss the development of the wolf imagery in the account of the hunting of King Ongentheow by Wulf Wonreding and his brother, Eofor ("Boar"), as well as the poet's imaginative treatment of the beasts-of-battle motif.

No animal was more feared or hated in the early Middle Ages than the wolf.³³ In his *Etymologies*, Isidore derives the Latin term, *lupus*, from the Greek *λυκρς*, "because it slaughters whatever it finds in a frenzy of violence (perhaps cf. *λυσσα*, "rage") [. . .]. It is a violent beast, eager for gore" (XII. 23–24).³⁴ As ferocious creatures that were associated with battle, wolves were frequently depicted alongside boars, eagles, and serpents in early Anglo-Saxon art (Adams 2015), while Old English poets refer to warriors as "*here-/hilde-wulfas*" ("battle-wolves", *Genesis A*, lines 2015, 2051a), and as "*wæl-wulfas*" ("slaughter-wolves", *Maldon*, line 96a).³⁵ Of course, "*wulf*" was a highly productive name element throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, not least in *Beowulf* itself, where we encounter characters named *Wulf*, brother of *Eofor* ("Boar"), *Wulf-gar*, *Gar-ulf* (i.e., *Gar-wulf* ("Spear Wolf")), and *Hrōþ-ulf* (from *Hrōþ-wulf*, perhaps also "Famous Wolf"), alongside the Geatish hero himself (possibly *Beow-(w)ulf* ("Barley-Wolf") or *Beo-wulf* ("Bee-Wolf"), a kenning for "Bear").³⁶

Ælfric's hunter does not include the wolf among the list of the animals of the forest that he catches on behalf of his king, presumably because it was not valued as game. Instead, wolves were hunted primarily as vermin in the early Middle Ages, and they were viewed as not only a danger to flocks, but also, as we shall see, to people.³⁷ Wolf-pits, either as pits for trapping wolves, or as the lairs in which they lived, are mentioned in several Anglo-Saxon charters (Hooke 2015, p. 269), in contexts that resonate with the watery habitat of the Grendelkin.³⁸ For example, a grant of land from King Æthelred in Crediton, Devon, which dates from 739 (S 255), mentions a "*wulf-pytt*" close to "*grendeles pytt*" and "*caines acer*" (Cain's Acre), in a marshy landscape that features lakes (including "*deormere*" ("deer-lake") or ("animal-lake")), streams, and brooks. While the location of a certain "*grendles mere*" close to "*beowan hammes*" ("Beow's home") in an early tenth-century charter (S 416) has been long recognized (Reynolds 1955), and, to the best of my knowledge, this connection

between “*grendeles pytt*” and “*caines acer*” in S 255 has not been noted before in *Beowulf* scholarship:

[. . .] *on grendeles pytt. of grendeles pytte on ifigbearo. of ifigbeara on hrucgan cumbes ford. of hrucgan cumbes forda on fearnburh. of fearnbyrig on earnes hricg. of earnes hrycge on wealdan cumbes ford. of wealdan cumbe on tettan burnan. of tettan burnan up on stream oð lyllan broc. of lyllan broce on middel hrycg. of middel hrycge on herepað ford. of herepað forda on cyrtlangeat. of cyrtlan gate on suran apuldre. of suran apuldran on grenan weg. of grenan wege on wulfpyt. of wulfpytte on stream oð þa laca tolycgap. [. . .] þanon on deormere. of deormere on langan stan [. . .] þanon on caines æcer. of caines æcere on wulfcumbes heafod [. . .].*

[. . .] *to Grendel's pit, from Grendel's pit to Ivy Grove, from Ivy Grove to the Woodcock's Valley's ford, from Woodcock's Valley's ford to Farnborough, from Farnborough to Eagle's Ridge, from Eagle's Ridge to the forest of Cumbesford, from Cumbe forest to Tett's Stream, from Tett's Stream up the stream until Lill's Brook, from Lill's Brook to Middle Ridge, from Middle Ridge to Herepath crossing, from Herepath crossing to Cyrtle's Gate, from Cyrtle's Gate to Sour Apple-Tree, from Sour Apple-Tree to Green Way, from Green Way to Wolf-Pit, from Wolf-Pit to the stream until it runs into the lake [. . .] from there to Deer/Animal Mere, from Deer Mere to the Long Stone [. . .] thence to Cain's Acre, from Cain's Acre to Wolf-Hollow's Head [. . .].*

Among the almost seventy named places that are included in this charter, only two feature “-pytt” as the second element: “*wulf-pytt*” and “*grendeles pytt*”. This collocation may hint at an association between Grendel's lair and the habitation (or trapping) of wolves (and the biblical Cain) in the English landscape.³⁹ Another Grendel's Pit, which was again located near to lakes, marshes, forests, and wolf-inhabited hills, features in a grant of land by King Cenred of Mercia in Worcestershire from 708 (S 78):

Ærest of grindeles pytt on wiði mære · of wiði mære on reade sloh · of þam sloh up on þa fearnige leage · of þere leage on wulfan dune · of þere dune on beran heafde · of beran heafde on wude crofte · of þam crofte on carca dic · of ðere dice on þene blace pol · of þam pole æfter long pidele into þam mersce · of þam mersce æft on grindeles pytt

First from *Grendel's Pit to the Withy Mere*, from Withy Mere to the Red Slough, from that slough up to the ferny wood, from the wood to the *Wolf Hill*, from the hill to the Bear's Head, from the Bear's Head to Wood Croft, from that croft to Carca Ditch, from that ditch to that Black Pool, from the pool along the Piddle into the marsh, *from the marsh back to Grendel's Pit*.

Several details of the forbidding landscape that is occupied by the Grendelkin provide a close match to these charters:

Hie dýgel lond
warigeað, *wulf-hleoþu*, windige næssas,
frēcne fengelād, ðær fyrgen-strēam
under næssa genipu niþer gewiþeð,
flōd under foldan. (Lines 1357b–61a) (Emphasis added).

They occupy a mysterious land, *wolf-slopes*, windy cliffs, terrible treacherous fen-tracks, where the mountain stream flows downward under the darkness of cliffs, water under the earth.

Noting the traditional association of wolves with precipices, and the identification of cliffs with places of burial and suicide, Norman E. Eliason has argued that that this image “may well have conjured up a picture of a cliff where wolves lurked, feeding upon animal and human carcasses” (Eliason 1935, p. 21). As I will now demonstrate, the poet

also exploits the wolf's reputation as an eater of human beings in the characterisation of the Grendelkin.

Both Grendel and his mother are said to be "grim ond grædig" ("fierce and greedy", lines 121a, 1499a),⁴⁰ which are qualities that are frequently ascribed to wolves in Old English literature. For example, in a passage towards the end of Blickling Homily XVI, which presents a close analogue to Hrothgar's account of the Grendelkin's haunted mere, we read how devils "on nicra onlicnesse" ("in the shape of sea-monsters") grasp at doomed souls "swa grædig wulf" ("like greedy wolves"), who drop from cliffs into the frozen lake that forms the entrance to hell (Morris [1874–80]1967, p. 209).⁴¹ Grendel's own greed is highlighted in the narrator's description of how, upon entering Heorot, he rejoices in his mind ("þā his mōd āhlōg", line 730b) at the expectation of a feast ("wist-fylle wēn", line 734a). The focus then shifts to his gluttony, as he tears apart a sleeping Geatish warrior, Hondscio, limb from limb, before devouring his flesh and blood:

Nē þæt se āglæca yldan þōhte,
ac hē gefēng hraðe forman sīðe
slæpendne rinc, slāt unwearnum,
bāt bān-locan, blōd ēdrum dranc,
syn-snædum swealh; sōna hāfde
unlyfigendes eal gefeormod,
fēt ond folman. (Lines 739–45a)

The awe-inspiring one did not think to delay, but quickly he seized at the first pass a sleeping warrior, cut into him without warning, bit the bone-locks, drank blood from the veins, sinful morsels; soon he completely devoured the feet and hands of the unliving one.

Hugh Magennis has described this scene as a monstrous parody of the courtly decorum of the feasting scenes that occur elsewhere in the poem (Magennis 1999, pp. 24–25), while Andy Orchard notes that, in describing Grendel's cannibalism, the narrator "concentrates on just those aspects which would cause most offence to a Christian audience" (Orchard 1995, p. 63). Moreover, this revolting scene of gluttony and butchery is also reminiscent of the actions of a predatory wolf that steals into a farmyard or dwelling at night to capture and eat an animal, or even a sleeping human.⁴² Equally wolflike is the manner in which Grendel habitually stalks the hall at night (lines 115–17, 716b–17), before swiftly creeping across the floor (lines 121b–22a, 724b–26a), with the intention of consuming ("ðicgean",⁴³ line 736a) his prey before returning to his mountain lair, where he rejoices in his plunder (lines 123b–25).

While it is impossible to say how frequent wolf attacks on humans were in the Middle Ages, the fear of being eaten alive by wolves was certainly a very real one in pre-Conquest England, as it still is in many parts of the world to this day, and it is alluded to in no less than three of the wisdom poems that are preserved in the tenth-century Exeter Book.⁴⁴ Although the compositional dates of these poems are unknown, in each case, the reference to the man-eating wolf appears in a *sum*-catalogue, and it seems likely that these sections reflect the oral tradition (Neidorf 2020, p. 108).⁴⁵ *The Wanderer* describes how "sumne se hāra wulf/deaðe gedælde" ("the grey wolf will dismember a certain one in death", lines 82b–83a); the narrator of *Beowulf* uses the same verb to describe how, upon entering Heorot and seeing a large group of sleeping Danes, Grendel "mynte þæt hē gedælde [. . .] ānra gehwylces/lif wið lice" ("intended that he should sever the life from the body of each of them", lines 731a–33a). Further parallels with Grendel are presented by, *The Fortunes of Mortals*, which warns of the terrible fate that awaits a certain unfortunate youth:

Sumum þæt gegongeð on geoguð-fēore
þæt se ende-stæf earfeð-mæcgum
wēalíc weorþeð. *Sceal hine wulf etan,*
hār hæð-stapa; hinsīþ þonne

mōdor bimurneð. Ne bið swylc monnes geweald.

(*The Fortunes of Mortals*, lines 10–14). (Emphasis added).

For some sufferers it happens that the end
woefully occurs during youth.

The wolf, the hoary heath stalker,

will devour him; his mother will then mourn

his departure. Such is not under human control. ⁴⁶

The man-eating Grendel is similarly described as a “mære mearc-stapa, sē þe mōras hēold,/fen ond fæsten” (a “famous border-stepper, the one who ruled the moors, fen and stronghold”, lines 103–04a), and “sinnihte hēold,/mistige mōras” (“sinfully he ruled the misty moors”, lines 161b–62a). Verbal parallels such as these would have encouraged the poem’s original audience to identify Grendel as he creeps toward Heorot through the mist with a lone wolf stalking its prey.

Another wisdom poem, *Maxims I*, warns that a wretched outlaw who takes greedy wolves as his companions will suffer an equally terrible fate:⁴⁷

Wel mon sceal wine healdan on wega gehwylcum;

oft mon fereð feor bi tūne, þær him wat frēond unwiotodne.

Wineleās, won-sælig mon genimeð him wulfas tō gefēran,

fela-fæcne dēor. Ful oft hine se gefēra sliteð;

gryre sceal for greggum, græf dēadum men;

hungre hēofeð, nales þæt hēafe bewindeð,

ne hūru wæl wēpeð wulf se græga,

morþor-cwealm mægca, ac hit ā mære wille. (*Maxims I*, lines 143–51)

One must be true to a friend on each path;

one often travels far around a homestead, where he knows he has no certain friend.

Friendless, the unhappy man takes wolves as companions,

very treacherous animals. Very often that companion tears him;

there must be terror on account of the grey one, a grave for the dead man;

the grey wolf laments its hunger, not at all circles the grave with a dirge,

indeed does not mourn over the slaughter,

the murder of men, but it always wants more. ⁴⁸

In *Beowulf*, the traditional figures of the miserable outlaw and the greedy wolf are combined in the form of Grendel, who is similarly described both as an “atol ān-gengea” (“wretched solitary goer”, line 165a) who is “drēamum bedæled” (“deprived of joys”, line 721a), and as a remorseless consumer of human flesh who rejoices at the prospect of another feast upon entering Heorot (lines 730b–34a).⁴⁹

The horror of being torn apart and eaten by wolves expressed in these Old English poems may also reflect the belief that a dismembered body could not be resurrected on Judgment Day (Jurasiński 2007b). In *Beowulf*, of course, the question of the salvation of pagan souls is notoriously vexed.⁵⁰ However, it is at least possible that the Christian audience would have found Grendel’s preferred method of eating his human prey particularly abhorrent for this same reason. Not only did the Danes not know how to worship the true God (lines 181b–83a), but those of them unfortunate enough to die at the hands of Grendel were also denied any hope whatsoever of bodily resurrection.⁵¹

Consolidating this link between the Grendelkin and wolves are several lupine epithets applied to the pair. For example, at line 1267a, the narrator describes Grendel as “heoro-wearh hetelic”, where the first element, “heoro-” means “sword”, while the second element, “-wearh”, may mean either “oppressor” (Cf. the Old High German “*warag*” (“dreadful

transgressor”) or “wolf” (the Old Norse “*vargr*” (“wolf”, “dreadful transgressor”)).⁵² Taking “wearh” as “wolf” here has the advantage of placing the wolf and the stag in opposition across the caesura:

Panon wōc fela
geōscaft-gāsta; wæs þæra Grendel sum,
heoro-wearh hetelic, sē æt Heorote fand
wæccendne wer wīges bīdan. (Lines 1265b–68) (Emphasis added).

Thence were born a great many misbegotten spirits; Grendel was one of those, hateful sword-wolf, who at *Heorot/Stag* discovered the sleeping man, awaiting battle.

Grendel’s mother is referred to not only as “brim-wylf” (“she-wolf”, lines 1506a,⁵³ 1599a), but also as “grund-wyrgen” (“wolf of the deep” or “transgressor of the deep”, line 1518b).⁵⁴ The feminine form, *wylfen* (“she-wolf”), appears in the Old English glosses for “Bellona, i. furia, dea belli, mater Martis” (“Bellona, fury, goddess of war, mother of Mars”), and “beluae, bestiae maris” (“monster, beast of the sea”).⁵⁵ Moreover, although Grendel’s mother’s war-terror (“wig-gryre”, line 1284a) may be less than that of a “wæpned-men” (“weaponed-man/man”, line 1284b),⁵⁶ similar to the goddess, Bellona, who is typically depicted wearing a helmet and carrying a sword or spear, carries a “seax” (“short sword”, line 1545b), and she appears to be protected by some form of body armour when Beowulf’s blow with his own sword, Hrunting, is deflected off her neck (lines 1518–28).⁵⁷

Grendel’s physical features, about which information is so scarce, present another link with the wolf. Scholars have identified a number of literary analogues for the terrible light that gleams from his eyes as he enters Heorot (“him of ēagum stōd/ligge gelicost lēoht unfæger” (“from his eyes shone an ugly light, most like flame”, lines 726b–27), including the humans and serpents that are described in *The Wonders of the East* (Orchard 2003, p. 25), and the giants in the biblical Book of Wisdom (Anlezark 2006).⁵⁸ Another, perhaps more immediate context for Grendel’s shining eyes, however, is provided by the gleaming eyes of the wolf at night. Similar to all canines, wolves possess a photoreceptor behind the retina that is known as the “tapetum lucidum” (“bright tapestry”), which allows them to see in the dark. Occasionally, light is reflected from this structure, which produces the phenomenon known as “eye-shine”.⁵⁹ As Irina Rau has pointed out, the wolf’s shining eyes, as well as its association with the devil, are frequently recorded in later medieval bestiaries (Rau 2018, p. 11).⁶⁰ For example, the influential *Second-Family Bestiary*, which was probably produced in England in the mid-twelfth century, states: “The wolf’s eyes shine in the night like lanterns, because certain of the Devil’s works appear beautiful and wholesome to blind and foolish men” (Clark 2006, p. 143).⁶¹ Sam Newton similarly connects the light that shines from Grendel’s eyes with the East Anglian folk tradition of the Shuck, a wolflike canine that stalks the fens and that is associated with the devil and with death (Newton 1992, pp. 143–44).⁶² To the original audience of *Beowulf*, then, this solitary detail of Grendel’s physical appearance as he comes “of mōre under mist-hleoþum” (“from the moor, out of misty slopes”, line 710) might have evoked the frightening image of the shining eyes of a lone wolf, or some other monstrous canine stalking its prey at night.⁶³

The association between wolves and the devil that is evident in these later medieval bestiaries is also widely attested to across the Anglo-Saxon period, and it provides another link between the wolf and the demonic Grendelkin.⁶⁴ In the late-tenth century, Ælfric simply stated, “Se wulf is deoful” (*Catholic Homilies* I, 17), while the *Advent Lyrics*—a poem that probably dates from the seventh or eighth century—features an extended metaphor of the devil as a wolf attacking the Lord’s flock that presents an interesting parallel to Grendel’s assault on Heorot:⁶⁵

Hafað se awyrgda wulf tōstenced,
dēor dæd-scua, dryhten, þīn ēowde,

wīde tōwrecene þæt ðū, waldend, ær
 blōde gebōhtes, þæt se bealo-fulla
 hīneð heardlīce, ond him on hæft nimeð
 ofer ūsse nīoda lust. Forþon wē, nergend, þē
 biddað geornlice brēost-gehygdum
 þæt þu hrædlice helpe gefremme
 wergum wreccan.

(*Advent Lyrics*, lines 256–64a). (Emphasis added).

The cursed wolf, the fierce agent of darkness, has driven your flock apart, Lord, and scattered it far and wide. The evil being cruelly oppresses and takes captive, contrary to our desire and longing, that which you, the ruler, formerly bought with your blood. Therefore, saviour, we eagerly pray to you in our innermost thoughts that you may quickly help us weary exiles. ⁶⁶

This passage has no direct source in the Latin, “O Antiphons”, which lie behind the *Advent Lyrics*, though the image of the wolf who scatters the flock can be traced to John 10.12 and to Acts 20.29. The verbal connections between this passage and the various descriptions of the wolflike and demonic Grendelkin are, however, extensive and are worth enumerating in full. First, we note that both the devil/wolf and the Grendelkin are cursed (the *Advent Lyrics*: “awyrghda”,⁶⁷ line 256a; Grendel: “wergan gāstes” (“cursed spirit”), line 133a,⁶⁸ “forscrifen” (“condemned” (by God)), line 106b; “Godes yrre bær” (“he carried God’s anger/curse”), line 711b; Grendel’s mother: “grund-wyrgenne” (“wolf of the deep” or “transgressor of the deep”, line 1518b). Moreover, both poets use “-scua” (“-shadow”) compounds (both hapaxes), which are preceded by alliterating (near-homonym) adjectives that are used to describe the hated creature: “deor dæd-scua” (“beast, shadow-actor”, *Advent Lyrics*, line 257a); and “deorc dēap-scua” (“dark death-shadow”, *Beowulf*, line 160a).⁶⁹ Similar to the devil/wolf, the Grendelkin also carry their victims away once they have captured them. For example, after stating his intention to fight Grendel in Heorot, Beowulf declares:

[. . .] Wēn’ ic þæt hē wille, gif hē wealdan mōt,
 in þæm gūð-sele Gēatena lēode
 etan unforhte, swā hē oft dyde
 mægen-hrēð manna. Nā þū mīnne þearft
 hafalan hȳdan, ac hē mē habban wile
 drēore fāhne, gif mec dēað nimeð
 byreð blōdig wæl, byrgean þenceð,
 eteð ān-genga unmurnlice,
 mearcað mōr-hopu— nō ðū ymb mīnes ne þearft
 līces feorme leng sorgian. [. . .].’ (Lines 442–51)

[I expect that he wishes, if he is able, to eat without fear the prince of the Geats in that war-hall, as he often has done to the glorious host of men. You will have no need to hide my head (i.e., to bury me), but he will have me gored with blood, if death takes me, he carries the bloody corpse, intends to taste it, the solitary walker eats without remorse, inhabits the moor-slopes—you will have no need to grieve for long concerning (the whereabouts of) my body.] ⁷⁰

Behind Beowulf’s boastful words, we may detect a deep-seated cultural fear of being killed and eaten by a wild animal and of thereby being denied a proper burial. As we have seen, in Old English wisdom poetry, the animal that is most associated with such behaviour is the hated figure of the wolf.

In addition to these predatory lupine qualities that are ascribed to both Grendel and to Grendel's mother, on occasion the poet casts these enemies of Heorot as prey themselves. For example, the two accounts of Grendel's flight from Heorot both anticipate Hrothgar's subsequent description of the stag's doomed attempt to find refuge in the woods:

Hē on mōde wearð

forht on ferhðe; nō þȳ ær fram meahte.

Hyge wæs him hin-fūs, wolde on heolster flēon,

sēcan dēofla ġedræg

(Lines 753b–56a). (Emphasis added).

In his mind he became afraid in spirit; he could not (go) from there. His intention was to get himself away in a hurry, *he wished to flee to the darkness, to seek out the company of devils.*

Dēað-fæge dēog siððan drēama lēas

in fen-freoðo feorh ālegde,

hæþene sāwle; þær him hel onfēng. (Lines 850–52). (Emphasis added).

He hid doomed to death, after deprived of joys he gave up his life in the fen-refuge, his heathen soul; hell received him there.

The following narrative elements are shared between the flight of Grendel and the account of the hunted stag: (1) The eagerness to flee from danger; (2) The eagerness to seek a place of refuge; (3) The giving up of life; and (4) The departure of the soul/spirit. The structural and verbal affinities—and the thematic contrasts—between these passages complicate the extended animal-hunting metaphor that underlies the Heorot–Grendel episode. In an ironic reversal, the hunter has now become the hunted. Whereas the stag would rather be torn to pieces by dogs on the shore than venture into the haunted mere, Grendel plunges into the same body of water in a doomed attempt to prevent himself from being ripped apart by Beowulf.⁷¹

The motif of the Grendelkin as prey themselves is developed in the narrator's detailed description of the journey to the mere. In the aftermath of Grendel's first assault on Heorot, the Danes examine his tracks ("syðþan hīe þæs lāðan lāst scēawedon, / wergan gāstes") after they examine the loathsome tracks of the cursed spirit (lines 132–33a). Now, in the morning after Beowulf has ripped off Grendel's arm, men gather from afar "wundor scēawian, / lāþes lāstas" ("to examine the wonder, the tracks of the loathsome one", lines 840b–41). On his way back to the mere, the wounded Grendel leaves behind him a trail of blood ("feorh-lāstas bær" ("he carried his life-tracks"), line 846b), which provides the Danes with a clue as to his whereabouts. A large hunting party then sets out from Heorot to track them down to their lair. King Hrothgar leads the hunt, on horseback and well-equipped ("geatolic", lines 1397–1401a), accompanied by "gum-fēþa" ("foot-soldiers", line 1401b) bearing shields ("lind-hæbbendra", line 1402a). The group follow "lāstas" ("tracks", line 1402b) across "stēap stān-hliðo stīge nearwe / enge ān-paðas uncūð gelād" ("precipitous stone-cliffs with narrow paths, in single file (or) lonely tracks), unknown trails", lines 1409–10). Upon their arrival at the bloodstained mere, a horn is blown (line 1432a), and a Geatish warrior shoots one of the sea monsters ("nicras", line 1427b) that are lying on the shore with a bow and arrow.⁷² After falling into the lake, the dying beast is hooked back onto the shore by the hunters ("mid eofer-sprēotum" ("with boar-spears"), 1437b), who gaze in wonder at the "gryrelcne gist" ("terrible guest", lines 1441a), while Beowulf arms himself in preparation for his descent into the mere in pursuit of Grendel's mother. Through this sustained and varied use of hunting imagery, the Grendelkin are first cast as the wolflike predators of the noble stag, before they are themselves hunted down and killed like wolves in their mountainous watery lair.

4. The Hunting of King Ongentheow and the Beasts of Battle

Hunting imagery is deployed less frequently in the narration of the dragon fight. For example, when Beowulf sets off to seek out the dragon, we are simply told, “Gewāt þā twelfa sum” (“he went then as one of twelve”, line 2401a), with none of the rituals of the hunt that we see on display in the pursuit of the Grendelkin to the mere, such as the blowing of horns, the use of bows and arrows, or the following of tracks. Only occasionally, and perhaps unconsciously, does the poet introduce an image that is derived from his knowledge of hunting, such as when the dragon tracks the thief who steals a cup from the hoard (“stearc-heort onfand/fēondes fōt-lāst” (“the brave-hearted one (i.e., the dragon) discovered the enemy’s foot-tracks”, lines 2288b–89a). The reason for this marked shift away from hunting imagery in the account of the hero’s final monster-fight is unclear, although it probably has something to do with the nature of the adversary: a dragon. Although it is technically a member of the animal kingdom, the dragon is, of course, a mythical beast, and it is therefore not associated with hunting. Nevertheless, the narration of the dragon-fight is set within a dense patchwork of nonlinear allusions to the wars between the royal houses of the Geats and the Swedes, and it is here, in these passages, that the images of hunting and pursuit are sustained and developed.⁷³ In particular, the Geatish Messenger, in his long speech after Beowulf’s death, relates the hunting and killing of the Swedish King, Ongentheow, by the Geatish brothers, Eofor and Wulf (lines 2961–88), before he concludes with an imaginative treatment of the traditional beasts-of-battle motif. In the discussion that follows, I argue that, in these passages, the poet expands upon and varies the stag–wolf imagery that is highlighted above in the Danish section, introduces new animals in the forms of the boar, raven, and eagle, and utilises hunting imagery as a metaphor for the conduct of warriors in battle, and for the concomitant act of plundering the slain.

First, the Messenger relates how the Swedish ruler, Ongentheow, pursued (“folgode”, line 2932a) the Geats to “Hrefna Wudu” (“Ravenswood”, line 2925b) in revenge for the kidnapping of his queen. Once he catches up with his quarry, Ongentheow kills King Hæthcyn and taunts the surrounded Geatish warriors that he will hang them in the morning, “fuglum⁷⁴ tō gamene” (“as sport for birds”, line 2941a). Just as all seems lost for the Geats, Hygelac rides to their rescue, and his dramatic arrival is announced—just as the hunting expedition to the mere—by the blowing of trumpets and horns (line 2923b). With the tables now turned, Hygelac begins to hunt down the aged Swedish king: “þā wæs æht boden/Swēona lēodum” (“then the pursuit of the Swedish people was begun”, lines 2957b–58a).⁷⁵ The hunting of Ongentheow culminates in a dramatic scene in which the Swedish ruler is savagely cut down and killed by the bestially-named Geatish assassins, Wulf (“Wolf”) and Eofor (“Boar”) (Owen-Crocker 2007; Williams 2015, pp. 197–98), before his corpse is plundered on the battlefield:⁷⁶

þær wearð Ongenðio ecgum sweorda,
blonden-fexa on bid wrecen,
 þæt se þeod-cyning ðafian sceolde
Eafores ānne dōm. Hyne yrringa
 Wulf Wonrēding wæpne geræhte, 2965
 þæt him for swenge *swāt ædrum sprong*
 forð under *fexe*. Næs hē forht swā ðēh,
 gomela Scilfing ac forgeald hraðe
 wyrsan wrixle wæl-hlem þone,
 syððan ðeod-cyning byder oncirde. 2970
 Ne meahte se snella sunu Wonrēdes
 ealdum ceorle *ondslyht* giofan,
 ac hē him on *hēafde helm* ær gescer,

þæt hē *blōde fāh* būgan sceolde,
 fēoll on foldan; næs hē fæge þā gīt, 2975
 ac *hē hyme gewyrpte*, þeah ðe him wund hrine.
 Lēt se hearda Higelāces þegn
 brādne mēce, þā his brōðor læg,
eald-sweord eotonisc entiscne helm
brecan ofer bord-weal; ðā gebēah cyning, 2980
 folces hyrde, wæs in feorh dropen.
 Ðā wæron monige þe his mæg wriðon,
 ricone ārærdon, ða him gerymed wearð,
 þæt hīe wæl-stōwe wealdan mōston.
Benden rāfode rinc oðerne, 2985
 nam on Ongenðio iren-byrnan,
heard swyrd hilted, ond his helm somod,
hāres hyrste Higelāce bær.
 (Lines 2961–88). (Emphasis added).

There it came to pass that *the grey-haired* Ongentheow was brought to bay with the edges of swords, so that the people-king had to submit to the sole judgement of Eofor (*Boar*). Wulf son of Wonred angrily struck him, reached him with a weapon, so that because of the blow *the blood sprang forth from his veins* from underneath his hair. Even so, he (i.e., Ongentheow) was not afraid because of that, the old Scylfing, but he quickly gave back a worse exchange for that murderous blow, after the people-king turned back. Nor could the brave son of Wonred (i.e., Wulf) deliver a counterblow to the old warrior, but he (i.e., Ongentheow) first *cut through his helmet into his head*, so that he (i.e., Wulf) had to fall to the earth, *bloodstained*; he (i.e., Ongentheow) was not fated to die yet, *but he recovered himself* although the wound injured him. The fierce thane of Hygelac (i.e., Eofor) then let the broad blade, *the gigantic ancient sword, break the giant's helmet over the shield-wall*, when his brother (i.e., Wulf) lay dead. Then the king (i.e., Ongentheow) bent down, *shepherd of the people, he was struck to his life*. Then there were many who bandaged his kin, quickly raised him up, when room was made for them, so that they were allowed to hold sway over the slaughter-place. *Then one warrior plundered another*, he took from Ongentheow the mail coat, *fierce hilted sword, and his helmet all together*, bore the ornaments of *the grey-haired one* to Hygelac.

This long section of the Messenger's speech is framed by an envelope pattern that emphasises the aged Ongentheow's grey hair ("blonden-fexa", 2962a; "hāres", 2988a).⁷⁷ Grey is, of course, not only the colour of old age in Old English poetry, but also, as we have seen, the colour of the wolf (*Fortunes*, 13a: "har hæð-stapa"; *Maxims I*, 150a: "wulf se græga").⁷⁸ While the wolf is typically associated with predatory behaviour, as we have seen, wolves were also hunted as vermin. Here, the wolflike Ongentheow is also cast as a shepherd of the people ("folces hyrde", line 2981a), mercilessly pursued by the savage Boar and Wolf. This passage has numerous close verbal and thematic parallels with previous hunting scenes in the poem. For example, the detail of the blood springing from the stricken Ongentheow's veins (2966b) echoes the earlier description of the wolflike Grendel's devouring of Hondscio in Heorot ("blōd eðrum dranc" ("drank blood from veins"), line 742b), while Ongentheow's recovery after the blow from Wulf's sword (2975a) recalls how Beowulf regained his feet during his fight with Grendel's mother ("syððan hē eft āstōd" ("afterwards he stood back up again"), line 1556b). The manner in which Eofor cuts through Ongentheow's helmet with an "*eald-sweord eotonisc*" (an "ancient gigantic sword"), which causes him to stagger to the floor (lines 2973, 2975a, and 2979–80a), is

closely matched by the description of Beowulf's decapitation of the Grendelkin in the mere, in which he angrily strikes Grendel's mother's neck with an "eald-sword eotenisc" (line 1558a) until the blade penetrates her armour and she staggers to the floor (1565b–68). Finally, Eofor's presentation of Ongentheow's plundered sword hilt and helmet to Hygelac (2987–88) recalls Beowulf's presentation of Grendel's head and the giant sword-hilt to Hrothgar.⁷⁹

In the Messenger's account of the Geatish–Swedish wars, then, animal imagery is used to reflect the brutality of a conflict in which the protagonists on both sides display lupine qualities, with each ruthlessly hunting down and killing their prey. The wolflike Ongentheow first pursues and kills the young Geatish king, Hæthcyn, and taunts the besieged survivors that their corpses will be fed to birds. Then, Ongentheow himself is pursued and killed by Boar and Wulf, who symbolically dishonour and dismember his body by plundering his armour. This sustained interplay of animal figures culminates in the remarkable variation on the traditional beasts-of-battle motif that forms the conclusion to the Messenger's long speech.

The tricolon of raven, eagle, and wolf typically appear in Old English poetry on the eve of battle in anticipation of carrion.⁸⁰ However, whereas in other poems, these animals are usually part of the battle scenery, sometimes appearing individually, sometimes as a pair or trio, uniquely in *Beowulf*, all three animals are presented together, discussing how they have fared at their feast.⁸¹

ac se wonna hrefn

fūs ofer fægum fela reordian,

earne secgan hū him æt æte spēow,

penden hē wið wulf wæl rēafode. (Lines 3024b–27)

but the dark raven, eager over the doomed, often inquires, asks of the eagle how it went for him at the feast, when along with the wolf he plundered the slain.

Not only does the placement of the beasts in conversation effectively humanise them, as Mo Pareles has recently noted (Pareles 2019), but the positioning of this passage at the end of the Messenger's speech, in which the predatory boar and wolf are humanised in the form of Eofor, Wulf, and Ongentheow, collapses the boundary between the human and animal hunters. Indeed, the Messenger uses the same verb, "rēafode" ("robbed", "plundered", "rifled", "stripped", lines 2985a, 3027b), to describe the actions of Eofor and the beasts of battle as they pick over the slain.

Another predatory animal is introduced into the narrative when, following the conclusion of the Messenger's speech, the Geats rise as a group and trudge, dejected and weeping, "under Earne Næs" ("under the Eagle's Cliff", lines 3031b). The implications of this allusion to another bird of prey so soon after the account of the hunting of Ongentheow and the beasts-of-battle passage are clear: without a leader of Beowulf's stature to protect them, the Geats will be hunted down and slain as Ongentheow was, with their bodies plundered by their enemies and picked over by animals.

5. Conclusions

This article highlights the sustained use of hunting imagery in *Beowulf*, and it argues that the poet draws on the traditional associations of the stag and the wolf in his depictions of Heorot and the Grendelkin in the first part of the poem, before varying these motifs in the account of the hunting of King Ongentheow. I proposed that the poet inherited the name of the Scylding royal hall, Heorot, from Germanic legend, and that the poet knew that the stag was a symbol of royal power. From this kernel, I suggested that the poet developed a metaphor of the Danish royal hall as a hunted stag that is brutally taken down by a monstrous and wolflike predator. In elaborating the figures of Grendel and Grendel's mother, I argue the poet merged the northern folktale motif of a pair of male and female trolls who inhabit a watery lair and prey on the local population with a range of

traditions that are associated with the hated figure of the wolf. From vernacular wisdom poetry, the poet derived the motif of the wolf as a companion to the outlaw, as well as its fearsome reputation as a consumer of human flesh, both of which the poet brings together in the figure of Grendel himself. From homiletic tradition, the poet took the wolf's association with the devil. By combining these wolflike qualities with the tradition of a race of monstrous creatures descended from Cain, the poet produced a pair of terrifying predators who could serve as both natural enemies of the stag and ancient adversaries of God. In the narration of the pursuit of Grendel and his mother to the mere, the poet drew on his familiarity with large-scale royal-led hunts, from which he took details, such as the navigation of narrow precipitous tracks that led to the quarry, and the use of hunting horns, as well as weapons, such as bows and arrows. Finally, and more tentatively, I suggest that the hunting imagery is used for a rather different purpose in the final part of the poem, in which the hierarchy of the noble stag and the devilish wolf gives way to the opportunistic scavenging of the beasts of battle and their human counterparts, Eofor and Wulf. Through this consistent and varied use of hunting and animal imagery, the *Beowulf* poet transformed the raw materials of royal legend, folktale, and biblical lore into a work of imaginative art that reflected the leisure interests of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy while also giving voice to some of the most deep-seated fears of the wider community.⁸²

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Notes

- ¹ Kathryn Hume previously described the poem's theme as "threats to social order" (Hume 1975, p. 5). See further, Magennis 1996. All quotations from *Beowulf* are from Fulk et al. (2008), although I have silently hyphenated the compounds.
- ² See, for example Magennis (1996), pp. 60–81 (on feasting); (Bjork 1994) (on speech as gift).
- ³ For example, Bede records in his *Ecclesiastical History* I.12 that the Britons were left without food following the Roman withdrawal, "except for such relief as hunting brought" ("excepto uenandi solacio"; Colgrave and Mynors 1979, pp. 44–45).
- ⁴ See, for example, Sykes (2010).
- ⁵ Colgrave and Mynors (1979, p. 259); "uenerat enim de uenatu" (p. 258).
- ⁶ Keynes and Lapidge (1983, p. 75); Stevenson (1904, p. 20): "In omni venatoria arte industrius venator incessabiliter laborat non in vanum; nam incomparabilis omnibus peritia et felicitate in ilia arte, sicut et in ceteris omnibus Dei donis, fuit". Asser lists hunting as the foremost skill appropriate to a nobleman (*Vita Alfredi*, 75; Keynes and Lapidge 1983, p. 90), and twice refers to Alfred engaging in hunts once he assumed the throne (*Vita Alfredi*, 74, 76; Keynes and Lapidge 1983, pp. 89, 91). In the Prose Preface to the Old English *Pastoral Care*, "Alfred" uses hunting imagery to describe how the scholars of his day have lost the "track" (OE "*spor*") of wisdom left by their ancestors (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, p. 125). Similarly, the narrator of the preface to the Alfredian translation of St Augustine's *Soliloquies* describes how every man, once he has built a hamlet on leased land from his lord, delights to engage in hunting, fowling, and fishing (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, p. 139). The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 885 (=884) records that the Carolingian ruler, Carloman II, was slain by a boar while out hunting (see also, *Vita Alfredi*, 68; Keynes and Lapidge 1983, p. 87).
- ⁷ Garmonsway (1978), pp. 23–25.
- ⁸ See also Faraci (1998) (on deer hunting); and Sykes (2011); Thiébaux (2015), pp. 17–18; Harlan-Haughey (2016).
- ⁹ For studies of these and other names in *Beowulf* see, for example, Robinson (1968); Fulk (1987); Fulk (2007); Jurasinski (2007a); Shippey (2014); Abram (2017); Neidorf (2018); and Shaw (2020).
- ¹⁰ For the identification of Heorot with the stag, see Orchard (2003), p. 156. On animal names in *Beowulf*, see Orchard (2003), p. 172. See also Herben (1935). The study of animals in medieval literature has become a major subject in recent decades. See, for example, Mann (2009); and Bintley and Williams (2019).
- ¹¹ In Scandinavian sources, the Scylding/Skjoldung hall is referred to as "Lejre". Stephen J. Herben Jr. notes that an eighteenth-century map records two place names, *Stor Hiort* and *Lille Hiorte*, in the vicinity of Lejre (Herben 1935, p. 943). See further, Niles and Osborn (2007). For possible the connections with Hartlepool (Old English "*Heruteu*"), see Harris (2014). *Widsith* is usually thought to be among the earliest Old English poems, and it is probably antecedent to *Beowulf*: see Neidorf (2013b); and Neidorf

(2019). For arguments for a later post-Alfredian date of composition for *Widsith*, see Niles (1999); and Weiskott (2015). On the probable dating of *Beowulf* to the seventh or eighth century, see the essays in Neidorf (2014). Regardless of the date of *Widsith*, however, the appearance of the name, *Heorot*, in both poems, suggests that it was the traditional name of the Scylding court in England.

12 Colgrave and Mynors (1979), pp. 20–21 (“et ceruorum caprearumque uenatu insignis”).

13 The use of antlers for making inkwells is alluded to in Exeter Book Riddles 88 and 93 (ASPR numbering), both of which are usually solved as “blæc-horn” (“ink-horn”); in Orchard (2021), these riddles are numbered 84 and 89. For text and translation, see Orchard (2021, pp. 408–11, 414–15). The majority of the Exeter Riddles probably date from the eighth century (see Neidorf 2013a, p. 39). Tim Flight (2016) has recently analysed the account of an aristocratic deer hunt led by King Edmund (r. 924–46) in the late-tenth century, *Vita S. Dunstani*. Della Hooke comments on the hunting of deer for venison long before the Norman Conquest and highlights presence of deer-related terms in Pre-Conquest English place-names (Hooke 2015, pp. 267–71).

14 For a discussion of the *Beowulf* poet’s possible knowledge of this and other Isidorean etymologies, see Frank (2020, p. 248).

15 On the influence of hagiography on the poem, see Rauer (2000). The hart appears frequently in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, and most famously in Psalm 42.1, “As the hart panteth after the fountains of water; so my soul panteth after thee, O God” (the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate). In later medieval bestiaries and art, the stag often appears as a symbol of Christ, which is a tradition that can be traced back to Isidore’s statement that stags are “antagonistic to serpents” (*Etymologies*, XII.i.18; Barney et al. 2009, p. 248). See Sill (1996, p. 21); Payne (1990, pp. 38–9); and Badke (2022): <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast162.htm> (accessed 2 March 2022). In the tenth-century Old English prose version of the *Life of St Eustace*, the pagan lord, Placidus, is out leading a deer hunt when, separated from the majority of the group, he is confronted by a great stag (“ormæte heort”, Kramer et al. 2020, p. 58). After pursuing the stag into a wood with a small group, Placidus becomes separated from his men. Eventually, he catches up with the stag, who is standing on a high rock, and he sees, “betweox þæs heortes hornum” (“between the horns of the stag”), a gleaming crucifix. The Old English, *Life of Eustace*, is based on a Latin version of the Greek original.

16 See esp. Fulk (1992, p. 390); Wormald (2006); and Neidorf (2014).

17 See Raw (1992); and Fulk et al. (2008, pp. 119–20).

18 Scholars have suggested that the name, *Heorot*, stems from the attachment of antlers, or even horns, to the gables (Rollason 2012, p. 448; Sykes 2010, p. 177; Blair 2018, p. 106). Blair argues that *Beowulf*’s *Heorot* is a literary counterpart to the “great hall complexes” of seventh-century England, such as the Northumbrian royal palace at Yeavering (Blair 2018, pp. 137–38).

19 The cause of the fire at *Heorot* is a feud with the Heathobards: *Beowulf* predicts that a fight will break out at the marriage of Hrothgar’s daughter, Freawaru, and the Heathobard prince, Ingeld (lines 2020–69a). In *Widsith*, Hrothgar and his nephew, Hrothulf, defend *Heorot* against attack by a Heathobard force that is led by the same Ingeld.

20 Stags use their antlers to defend themselves against attack from other animals, such as wolves. For first-hand accounts from North America in the late twentieth century, see Mech et al. (2015, pp. 13–27).

21 During the ensuing fight between *Beowulf* and Grendel, the narrator twice uses the personal pronoun, *he*, to refer to the hall, as it struggles to withstand the battering it receives from the titanic struggle of these two fierce adversaries (772b, 773b).

22 Greenfield (1967, p. 150) notes two further instances of the formula: *Cotton Gnomes*, lines 36b–37a: “Duru sceal on healle/rūm recedes mūþ” (“The door must be in the hall, the spacious building’s mouth”); and *Genesis A*, lines 1363–64a: “Him on hoh belæc heofron-rices weard/ mere-hūses muþ” (“At his” (i.e., Noah’s) “heels, the guardian of the heaven-kingdom locked the mouth of the sea-house” (i.e., the Ark)).

23 See further Brodeur (1959).

24 On wolves as hunters of deer, see below. Wolves typically kill their prey, including deer, by biting the nose or throat and holding on until the animal dies of shock. For first-hand accounts of wolves hunting deer in late twentieth-century North America, see Mech et al. (2015, pp. 13–27).

25 On the symbolism of the hall in Old English poetry, see Hume (1974). On Grendel as symbolic of the threats to royal authority, and as a portent of a contested succession, see Leneghan (2020a, pp. 155–76).

26 On the motif of deer hunting in the poem, see Faraci (1998). Scholars have noted analogues in the *Aeneid*, VI. 239ff. (Klaeber 1911), and a thirteenth-century hunting manual (Rigg 1982). Others have connected this passage with pagan fertility cults (Nicholson 1986), or have read it as a Christian allegory (Robertson 1951, pp. 33–34). Anlezark (2007) places it within the classical Avernian tradition and compares a related passage in the Old English poem, *Solomon and Saturn II*.

27 The metrical rules indicate that the scribe has skipped a word after “*hafelan*”. The verb, “*beorgan*” (“to protect”), is supplied by most editors, including (Fulk et al. 2008). For a recent and persuasive argument in favour of an emendment instead to “*hafele*”, which produces the reading, “with its head raised”, see Porck (2020). The fifteenth-century hunting manual, *The Master of Game*, describes how the stag will enter into a lake or marsh to try and throw pursuing hounds off its scent (Baillie-Grohman and Baillie-Grohman 1909, p. 33).

- 28 On Grendel as a symbol of a royal usurper and as a portent of threats to the Scylding dynasty, see [Leneghan \(2020a\)](#), pp. 162–76). In the opening lines of the poem, God recognizes the “fyren-ðearfe” (“terrible need”) that the Danes had endured during a long period without kings (14b–16a). On the fear of lordlessness as a central theme in the poem, see [Stanley \(2005\)](#).
- 29 Noting the correspondence in the names between the animal and the royal hall, Sarah Lynn Higley reads this passage as a “counter-image” of the conventional motif that is known as the “Hero on the Beach” (on which, see [Crowne 1960](#)), in which the stag “appears to present a complex visual metaphor for the passivity and entrapment present in Hrothgar’s kingdom” ([Higley 1986](#), p. 344). On Hrothgar’s inertia, see also [Porck \(2019\)](#), pp. 188–97; and [Leneghan \(2020a\)](#), pp. 50–67).
- 30 In their study of the interaction between wolves and white-tailed deer in contemporary North America, Mech, Smith, and MacNulty observe “a constant tension between the two species, with each trying to survive by outdoing the other” ([Mech et al. 2015](#), p. 13).
- 31 For an overview, see [Fulk et al. \(2008\)](#), p. xxxvi–l).
- 32 See, for example, [Orchard \(2003\)](#), p. 156; and [Marvin \(2006\)](#), p. 19). For a linguistic survey of the wolf terms in the poem, see [Wiersma \(1961\)](#), pp. 41–53, 474–75). For a useful survey of wolves in Old English literature, see now [Flight \(2021\)](#), pp. 62–88). On the importance of wolves in the Volsung legend, which is alluded to in *Beowulf* in lines 875–900, see [Vowell \(Forthcoming\)](#).
- 33 A rare example of a positive depiction of a wolf in pre-Conquest England is found in Ælfric’s late tenth-century, *Life of St Edmund*. After the saint’s martyrdom, a wolf plays against type by miraculously protecting his dismembered head in a forest ([Clayton and Mullins 2019](#), pp. 196–97). See [Faulkner \(2012\)](#). For the more typical negative association of the wolf in the same text, see below, n. 65. Another guardian wolf appears in the twelfth-century, *Gesta Herewardi* ch. XXIX, in which the hero and his men are guided through a storm at night by a tame wolf that they mistake for a dog.
- 34 [Barney et al. \(2009\)](#), p. 253).
- 35 Most scholars accept that *Genesis A* was composed around the same time as *Beowulf*, which was in the seventh or eighth century (e.g., [Fulk 1992](#), pp. 348–51; and [Neidorf 2013a](#), p. 39); *Maldon* dates from the late tenth or early eleventh century, even though the poet appears to borrow directly from *Beowulf* (see [Atherton 2021](#), pp. 128–38).
- 36 [Werner \(1963\)](#). Keynes suggests that Bishop Wulfstan of York used the pen name, *Lupus*, “as a warning to his flock that he was out on the prowl” ([Keynes 2005](#), p. 22). For debate as to the meaning of *Beowulf*’s name, see, for example, [Abram \(2017\)](#); and [Shaw \(2020\)](#), pp. 29–51).
- 37 In Ælfric’s, *Colloquy*, the shepherd says that he guards his sheep with dogs in hot and cold weather, “þe læs wulfas forsweglen hig” (“lest wolves should eat them”) ([Garmonsway 1978](#), p. 22). Once caught and killed, wolves were valued more for their (foul-smelling) fur than for their meat.
- 38 S 50, 255, 276, 446, 582, 600, 970, 1036. All charters are cited by Sawyer number (S) from the Electronic Sawyer corpus ([www.esawyer.org.uk](#)), which is based on [Sawyer \(1968\)](#). The results were sourced from the *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* ([Healey et al. 2009](#)), which was accessed on 29 December 2021. Cf. *The Master of Game* VII: “Also men take them (i.e., wolves) within pits and with needles and with hausespieds or with venomous powders that men give them in flesh, and in many other manners” ([Baillie-Grohman and Baillie-Grohman 1909](#), p. 61).
- 39 Cf. “*grendles bece*” (“beech”) (S 786); “*gryndeles sylten*” (“bog”) (S 645); “*grendeles gatan*” (“gate”) (S 1451); “*grendel*” (S 669); and “*grendles mere*” (S 416, 579). The poet twice relates the Grendelkin’s descent from the misbegotten line of Cain (lines 102–14 and 1261b–65). The charter might therefore suggest that the Grendelkin were already associated with Cain prior to the composition of the poem. Alternatively—and I would suggest, more probably—the collocations of these place names might reflect the popularity of *Beowulf*, which perhaps inspired its audience to name the features in their own landscape after the people and places mentioned in the poem. A similar process seems to lie behind the naming of a neolithic burial chamber in Oxfordshire as “*Welandes smiððan*” (“Wayland’s Smithy”), which is recorded in a charter of King Eadred to Ælfeah, 955 (S 564), after the legendary Germanic smith who is mentioned in *Beowulf* (line 455a), as well as in several other Old English texts. For possible connections between the name, *Grendel*, and the East Anglian word, *grindle*, which means, “drain”, or “ditch”, see [Newton \(1992\)](#), p. 144). Kaske notes the possible connections between the name, *Grendel*, and the Old English verb, *grindan* (“to grind”), and the noun, *grund* (“the bottom of a lake”), and connects the name’s unusual -el ending with the names of the fallen angels, or “watchers” (e.g., Rameel, Kkabel, Tamiel, Ramiel, Danel, and Ezeqeel) who, according to the Book of Enoch, had intercourse with the daughters of Cain, which brought forth a race of cannibalistic giants ([Kaske 1971](#), p. 426).
- 40 In a recent study of the extra (i.e., nonstructural) alliteration in Old English verse, Mark Griffith notes: “Word-initial *gr-* opens many words in Old English in the related semantic areas of grimness, grief, anger and violence”, and suggests that the *Beowulf* poet used *gr-*clusters, such as *grim ond grædig*, as “a vehicle for the characterisation of the monstrous” ([Griffith 2018](#), pp. 97–99).
- 41 The homily is labelled, “XVII”, in Morris’ edition. For a survey of the extensive scholarship on the connections between the Blickling XVI, *Beowulf*, and the *Visio Pauli*, see [Orchard \(2003\)](#), pp. 157–58). See also [Malone \(1958\)](#).
- 42 Compare the description of wolves in *The Master of Game*: “And there be some (wolves) that hunt at the hart [. . .]. There are some that eat children and men and eat no other flesh from the time that they be acherned (blooded) by men’s flesh [. . .]. They are called wer-wolves, for men should beware of them [. . .]. And man’s flesh is so savoury and so pleasant that when they have taken to man’s flesh they will never eat the flesh of other beasts, though they should die of hunger. For many men have seen them

leave the sheep they have taken and eat the shepherd. [. . .] For he knoweth well and woteth well that he doth evil, and therefore men ascrieth (cry at) and hunteth and slayeth him. And yet for all that he may not leave his evil nature.” (Baillie-Grohman and Baillie-Grohman 1909, pp. 59–60, 63).

- 43 This verb also appears in the context of eating, fens, a watery environment, and wolves in the enigmatic Exeter Book poem, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, lines 2a, 8a.
- 44 For recent commentary on these poems, see Niles (2019, pp. 93–106). In this discussion, Niles treats *The Wanderer* as a wisdom poem. See further Shippey (1994). One recent study found 489 human victims of wolf attacks in North America between 2002 and 2020 (Frey 2021). The majority of these victims were attacked by rabid wolves, but 67 were the result of predatory attacks, of whom 9 were killed. Accounts of wolves killing humans continue to inspire fear and are regularly reported in newspapers and online. See, for example, “Villagers Kill Wolf Attacking Humans” (Anon 2021), *The Times of India*, 29 October 2021: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/villagers-kill-wolf-attacking-humans/articleshow/87346428.cms>, accessed on 12 February 2022. The recent reintroduction of wolves to parts of Europe has attracted controversy, with farmers complaining about the losses of livestock and raising concerns about attacks on humans. See, for example, Hedgecoe (2021).
- 45 Niles (2019) treats all of the Exeter Book poems as roughly contemporary with their tenth-century manuscript, but most scholars have dated them to the early Anglo-Saxon period: Neidorf (2013a), for example, places *Maxims I* close to *Beowulf*, as part of the “archaic corpus” (i.e., prior to the ninth century), on lexical grounds; see also Cronan (2004). Fulk would assign *The Wanderer* a date later than *Beowulf* on metrical grounds (Fulk 1992, pp. 12–13, 166–67). For a study of Old English catalogue poems, see Howe (1985). See also Stanley (1956, pp. 445–47); and Stanley (2015).
- 46 Text and translation from Bjork (2014, pp. 56–57), with macrons added to indicate vowel lengths. The poem is often referred to as, *The Fortunes of Men*. For a recent discussion of the poem’s structure and theme, see Neidorf (2020).
- 47 Brian O’Camb has compared this passage with Isidore’s description of the wolf that is cited above (O’Camb 2016).
- 48 Text and translation from Bjork (2014, pp. 76–77), with alterations for British English spelling (e.g., gray / grey).
- 49 Grendel refuses to accept a truce (“sibbe”, line 154b) or financial recompense (“fēa pingian”, line 159b) for his feud with the Danes (“fæhðe”, line 153a). He is, therefore, quite literally an outlaw, who rejects the legal customs of society. William Chaney (1962) suggests that Grendel’s inability to approach to the “gif-stöl” (lines 168–69) reflects the ancient custom whereby a criminal and murderer was denied access to royal asylum. For a survey of the interpretations of the gif-stöl crux, see Leneghan (2020a, pp. 162–76). For connections between Grendel and later English outlaws, such as Robin Hood, see Cotten-Spreckelmeyer (2011); Harlan-Haughey (2016).
- 50 Some scholars argue the poet believed that some “good pagans”, such as Scyld and Beowulf, could be saved (e.g., Cox 1971), while others have rejected this possibility on the grounds of its incompatibility with the position of many of the Church Fathers (e.g., Stanley 1963). For an overview of the debate, see Fulk et al. (2008, pp. lxix–lxx).
- 51 On the denial of proper burial as an act of dishonouring the dead in *Beowulf*, see Owen-Crocker (2002); Leneghan (2020b).
- 52 The interpretation of the Old English, *wearh*, in this context, as “wolf”, was first suggested by Grein (1861–1864). Klaeber ([1911–12]1997, p. 24) finds the proposal unlikely, but see Wiersma (1961, p. 54). In his study, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, Stanley also casts doubt on the association of wolves with outlaws in Old English (Stanley 1992), but the evidence of the wisdom poems cited in this article, as well as the *Advent Lyrics* and *Beowulf* itself, would suggest otherwise.
- 53 MS 1506a reads “brimwyl” (“surging water”?), but most editors emend it to “brimwylf”.
- 54 Sarrazin (1910) notes a parallel in *Bjarkarimur*, in which the hero, Bjarki, fights a man-eating she-wolf. See also Rosier (1963); Klaeber ([1911–12]1997, p. 20).
- 55 *DOE Corpus*, (Healey et al. 2009); gloss numbers, 0104 (B138), and 0108 (B145). *Bellona* is also glossed as “wælcyrge” (“valkyrie”) (*DOE Corpus*, (Healey et al. 2009); gloss numbers, 0731 [754] and 1847). For connections between Grendel’s mother and the figure of the Valkyrie, see Chadwick (1959, p. 177; and Damico (1984, p. 46). The connection between the *Bellona* gloss and Grendel’s mother is noted by Purser (2013, p. 115, n. 54), although he does not discuss the implications of the “beluae, bestiae maris” gloss. Grendel’s mother is also described as a “mere-wif mihtig” (a “mighty sea-woman”, line 1519b).
- 56 Commenting on these lines, Fulk, Bjork, and Niles note: “If the *gryre* that she inspires is less, the danger that Grendel’s mother presents is nonetheless greater, for the fight with her is more difficult for Bēowulf than the fight with Grendel” (Fulk et al. 2008, p. 197).
- 57 On the impenetrability of Grendel’s mother’s skin, see Cavell (2014, pp. 161–62).
- 58 On the effectiveness of this image, see Renoir (1962, p. 195). For further literary analogues, see Fulk et al. (2008, p. 159).
- 59 See Ollivier et al. (2004).
- 60 I am grateful to Irina Rau for sharing her unpublished research on this topic with me, and for discussing the connections between Grendel and wolves.
- 61 “Oculi eius in nocte lucent velut lucernae, quia quaedam Diaboli opera caecis es fatuis viris videntur esse pulcra et salubria” (Clark 2006, p. 143). See also Barber (1993, p. 71); Badke (2022): <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beat180.htm>, accessed on 10 February 2022.

- ⁶² In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar associates Grendel with “scuccum ond scinum” (“demons and evil spirits”, line 939a). See further, Pascual (2014). Newton further suggests that the wolf may have been a royal symbol for the *Wuffingas*, the East Anglian ruling dynasty who claimed among their ancestors one, Hrothmund, a name that corresponds with one of the two sons of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow who is named in *Beowulf* (Newton 1992, pp. 106–8).
- ⁶³ The *Second-Family Bestiary* records that the she-wolf, “if she needs to seek her prey at night, like a tame dog she goes back and forth at the sheepfold. And lest the dogs by chance smell the odor oh her breath and wake the shepherds, she walks against the wind. And if a branch or anything sounds beneath her footstep, she punishes the foot with an emphatic bite. Her eyes shine in the dark like lanterns.” (Clark 2006, p. 143).
- ⁶⁴ Demonic epithets are frequently applied to Grendel, for example “fēond mancynnes” (the “enemy of mankind”, line 164b), “Godes andsaca” (“God’s adversary”, line 1682b), and “eald-gewinna” (“ancient enemy”, line 1773a). On Grendel’s demonic nature more generally, see Andrew (1981); and Johnson (2001). As Klaeber notes, Grendel’s mother is also described in demonic terms, such as “wæl-gæst wæfre” (“wandering slaughter guest”, line 1331a) and “æfter deofla hryre” (“after the fall of devils”, line 1680a) (Klaeber [1911–12]1997, p. 64).
- ⁶⁵ On the early date of the *Advent Lyrics*, see Rankin (1985); Fulk (1992, pp. 396–99). In his, *Life of St Edmund*, Ælfric describes how, after invading East Anglia in 865, the Viking chieftain, Hinguar, “færlice swa swa wulf on lande bestalcode” (“swiftly stalked the land like a wolf”), killing men, women, and children (Clayton and Mullins 2019, pp. 188–89). Writing around the same time, Wulfstan warns that the shepherds of the people (i.e., bishops and priests) must be wary, lest the “wodfræca werewolf” (“ravens werewolf”) (i.e., the devil) should too quickly tear at or bite the godly flock: Homily 16b (Bethurum 1957, p. 31).
- ⁶⁶ Translation from Clayton (2013, p. 19).
- ⁶⁷ On the possible connections between the OE, “wearg” (Bosworth and Toller 1898, p. 1177; s. v. “wearg”: “evil”, “vile”, “malignant”, “accursed”), and the ON, “vargr” (“wolf”), see above.
- ⁶⁸ The same epithet, “wergan gæstes”, is used by Hrothgar in his advice to Beowulf (line 1747b) to refer to demons.
- ⁶⁹ The parallel is noted by Klaeber ([1911–12]1997, p. 22), who links this phrase to the biblical, “*umbra mortis*” (Mt. 4.16, Lc 1.79 etc.). In his speech to the Danish coastguard, Beowulf similarly refers to Grendel as a “dēogol dæd-hata” (“secret doer of hateful deeds”, line 275a), who performs “hynðu ond hrā-fyl” (“humiliation and slaughter”, line 277a) in Heorot. For a list of all the Old English poetic compounds, see now Orchard (2020).
- ⁷⁰ For further references to the Grendelkin’s wolflike method of snatching their prey and taking them home to eat them, see lines 120–25, 1292–95, 2085b–92, and 2127b–28.
- ⁷¹ In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, XI, 809–15, the fleeing figure of Arruns is compared to a wolf that has killed a shepherd or a bullock and that hides itself in the mountains and woods. On the complex and extensive symbolic use the wolf as both a ravenous predator and a nurturing protector in Virgil, as well as on numerous references to lycanthropy, see Fratantuono (2018). There is no strong evidence to indicate that the *Beowulf* poet was familiar with the writings of Virgil, although a number of scholars have raised the possibility. For a detailed study of the Virgilian parallels, see Haber (1931).
- ⁷² On this passage, see Brasswell (1973).
- ⁷³ On the Geatish–Swedish wars, see Earl (2015); and Leneghan (2020a, pp. 180–94). On the nonlinear narration of these events, see Lapidge (2001).
- ⁷⁴ “*Fuglum*” is supplied by most editors to fulfil the alliteration of the line, Cf. line 2448a, “hrefne tō hroððe” (“to the delight of the raven”).
- ⁷⁵ For debate about the interpretation of these lines, see Fulk et al. (2008, p. 261).
- ⁷⁶ Earlier in the same speech, the Messenger relates how, following Hygelac’s own death in Frisia, his young son, King Heardred, was pursued and killed by Ongentheow’s son, Onela, as punishment for harbouring the exiled sons of Ohthere (lines 2379b–86).
- ⁷⁷ The term, *blonden-feax*, is also used three times to describe the old and grey-haired Hrothgar, at lines 1594a, 1791a, and 1873a. Hrothgar is also described as “gamol-feax” (1608a).
- ⁷⁸ Elsewhere, Ongentheow is described as “eald ond egesfull” (“ancient and terrible”, line 2929a), both of which are qualities that are often associated with the wolf. On the associations of “grey” in Old English, see Biggam (1998).
- ⁷⁹ “bone hafelan ond þā hilt somod” (“that head and the hilt together”, line 1614); “from þām holm-clife hafelan bæron” (“they carried the head from the sea-cliff”, line 1635); “þā wæs be feaxe on flet boren/Grendles hēafod” (“then Grendel’s head was brought into the hall by the hair”, lines 1647–48a); “Ðā wæs gylden hilt gamelum rince,/hārum hild-fruman on hand gyfen” (“Then the golden hilt was given to the old ruler, into the hands of the gray war-chief”, lines 1677–78).
- ⁸⁰ The classic discussion is Magoun (1955).
- ⁸¹ As noted by Bonjour (1957, p. 569) and Griffith (1993, p. 196).
- ⁸² For a persuasive argument in favour of the poem’s composition by a priest living in an aristocratic milieu in early Anglo-Saxon England, see Wormald (2006).

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