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“SAY WHAT I WEAR”: A STUDY OF CLOTHING AND ANIMAL LANGUAGE WITHIN
ALDHELM’S *ENIGMATA* AND THE EXETER RIDDLES

by

BRIDGITTE IVEY COLWELL

Under the Direction of Edward J. Christie, PhD

ABSTRACT

Within the Anglo-Saxon corpus, birds play a prominent role in religious poetry, acting as characters that reflect the values of the author as they pertain to God and Christianity. In the *Exeter Book Riddles* and Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*, birds act as metaphors, guiding readers in living a Christian life through a variety of folkloric and Biblical ways, though the descriptions and meanings inherent within each collection vary immensely. Aldhelm’s riddles celebrate God and his power of creation, using birds as a vehicle for expressing a valuation of nature even while educating readers on the key points of living a heaven-facing life. I argue herein the Exeter Riddle Poet expresses the same value for nature and creation, but superimposes clothing language on select birds, which suggests a fascination with humanity’s creative power as a gift from God.

INDEX WORDS: Bird folklore, Clothing studies, Anglo-Saxon literature, Riddles, Costume, Material Culture

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BRIDGITTE IVEY COLWELL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2020

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Bridgitte Ivey Colwell
2020

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College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

To Mary Ann Barfield, sister, friend, who shines ever bright, even if all other lights would go out. To Jenn Olive, dapper fellow browncoat, whose dedication to their art continues to inspire me in mine. To Zachary Hole, who flies his dragons alongside my birds in the sky. To my father, who brings with him riddles in the dark. To my mother, the Blessing, lady of love and coffee. To my brother of the silver linings and bright future. To my husband, the one who always saves me, who pushes me to go beyond the impossible and break through the heavens.

Thank you all for your love, support, and special brands of southern comfort.

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1 “This is my idea of fun”:¹ INTRODUCTION

Nu se munuc þe bihð to benedictes regole . / and forlæt ealle woruld-ðinge . hwi while he eft gecyrran / to woruldlicum wæpnum . and awurpan his gewinn . / wið þa ungesewenlican fynd his scyppende to teonan . / Se godes þeowa ne mæg mid woruld-mannum feohtan . / gif he on þam gastlican gefeohte . forð-gang habban sceall . / Næs nan halig godes þeowa æfter þæs hælendes þrowunga . / Þe æfre on gefeohte his handa wolde afylan . / ac hi for-bæron ehtnysse arleasra cwellara . / and heora lif sealdon mid unscæppignysse . / for godes geleafan . and hi mid gode nu lybbað . / forðan þe hi furþon noldon . ænne fugel acwellan .

(Now the monk that submits to the Rule of St. Benedict / and abandons all worldly things, why want he again to return / to worldly weapons and throw away the struggle / with the invisible demons to annoy his Creator? / The servant of God may not fight with worldly men / if he is to progress in that spiritual conflict. / No holy servant of God after the Savior’s passion / would eternally defile his hands with conflicts, / yet [these servants] bear persecution by dishonorable killers, / and gave their life with innocence / for having belief in God, and they now live with God. / Indeed, they would not wish any death upon a bird)² -- Ælfric, *XXV. Passio Machabeorum, Item alia. Qui Sunt Oratores, Laboratores, Bellatores* (ll. 851 - 862).

We Westerners have talked so much about birds over the millennia. We tell stories of the gods’ transformations and magical curses, yes, but we also tell stories of their beauty and grace, their gifts from God. We tell stories about birds that teach us to be better humans, stories that ask us to consider our existential place in the world, to consider our own temporality and “what to do with the time that is given to us” (Tolkien 50). It’s no wonder we tell these tales - birds will fill any niche left open, sing any silence into sound, captivate us with their beauty and mystery. Birds are the perfect carriers for just about any message we want to send.

We told stories about birds in Ancient Greece and Rome - well, we told stories about how often Zeus transformed *into* birds after wooing a woman to escape the glares of his wife, Hera.

¹ “This is My Idea,” the iconic song from *The Swan Princess* motion picture in which two royal children at first do not enjoy each other and their respective activities, but grow to like each other immensely – much like the relationship between myself and this thesis.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Old English translations are my own.

She, he wooed as a wounded cuckoo, seduced Leda as a swan (Taft), and sometime later carried off handsome Ganymede as an eagle (Pitman). Zeus' escapades have been discussed in the millennia since, appearing in such places as Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, the naming of Jupiter's moons, and the young adult series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. The eagle, too, stayed the symbol of powerful deities for millennia after.

The Irish Mythological Cycle tells of "The Fate of the Children of Lir," penned from an oral myth in the later middle ages. Lir, a lord of the Tuatha De Danann, has four children, and remarries after their mother dies. His new wife soon grows so jealous and hateful of the love between father and children that she takes the children out to a lake to kill them. However, she finds she cannot, instead casting an evil druidic curse on them to haunt the lakes of Ireland as swans. Because of her hesitation, and the love she had for their mother, the curse does not fully take, and so the children are left with a chance to end their curse and the power of speech, to mourn their sorrows across the lake (Ellis 56-78). The Brothers Grimm ("The Six Swans") and Hans Christian Andersen ("The Wild Swans") discovered similar folktales in the early 19th century, both of which added a few siblings and a way to break their curse: their youngest sister could to restore her brothers by keeping completely silent while harvesting, spinning, and weaving shirts of stinging nettle. Once clothed, the swans would return to the forms of her brothers. These three tales combine most cunningly in Juliet Marillier's *Daughter of the Forest*, in which Sorcha, the youngest daughter, narrates her years-long struggle to save her brothers from the curse.³

The Anglo-Saxons, for want of more than hearsay, wrote stories on how some birds spent the winter lying in the mud (Kitson 80), or that birds were Christ returned to earth (*Christ II*:

³ *Daughter of the Forest* also, in part, inspired the writing of this thesis.

Ascension; The Phoenix). The bird stories they tell through their riddle poetry, though, speak volumes about more than a lack of scientific evidence. The riddles of the Anglo-Saxons ask us to contemplate our relationship with God, as well as our relationship with ourselves and the creativity inherent within us. In the riddles of Aldhelm and the *Exeter Book*, birds are much more than merely a riddle answer, more than, “Say what I am called.” In fact, I propose, in this story, they ask us to “Say what I wear.”

In this thesis, I explore the connections between material culture, Christian theology, and birds within the *Exeter Book* Riddles. Specifically, I plan to focus my study on only three of the bird riddles in this text, namely Riddles 7 (Swan), 9 (Cuckoo), and 10 (Barnacle Goose).⁴ Over the course of this thesis, I frame the three riddles in the earlier work of Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* with particular attention to his didacticism and celebration of nature as it relates to God. The selected Exeter Riddles themselves deviate from the celebration of nature to the celebration of human creation, using words specifically related to clothing to describe the birds themselves. How does the Exeter Riddle Poet reflect the inheritance of Aldhelm? What distinction lies between the representation of divine and human creations within Anglo-Saxon riddles? What, too, does this tell us about the Anglo-Saxon depiction of manmade objects and God-made birds that would cause the Riddle Poet to so consistently use clothing as a feather metaphor when describing birds? Herein I will strive to answer these questions.

The *Exeter Book*, also known as the Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501, was completed in the mid to late tenth century and contains ninety-seven poetic riddles in Old English; the manuscript was rediscovered during the mid-nineteenth century and has since garnered a steady

⁴ Any Exeter Riddle number cited within the contents of this thesis will refer to the Krapp and Dobbie (KD) numbering system, as this system is the current academic standard. When a source cites a differing system, I will strive to cite the concurrent KD number, as well.

readership across the scholarly disciplines. Scholarship of the riddles has generally focused on a few specific modes: attempting to answer them (Cochran, Heyworth), dissecting their language (Massey, Howard), or discussing their context within analogues of the period (Murphy, Bitterli). Some riddles, like the first, “The Storm,” have widely agreed-upon answers. Others are scrutinized thoroughly from every angle, their answers still discussed over a century later. Case in point: Heyworth and Cochran were published within two years of each other in the late 2000s with disparate opinions, proposing both “the Devil” (Heyworth 175) and “a plough team” (Cochran 302), respectively, for Riddle 4. Studying analogues from the time also allows for readers and scholars alike to understand the metaphorical and cultural subtexts within the riddles. Specifically, Patrick J. Murphy’s *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* explores this concept thoroughly between the Latin riddles and cultural studies of Anglo-Saxon literature.

There have also been many attempts to discover influential works that contribute to a tradition of riddling. Scholars like Susan Lynn Crane and Mercedes Salvador-Bello demonstrate that the Riddles are influenced by Aldhelm or the Latin *enigma* tradition, the importance of their relationships to one another, and what sort of role they played in monastic or general society. Salvador-Bello in particular attempts to explore the foundations of medieval riddling in the Latin riddling genre and the “structuring principles governing [the enigmata]” such as “encyclopedic patterns” and “thematic clusters or pairs,” and the interactions with the Exeter Riddles in particular (9), established by Isidore’s *Etymologiae* (438). She later claims that the Riddles “were probably used for teaching purposes” as well as for secular entertainment (451).

Scholars of folklore have argued that the riddles reside just as much in the domain of folklore as they do in literary studies. This includes the connections to be explored in this thesis between clothing and animals. Frank Herbert Whitman, for instance, published a dissertation in

1968 entitled *The Influence of the Latin and the Popular Traditions on the Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, in which he discusses how far scholarship should connect what popular traditions are inherent in the riddles to the actual historical traditions of the time. Edith Whitehurst Williams published the article “Annals of the Poor: Folk Life in Old English Riddles” in 1988, in which she attempted to bring more scholarship about folklore into the riddle-studies corpus.

Frederick Tupper, Jr., in his 1910 edition of *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, argued for the comparative discussion of folklore and the Riddles, paving the way for scholars such as Whitman and Williams. Yet, as Murphy points out in *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*, a combination of the “questions of decorum” raised if Tupper examined the correlations between the “indecent/obscene” riddles and folk life, and Craig Williamson’s disparaging comments on the subject in his edition of *Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* have kept Tupper’s opinions and, as such, the folkloric approach, mostly out of mainstream scholarly research (Murphy 180).

To that end, this thesis will focus not on striving to prove there *are* examples of folk life within the *Exeter Book* riddles, but to discuss the inherent folklore assumptions within the poet’s language choices. Such support will come from the analysis of language concerning creation, animals, and clothing. The support for this analysis can be found in the above works, as well as in *Discovering the Folklore of Birds and Beasts* by Venetia Newall and *Costume: Performing Identities Through Dress* by Pravina Shukla. These two books contain discussions of folklore pertaining to clothing as costume and animals, specifically birds, and the symbolic roots in Western culture, which will contribute to the analysis of language connotations within the riddles.

The final facet tying these seemingly-disparate subjects together is clothing as material culture. The three bird riddles covered in this study all use clothing-oriented language to describe the subjects-to-be-named. Scholars of material culture have done some of this investigation for us, arguing that there is merit in exploring deeper into the distinction of clothing with regards to cultural and conceptual importance through the evidence within riddles themselves. Maren Clegg Hyer's "Textiles and Textile Imagery in the *Exeter Book*" spends time discussing such material culture in the riddles, as well as how the production of textiles features in Anglo-Saxon culture. Gale R. Owen-Crocker's wide array of scholarship includes, most notably, her book *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, the definitive text on clothing, textile design, and textile production, but also her varied articles on the subjects. She has also edited the *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* series, a valuable resource for this thesis. Alongside her stands Maren Clegg-Hyer's books *Material Culture of Daily Living* with Owen-Crocker and *Textiles, Text, Intertext* with Jill Frederick, both definitive works on Anglo-Saxon material culture, and, more specifically, clothing and textiles.

This project will attempt to combine these varying schools of scholarship to dissect the significance of the riddles' use of language as it relates to material culture and birds with regards to both literature and folklore, providing a more nuanced interpretation of these aspects of culture.

Chapter Two contains an exploration of Aldhelm's *Enigmata* through the lens of his didacticism. He admits in his "Prologue" that his purpose is twofold: to delight in the wonder of nature and God's creative power and to teach his audience to better know Him. The latter achieves this by using riddling as a specific didactic form, the metaphors layered within discussing the nature of man's role in creation, and the former by cleverly evoking the wonder

the natural world presents. I have selected six of the bird riddles⁵ in his collection which best illuminate how Aldhelm celebrates creations of God, how he equates their movements and lifecycles with Christ and Christian theology, and his attempts to teach his readers the benefits of a more ascetic, rather than worldly, life.

In Chapter Three, I couch my discussion of the *Exeter Book* Riddles within the precedent Aldhelm sets: to use language and metaphor to celebrate the glory of God in the natural world, and teach the audience about God in the meantime. The Exeter Riddles build upon Aldhelm by considering that God gave humankind life along with the power to create, and the community to support one another in all things. The Exeter Riddles, I argue, use material culture and a focus on temporality to discuss how humanity's place as creations of God and how to worship Him - as ascetics, as worldly Christians who only mouth the word of God, as people with human concerns somewhere in-between? I argue that, in the discussion within specific riddles, we find an exploration of what I have dubbed the Middle-Space - a place we can worship God and respect our abilities and our world without risking our place in heaven. The poet imposes the language of material culture, of man-made things, atop creatures made by God in order to define and consider these concerns within the Middle-Space.

Within, I offer a specific discussion of the riddles' focus on metaphor and the overlay of material culture in their use of clothing-specific language. By my count, there are a total of thirteen riddles which interact in some way with clothing.⁶ These interactions include using a variation on the verb "to clothe" (Riddles 20, 71), clothing as a proposed answer (35, 61), and using a variation on clothing-related nouns in a metaphorical fashion (7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 44, 45, 54,

⁵ Peacock (14), Nightingale (22), Swallow (47), Eagle (54), Raven (63), Dove (64)

⁶ 7 - "Swan"; 9 - "Cuckoo"; 10 - "Barnacle Goose"; 11 - "Wine"; 13 - "Ten Chickens"; 20 - "Sword"; 35 - "Mail Coat"; 44 - "Key"; 45 - "Dough"; 54 - "[Butter] Churn"; 61 - "Shirt"; 62 - "[Fire] Poker"; 71 - Fragment

62). It is, of course, necessary to narrow the field of research if for no other reason than brevity, though more specific reasons will be discussed within the thesis itself. Rather than select a few riddles arbitrarily, however, I will focus my study on Riddles 7, 9, and 10 as all best display the metaphorical use of material language with regards to birds. Venetia Newall, a renowned folklorist, explores animal folklore in her book *Discovering the Folklore of Birds and Beasts*, which I will use to contribute to my discussion of the particular birds within the three selected riddles.

2 FLIGHT OF THE CONCHORDS: BIRDS AND THEIR RIDDLING ROLE

2.1 The World of Professional Riddlership:⁷ Aldhelm's Framework

Aldhelm of Malmesbury starts this miniature saga as our first storyteller. His prose and poetry spoke often of his relationship with God, but also contemplated humanity's best road to heaven, as we will explore below. Aldhelm was, simply put, a highly influential figure in his time and well into the late Middle Ages,⁸ and so, with his riddling, serves as a good basis for understanding how riddles and birds speak about God. Aldhelm is often referred to as a "favored" author based on his wide influence (Murphy 3), and is quite possibly the "first great English scholar" (Pitman ii). Critics have speculated that he was educated in a combination of English and Irish traditions and pursued a wide and varied ecclesiastical career as a monk and later Bishop of Malmesbury (Pitman iii). We can thank Hadrian, scholar and tutor, for introducing Aldhelm to Latin prosody, which in turn paved his way to becoming the accomplished Latin and vernacular poet we know him as today (Pitman ii).

Riddle scholar Patrick Murphy suggests the rise of Symphosius' popularity within the Anglo-Saxon culture stems from the arrival of his enigmas on the island by the 600s, which established the "medieval paradigm" for riddling itself (3). Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, the [in]direct product of their relationship, became widely popular to the Anglo-Saxon aristocrats and clergy who had access to them in the years after they were penned.⁹ They reside in multiple collections, the most specifically dated of which – and, interestingly enough, prose but for these riddles – is Aldhelm's *De Metris*, that scholars estimate to have been written in 695 (Pitman iii). The

⁷ A reference to Terry Pratchett's *Soul Music*, p. 30, in which one character welcomes another to a world they were not entirely expecting.

⁸ This is, of course, beyond the academic convention of using a foundation specifically to increase word count.

⁹ We see evidence of this popularity in the sheer number of stylistic replications within the Anglo-Saxon corpus.

Enigmata consists of one hundred poems written in Latin hexameter – the style in which Symphosius wrote his own *enigma* – and, although they differ in line count and some content, Aldhelm clearly respected Symphosius’ skill and strove to emulate it. In some sense, then, Symphosius could be seen as the grandfather of the Exeter Riddles, via both Aldhelm’s tribute and the oral riddling tradition, and therefore represents a key player in the heritage of literary riddling within the period. Symphosius, from what we know of him, wrote between 300-500CE, and proved himself to be extremely influential as an ecclesiast, based on the popularity of his enigmas in Anglo-Saxon England as well as the traces of his influence in various works within the corpus (Murphy 3). Symphosius’ *enigma* were generally three lines long, cemented the precedent of Latin hexameter for the genre, and asked the reader – either explicitly or implicitly – to guess the subject therein, a pattern we see repeated throughout the Anglo-Saxon riddle tradition.

As Mary Swan and others have observed, a key concern in the scholarship surrounding Anglo-Saxon writing – be it vernacular or otherwise – is the subject of authorship. In her analysis of the Exeter Riddles, Swan writes that “modern scholars’ feelings of frustration when confronted by an anonymous Anglo-Saxon text are revealing of assumptions about how texts mean and the information we bring to bear when reading them” (72). Knowing, in other words, who contributed to the literature one produced – in Aldhelm’s case, Symphosius – is not enough. Culturally, reproduction and what we would now call “plagiarism” were not only encouraged but the process was, in fact, the norm, this using previous well-respected works to lay the groundwork for the current one.¹⁰ Reproducing and embellishing books of the Bible, for instance, *Judith* as a battle-oriented tale, was especially popular, and more so when the author

¹⁰ See Mary Swan, James Pitman, Dieter Bitterli, and others for discussion of Anglo-Saxon views on authorship.

used poetry to emphasize the parts of the tale that would most speak to their audience, or to choose stories to reproduce specifically with this audience in mind. Whether this culture of authorship by embellishment was endemic by the late seventh century, or traveled through society via, in part, Aldhelm's writings, we know definitively that Aldhelm did borrow, at the very least, Symphosius' style before merging it with his own. Aldhelm, like Symphosius, begins with a prologue defining his project and praising muses. However, he also acknowledges that muses are a pagan construction, and so he asks God for the inspiration and the gift of riddling instead (*Enigmata* Prologue ll.1-9)¹¹, then begs of God and his readers' forgiveness should he err (ll 25-29). From there, he moves into three-line hexameter poems in Latin before quickly shifting to longer and longer forms within the meter already defined; his final riddle, "Nature," ends at 83 lines, the rest varying between 3 and 15 lines each. He also clearly states his debt to Symphosius' writings, as well as using them for a jumping off point as "an excuse for writing a book of riddles," elsewhere within *De Metris* itself (Pitman iii).

In the riddles themselves, we find both purpose and delight. For Aldhelm, "all things – animals, plants, stars, natural phenomena, and even furniture and household utensils [creations of man] – speak of the power and wonder of nature and of God" (Pitman v). Aldhelm speaks throughout his riddles with great reverence for creation and imparts a sense of both the celebration of nature and glorification of God in his poems. His prologue admits he might "air his [Latin] vocabulary, of which he is obviously (and pardonably) proud" (v) in ways nonconforming or obscure (read: changes to language he glosses elsewhere to fit his needs)¹² – perhaps a subtle point toward his imperfect human state as compared to the glory he will sing of

¹¹ See Mercedes Salvador-Bello, pp 175-176, for further discussion of Aldhelm's forcible separation from pagan ideas.

¹² As this is often the case within his poems, I have opted to use James Hall Pitman's translation, well respected by the scholarly community, in place of my own, unless otherwise noted.

within the text – but asks his readers and God to overlook this within his larger purpose. Also, based on the use of riddling as a medium, Aldhelm strove to teach his readers various lessons, including seeing God and his works in all things great and small. Anglo-Saxon communities already used riddling as a didactic form, which demonstrates ways to educate readers in both “imagin[ing] a thing’s qualities and relat[ing] them to larger patterns” gently and candidly within their “playful” voice (Stanton 30). Indeed, Aldhelm does not ask the readers to guess each riddle, instead titling each by their answer. While this does remove the guesswork, and therefore some of the puzzle meant for learning from, entitling the riddles also shifts the reader’s attention from merely using the clues inherent for the purpose of *guessing* to the clues for the purpose of *reading*. This method thus forefronts the celebration of the subject rather than the didacticism inherent in the medium.

To that end, I have chosen to discuss six of Aldhelm’s birds – and later, various Exeter Riddle birds – to explore how they interact with one another and reflect his larger goals of celebration of nature and glorification of God. While this selection does not speak for the whole of his *Enigmata*, nor for all of his bird subjects, my preliminary analysis returns that all his bird poems do explore the dichotomy of life and death, and how they relate to the world and to God. The six I have chosen most overtly relate to one another via their individual themes and language: Riddles 14 (Peacock), 22 (Nightingale), 47 (Swallow), 57 (Eagle), 63 (Raven), and 64 (Dove).¹³ The metaphors, allegory, and outright calls to God throughout these poems explore varying aspects of the natural world and its connection to the earth and the heavenly sphere, in that the world is enclosed within heaven with the sky as a sort of demarcation between the two. Considering this connection, in addition to exploring the limits of knowledge with regards to

¹³ To avoid confusion, I will only capitalize riddle titles, not quote them, due to the title and the subject being the same.

migration patterns and life cycles within the environment, as well as how Anglo-Saxons seemed to rely heavily on lore, I will strive to consider whether these fowl act or represent messengers to and from God. Beyond these riddles' obvious thematic connection of aviation, each reflect an intentional preoccupation with death and rebirth, alongside allegorical didacticism. These themes underscore Aldhelm's twofold purpose of pedagogical demonstrations of Christian worship alongside his own praising of God through celebrations of nature. In addition to the death-cycle and the intentionality of Christian allegory, we will, in the next few paragraphs, find Christ metaphors and the celebration of nature itself.

2.2 Riddles on the Wings of God:¹⁴ The Birds of the *Enigmata*

Throughout the Bible, God consistently attempts to keep humans, specifically his Chosen People, safe from sin, or to guide them in avoiding greater sin post The Great Debacle of Original Sin. Perhaps mine is a "brighter side" reading of the Bible, but it seems, considering his reverence for God throughout his works, one Aldhelm may have at least considered when composing these riddles – a perspective of glory and awe in the light of God's guidance. God does, after all, protect Isaac from slaughter after testing Abraham's dedication to him (Gen. 22), warns Adam and Eve away from The Tree of Knowledge (and, as such, loss of innocence) (Gen. 2.17), and protects and guides David's hand with Goliath (1 Kng. 17), to name just a few Biblical stories. He rewards those who follow his teachings – not just blindly worship him – and guides his people from making too many harmful mistakes when they ask for help, as in Jonah's big fish adventure (Jon. 1).

¹⁴ A reference to a hymn based on Isaiah 40:29-31, in which God "shall renew their strength, they shall take wings as eagles" (Douay-Rheims translation) – appropriate, I think, considering the subject of birds, and specifically eagles.

When humans are deemed “worth saving,” as in the story of Noah and his family, God protects them from His wrath. His Old Testament nature is to be wrathful – as when a father’s children go too far, it seems – and, as God, He may perhaps go overboard with destruction, but He is also forgiving. In the Book of Genesis and *Genesis A*, the Flood that God sends acts as a baptism for the world and humanity at large – literally evoking images of death and rebirth, and of the future sacrifice of the Messiah. Here, God seems to attempt to cull the herd, as it were, to protect the “healthy,” the devout and/or non-sinning population and to simultaneously remove the “unhealthy” portion, those inundated or just seduced by sin (Gen. 7). This Biblical imagery, of course, is the basis for Aldhelm’s two riddles, the Dove and the Raven. According to Aldhelm’s reading of the Bible story, Noah acts as a redeemer of humankind, one who will restructure the sins of the world – much as Christ does when he sacrifices himself. In this sense, Aldhelm views the ark itself as the Church or, as Milton Gatch has written, “the vessel by which the saved are transported to the new, redeemed life” to begin a new era of history (4). The underlying message, beyond God’s protection of the worthy, reinforces that baptism is the way to Christianity and rebirth, “a ritual of dying. One goes under the water but, instead of drowning, he is brought out of it a new man” through this ritual of conversion (4). It is entirely likely that as “the agent of an act of salvation, Noah was seen [by Aldhelm] as the type of Christ” and – in this sense – his death and rebirth are representative of a trial run of the Messianic narrative that emerges in the New Testament (4).

It is no surprise that Aldhelm saw the allegorical underpinnings of Noah’s story – whether or not he pursued the above conjecture – nor that he used those underpinnings to structure his paired riddles, Raven and Dove. So, too, could we see these paired birds: the Raven, creature of pride, juxtaposed with the Dove, of humility. Milton Gatch, while he writes on the

birds of *Genesis A* rather than those of Aldhelm, nevertheless lays out the basic lore of the Flood, including that of these birds. He suggests they could even represent Christian stereotypes. The Raven, he says, represents the “nominal Christian” (5), especially when one considers the bird “refuses to bend his neck” to the “patriarch’s rule” (*Enigmata* ll. 5-6). He flies from the ark, though whether he returns or not was up for debate even in late Antiquity, and, when one considers “the inmates of the ark represent Christians, the baptized,” the Raven chooses not to “take advantage” of his newly-baptized status, instead representing “either sinfulness in flight from purity” or, as Bede suggested and was more widely accepted, “the worldly Christian who strays from the narrow confines of strict religious life” (Gatch 5). This interpretation of sin fleeing from the site of baptism, or even the Christian fleeing from his duty as a newly-baptized follower of Christ, may also stem in part from the darkness of his feathers, as, among others, Venetia Newall points out that black or dark feathers were sometimes equated with the devil or of sin (50).¹⁵ We also see this manifest in Aldhelm’s poems, as I will discuss below. While scholars seem to agree on Bede’s interpretation of ravens, when it comes to Aldhelm, the “refusal” to bow also underscores the Raven’s pride.

The Dove is the clear companion riddle to the Raven: the two use similar language, reference one another, and are positioned together in the collection. The Dove foils the Raven by describing itself as humble: it obeys “the patriarch’s command, / As by a fruitful bough I signified / Salvation to the earth was come” and receives gentility in its heart – humility – without the “black bile” of a melancholy humor (ll. 3-7).¹⁶ The Dove earns its place as a blessed

¹⁵ See also Kitson p. 497.

¹⁶ The subtle irony, intended or not, shines through in that humble Christians do not tout their own humility as it is against the very nature of the virtue to brag. In the Dove, the creature speaks of its own humility and achievements, undermining its own claims. While it seems to be a feature of riddle-craft itself, speaking through the creature’s mouth, the form does not completely erase the incongruity of the poem.

creature of God by following direction and assisting humankind in its journey of rebirth, and is rewarded with the additional status of purity and happiness, rather than the depression associated with “black bile.” Using the Dove riddle as a metaphor for a heaven-focused Christian, we could interpret this happiness as a knowledge of entrance into heaven and a dedicated religious life besides. These virtues of happiness and humility also pointedly oppose the Raven’s sins and its, to use Gatch’s language, “nominal Christian”¹⁷ metaphor (5). The humility inherent in following the plan laid before it (in remaining, in other words, a heaven-oriented Christian who adheres to religious doctrines) rewards the Dove (the Christian) with bounty and comfort in this new, reborn place. We also see a thorough appreciation for the Dove itself, and, by extension, God’s cleansing of the earth and His creatures that have survived, through Aldhelm’s references to the bird’s contentment and the finding of the “fruitful bough” (ll. 4). The Raven, though he may have been dubbed a nominal Christian, still exists as a creation of God and a creature, at least for now, free from sin through baptism, as well as one blessed with young. This, too, seems a celebration of life and creation.

As with all his riddles, Aldhelm imparts a crucial lesson with the Raven and Dove pairing. In the Biblical account, the raven does not receive punishment for his choice to not return. Aldhelm’s riddle offers a slight variation in his mention of the bird’s barrenness (ll. 12), but because the pun seems in line with the riddling genre rather than the Raven’s existence, the final lines, “One letter take away / and barren shall I be of progeny” (*Enigmata* ll. 11-12) stand to reinforce the Raven as the nominal Christian. These lines could also suggest that if you leave the Church in favor of worldly things, or even just pride, you and your children risk losing the community and safety within it, leading to dire consequences for your soul metaphysically as

¹⁷ I will be returning to Gatch’s definition of the phrase “nominal Christian,” found on p. 5, extensively in Chapter Three.

well as your physical self should something befall you without the Christian community's help. When we consider further applying the metaphor of the nominal Christian to this riddle, the Raven rejects the "narrow confines of strict Christian life" in favor of raising his own young like himself. The line "Until I see their feathers blackening / beneath the skin," if we return to Newall's suggestion that, in folklore, black or dark colors represent sin, may suggest that he still harbors sin but that he also has been baptized and so is still eligible for that ticket to ride to the sky should he follow the guidelines of the Church in repentance (ll. 10-11). This interpretation is reinforced by the above discussion of the Dove's reward of happiness and comfort, rather than the "black bile" – sin – which appears as late in its riddle as the Raven's black feathers. The Raven's struggles might additionally refer, as Charles D. Wright suggests, to Aldhelm's invocation of the "aetiological legend that God punished the raven's disobedience by causing its feathers to turn black (the same legend is found in the Old English *Adrian and Ritheus* dialogue, likewise without any allegorical gloss)" (139). This reference would support Aldhelm's goal to teach his readers via riddling. I propose, however, that both these theories – Raven as nominal Christian and Raven as Disobedient Sinner – are layered into the poem, especially considering the multiple metaphors and depth Aldhelm already spreads throughout the rest of his work.

In further examining the trail of the death and rebirth metaphor throughout our selected riddles, we come next to the Peacock, the Nightingale, the Swallow, and the Eagle. The Peacock, earliest in this collection, also presents the most obvious celebration of life and the glory of God with its direct references to beauty. It is followed closely by the Nightingale's juxtaposed melodious voice and dirty coloring. The Swallow continues this shift in focus from outer beauty to inner virtue, referencing healing its young and its Christ-like rise from sleep and starvation. The Eagle, the final poem between these and the Raven and the Dove which most directly

reference the theme of death and rebirth via the Flood, acts as a bridge as it demonstrates its worthiness as a creature to be celebrated by guiding others to heaven, and only mentions its body to demonstrate its rebirth.

Let us begin by examining the Peacock and its role as the progenitor of this tale. In today's world, theologians still gesture to the historical conflation of beauty and pride. Dr. Ron Rhodes, for example, recently explored how "Lucifer became so impressed with his own beauty... that he began to desire for himself the honor and glory that belonged to God alone. This pride represents the actual beginning of sin in the universe" ("How Did Lucifer Fall and Become Satan?"). Whether that rather puritanical bit of folklore existed the Anglo-Saxon period is moot. Aldhelm's tone throughout this riddle is celebratory, glorifying, rather than accusing or denigrating the bird for the gift of beauty God bestowed upon it. The Peacock describes itself via Aldhelm's pen as "indeed surpassing fair to see" and a "wonder to the world" (ll. 1-2). The most obvious layer here is his reference to its beauty as a worldwide phenomenon. The Bible, itself a worldwide text – or at least recognized in the West as one – contains references to the Peacock as beautiful and a respectable gift for royalty in the books of Kings, II Chronicles, and Job, though it does not appear in the New Testament at all, and, according to scholar Jamina Ramirez, seems to have no symbolic meaning until Augustine bestowed it (132-33).¹⁸ I, however, would disagree. Tharsis gave such valuable things as precious metals and exotic animals as gifts to their ally Solomon, God's chosen, and, though not an overt symbol of God's bounty, the animal could be interpreted as blessed by God for the sole purpose of supporting his chosen king (2 Kng. 10.22). If this was the case, we could consider the gifts as from God, and therefore blessed by him – worthy of Aldhelm's inclusion in his own praising of God's work.

¹⁸ See 1 Kng. 10.22; 2 Chr. 9.21; Job 39.13.

Aldhelm's reference to the Peacock as known the world over, the quintessential "bigger than my backyard" message, implies that the Peacock's great beauty can only exist *as* a "wonder," a gift from God, also supported by his final reference to the Peacock's perfect flesh even after death as a blessing itself (ll. 6). This suggests the Peacock was created to remind this world that God brings beauty even as he will also bring wrath – as in the tale of the Flood (Gen. 7). Aldhelm next describes the Peacock as being brighter than "beauteous ruddy gold," which serves to both reinforce this celebration of beauty as a gift from God and to underscore that Aldhelm writes as an Anglo-Saxon.¹⁹ Gold was often described as bright and shining within other poetic works in late antiquity due, in part, to the lack of hue terms within the language itself (Casson 224). To describe gold as "ruddy" suggests the Peacock was emphatically more beautiful than gold and further implies that a singular peacock was worth more than the currency. This emphasis on beauty stands, too, as subtle praise to God in his ability to create such beauty in nature.

Beyond his celebration of outer beauty bestowed by God, this poem also highlights the metaphor of death and rebirth, especially as it relates to Christ and the Christian message. While not the outright baptism of the Raven and Dove riddles, the Peacock nevertheless discloses its relation to this overarching theme in its admission that "corruption never seizes on my flesh" (ll. 6), which also acts as an indirect reference to Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*,²⁰ which mentions a similar experience with a lack of decay (cited in Ramirez 132). Mercedes Salvador-Bello discusses that the "incorruptible flesh [of the Peacock] could be associated with Christ's resurrection" (*Isidorean* 187). Considering the value Aldhelm places in Christ and his

¹⁹ See also Pitman's discussion on Aldhelm's proficiency in the vernacular over Latin, which would explain why he chose this particular phrasing.

²⁰ Augustine, XXI.iv, *De Civitate Dei*, eds. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, CCSL 47 and 48 (Turnhout, 1955), p. 762. Translation Marcus Dodds, *The City of God*, cited in Ramirez.

Resurrection,²¹ he employs metaphor to educate his readers on how worthy this value in Christ *is* seems almost a given. As an actual reference to the actual peacock lore in Anglo-Saxon England – beyond the already discussed Augustinian reference – the bird is classified as “clean” according to a variety of sources including multiple books of the Bible, indicating it can be eaten without betraying God’s mandates around food.²² We could include this as a possible addition to God’s blessing on the bird: if he notes it as clean eating, it is additionally blessed, which could have contributed to Augustine’s claim of its non-decaying flesh. With the addition of clean eating to the folklore of its un-rotting flesh, we see how Aldhelm allegorically relates the Peacock to Christ’s resurrection (*Isidorean* 187). This seems a natural extension of our theme of death and rebirth, especially when one considers the final phrase of the riddle: “now in death / corruption never seizes my flesh” (ll. 5-6). Aldhelm here could suggest that, while all living things must die, even those demonstrating God’s great taste in beauty that exists simultaneously as a physical representation of his glory on earth, God’s work is eternal. This message also acts to reinforce Aldhelm’s didactic purpose, and perhaps additionally suggests that – though a stretch – if one eats a Peacock, the ingestion of this symbolic Christ body-as-resurrection in its non-decaying flesh could bring one closer to God and his works.

In the Nightingale riddle, just a few poems later, Aldhelm begins shifting his tone. He continues to discuss beauty as an asset to the bird, but he instead emphasizes voice over physicality. The Nightingale’s “sweet” voice which produces such “varying melodies” premiers front and center herein (ll. 1). Some, though not all, of Aldhelm’s riddles tend to carry the most identifying markers first, a pattern to help readers use the title as a starting point on this journey

²¹ This value is most evident in Aldhelm’s purpose in writing his *Enigmata*, above, but is also seen in his consistent reflections on Christ via metaphor.

²² See Lev. 11, Deu. 14, Isidore’s *Etymologiae*, and Theodore’s *Penitential*

of celebrating the creatures of God as well as the best identifying traits of each subject. For instance, he uses the phrase “long have [I] borne a name of a hybrid form” to identify *enigma* 18 (Ant-Lion), “water, full of scaly fish” for 19 (Salt), “furrowed, iron-hued” for 21 (File), “nature bore [us], twin sisters” for 23 (Scales/Balance), and “dragon’s head contrived my birth” for 24 (Dragon-Stone), again, each found within their poem’s first lines. Additionally, the structure of these riddles – the emphasis of the first lines on assisting the reader in recognizing the described – helps us see how Aldhelm’s riddles “teach [his readers] something about the process of learning and knowing,” and that birds, in particular, act as a vehicle for the collection of knowledge (Warren 67). His specific focus on the Nightingale’s voice is a prime example. The description of its feathers, “dingy” colored, does not appear until the third line of the poem, as opposed to the first line’s description of the physical properties of the other riddles discussed above. There were, however, many species with feathers of a dun or dingy variety.²³ In this light, Aldhelm’s deemphasis of the Nightingale’s appearance displays his twofold purpose: the bird’s voice is its best identifying marker when paired with its color, rather than a bright songbird, and its variable songs are its natural wonder, its gifts from God most worth celebrating.

Having established the Nightingale’s physical features and singing talents as worth celebrating, we turn now to examine its metaphorical, allegorical, and monastic connotations. Salvador-Bello interprets Aldhelm, by including the Nightingale, lays bare his belief that its song was a metaphor for the devout monks who sang the Lord’s praises long into the night, and further that this metaphor encourages the interpretation of a human comparison, especially with his use of anthropomorphic terminology (*Isidorean* 196). She also suggests that the nightingale in Exeter Riddle 8 could indicate a reflection on motherhood (304-306), which, when one

²³ Depending on the translation of his Latin, the color descriptor can go either way. See also Casson’s discussion of “brown.”

considers her discussion of Aldhelm's riddle, could also apply there. Nightingale-as-mother metaphor may also ruminate on Mary as the mother of God and Joseph the protector of the nest, a concept that could bear more exploration in future. While there are some scholars who mention instances of nightingales as bringers of bad omen or associated with "lechery and illicit sexuality" by the twelfth century (Stanton 38), which may or may not have been rooted earlier in lore, this association within the Nightingale *enigma* seems unlikely, or even deliberately avoided. Consider, for instance, Aldhelm's insistence that Nightingale "never warble[s]" and that "none may scorn / my singing" (ll. 2-4). By outright decrying any negativity against it like this, Aldhelm simultaneously removes any negative interpretations and reinforces his celebratory tone. When we turn again to the theme of death and rebirth, we see "winter's cold / may rout me, but with summer I return" (ll. 5-6). Indeed, this "cycle" must have seemed perfect groundwork for referencing Christ, in which case Aldhelm would further be celebrating this natural creature as a representative of Christ, and therefore one of God's glory.

Moreover, the consistent phrasing of death and rebirth of birds throughout Aldhelm's riddles could refer to the Anglo-Saxon understanding of birds' lifecycles. Because birds' migration patterns took them beyond sight, off the island and beyond the sea – or hiding in hibernation in some cases – the Anglo-Saxons existed in a sort of limbo of belief: on the one hand, Pliny and Isidore both speak of migration patterns and leaving and returning during specific seasons; however, there seems to be some cognitive dissonance within the conversation of bird non-/migratory patterns within the riddles of Aldhelm and of the *Exeter Book*.²⁴ It seems, at least in his riddles, Aldhelm interpreted these selected birds as dying and being reborn upon

²⁴ See Warren, p.34 for his discussion on migration patterns and interpretations.

return to the island, as we will also see in the myth of the barnacle goose.²⁵ As the common nightingale tends to migrate south in winter, a similar notion of death and rebirth would most likely take hold within the culture – that the Nightingale would die in Winter and be reborn [when it returned] in Summer – and would therefore reference, if not outright stand as an allegory for, Christ’s resurrection. We may also see, in this dissonance between migration and death, the Anglo-Saxon notion that birds “are equated with frightening but compelling territories outside human knowledge, like the exotic realms to which Isidore links birds’ unknowable wanderings in his introduct[ion]” (Warren 34). Aldhelm, in using this metaphor, may have recognized that the cognitive dissonance existed without actually being able to articulate and/or resolve it, and so referred to it in his poem as the power of God to gift birds with the power to slip back and forth within human ken.

When we consider the Swallow, we find it is the most overtly allegorical of all the riddles selected here. This riddle describes the Swallow as one who “endure[s] the fast” through “deep slumber” over what we can interpret as winter via the line “I pass long months away from food” (ll. 1-2). We can see here, on this top layer of meaning, Aldhelm clearly believes the Swallow hibernates, or dies and is reborn – actually or metaphorically – although currently-known scientific fact and Isidore both state that European swallows migrate to Africa in winter.²⁶ Peter Kitson expounds on the Anglo-Saxon understanding of migratory patterns. He suggests that Anglo-Saxons understood “what the birds do at such times is lay themselves up in mud underwater in a torpid state,” and that as the Anglo-Saxons “spent their lives in a cloudy island at just one end of a migration-route were not so well placed to *verify* the fact of migration

²⁵ See Chapter Three on my discussion of Exeter Riddle 10.

²⁶ This is, of course, opposed to African swallows, which are non-migratory.

(emphasis mine)” – they, in essence, “had no observational data on where the birds were when not here” (80). The description of birds’ torpid state seems likely the referent to Aldhelm’s Swallow’s winter plans, just as, while the Anglo-Saxons may have had access to the theories of migration from Isidore and others, connecting a theory to reality may not have penetrated the folklore of the island. This might have caused a cognitive dissonance of sorts where migratory patterns were concerned, or, could also be a case of Aldhelm reaching for spaces to drop his allegories within the framework of the existing folklore to best help laymen further associate the Swallow with its description.

Nonetheless, the clear metaphor within the Swallow is, again, Christ’s death. We do see an interesting break from the previous pattern of using the first line to denote the creature via its best-known features – unless “Drooping” (ll. 1) and passing the winter without eating is the hallmark feature of the Swallow specifically, which, considering Kitson’s research, seems unlikely – where Aldhelm instead places the clear identifying marks at the end of the poem: “I wield to cure [my chicks], by a healing salve / made of that flower whose name is likewise mine” (ll. 9-10). The pattern of first-line identifiers is not specifically defined as absolute with some outliers, but rather a convenient and eye-catching pattern of selected riddles and their immediate neighbors. This change may represent a turning point in the collection toward the Eagle and the Raven/Dove pairing.

In analyzing this riddle, it is important to consider not just that the Swallow most closely resembles Christ’s existence, but that we discuss how this bird’s life cycle within the poem and Christ’s life cycle match up to display this poem’s celebratory message toward the glorification of God. Christ died, stayed dead for three days, and rose again; he spread his good word, tapped his successors to continue that work; he left for heaven and opened the gates there for humankind

to follow (Luk. 24). Depending on which Bible translation we examine, he either eliminated Original Sin completely or else allowed for baptism to remove it from humanity's souls, which we know, in some way or another, Anglo-Saxons were aware of. In comparing this cycle to the Swallow riddle, we see abundant similarities. Christ dies on the cross, the Swallow droops in the winter without food. Christ remains in his tomb for three days, Swallow fasts in deep slumber. Christ rises from the tomb, Swallow rises and sings to welcome Spring. Christ finishes proselytizing and goes to heaven, Swallow flees the "young and all [its] race" for the "shady coverts" (ll. 6-7). Christ allows sinners who repent into heaven – in essence, healing them in this process – when they die and at the Last Judgment both, Swallow cures its chicks with "a healing salve / Made of that flower whose name is likewise mine." The Swallow, then, of all Aldhelm's riddles most overtly reinforces his ability to see God (or in this case, Christ) in everything, and, with this knowledge shining through his poetry, he can best celebrate God's gift and glory, as well as teach his readers of God's closeness to the natural world which is best reflected in his creation of such a small bird whose life cycle so closely matches his Son's.

Aldhelm, in his riddle of the Eagle, returns to the first line to offer the creature's most identifying feature. Zeus – or Jupiter – Lord of the Sky and King of the Pantheon of the Antiquity stole Ganymede from Troy while wearing an eagle's shape. But, the poem goes on to say, the Eagle herein "was not that bird" (ll. 3), showing Aldhelm's marked "ambivalence of early medieval Christian writers [such as himself] to pagan tales" alongside his inability to "resist the allusion to the eagle that carried off Ganymede" even when insisting his Eagle is not Zeus (Herren 95). Indeed, while the Eagle, according to Aldhelm, was not Zeus, it does still fly between earth and "the dome of heaven" (ll. 6), where it drives "honking geese" and "scatter[s] fleeing swans" (ll. 5). We could read this phrasing in a few ways, but the two that immediately

rise to the forefront would be either causing havoc on its way to catch dinner or guiding these birds like a dog would a flock of sheep toward heaven. As Aldhelm has already told us the Eagle's name, we as knowledgeable readers, alongside his contemporaries, know that eagles tend to use silent hunting methods - prey animals are highly alert, so honking geese would give the game away and lose the Eagle his dinner. In this light, then, I read the Eagle as a guide to heaven, coupled with my earlier discussion of birds as allegories for Christ or his people, and Clive Hart's theory that birds can "cross the divide between the heavens and earth" (2, cited in Ramirez). This would "have manifested itself in Anglo-Saxon art and literature through the use of birds as symbols of the soul"; each bird may have had its own symbology, "but predominantly they were [significant]...because they represented the passage between heaven and earth, known and unknown, life and death" (Ramirez 195). Birds could fly the edge between "the dome of heaven" and the sky of earth. This Eagle, described as one going between these spaces, could indeed be guiding these other birds back and forth through that between space, or even up into heaven.

Stepping to the allegorical plane, the Eagle could very well represent Christ in earnest. Christ, a disruptor of the status quo – in the Eagle's case, the "scatter[ing] of fleeing swans" – looked at long standing merchants in the temple, then flipped their tables, (Mat. 21.12-13). He also stands as a guide to heaven, both through his sacrifice and his discussions with his apostles throughout the Bible on how to use him as a path to eternal life²⁷ – just as the Eagle could be interpreted as guiding the geese and swans. The Eagle seems, too, to have the ability to enter and leave heaven's space at will – he pushes the birds "*through* the dome of heaven" (emphasis mine) and then, when he is old and decrepit and worn from his work, plunges "in springs of

²⁷ See, among others: Jhn. 3, Mat. 19; 1 Jhn. 5; Mat. 6.

limpid water” (ll. 8), implying he has returned to the earthly plane to bathe and restore himself before flying in-between again. This bathing scene reminds us of the sacrament of baptism, and, as we have already established, refers to the ceremony as literally dying and emerging from the water reborn. As Christ himself was baptized,²⁸ the parallel to the Eagle’s renewal from “weary age has bent my senile limbs” to “dripping, rise restored in Phoebus’ light” (ll. 7-9) seems an obvious connection. Aldhelm reflects, through this use of allegory, on nature’s glory and reflection of God – that, should we look closely enough, we would see God in everything, and should therefore celebrate and glorify all his creations.

2.3 “Wings of a Dove”:²⁹ Conclusion

Aldhelm’s Raven, Dove, Peacock, Nightingale, Sparrow, and Eagle riddles all reflect a worldview more sympathetic to the earthly sphere and to humanity. Pre-Aldhelm, we see a heaven-focused lifestyle, one in which we are generally encouraged to look mostly heavenward, and that our earthly bodies matter not except as a vehicle for the soul and to worship and glorify God (Riyeff 455). Aldhelm’s riddles, though, reveal that he, at least, has progressed toward a middling road. ‘We as humans,’ he seems to say, ‘exist on this earth, placed here by God as caretakers for his creations great and small. We should, then, act as part of this glory and use our bodies, souls, and minds to glorify God and celebrate his work, as well as his generosity and the gift of his Son.’ We see this sentiment in Aldhelm’s reverence for the natural world throughout the *Enigmata* and explored within this chapter. Further, these riddles demonstrate his love of Christ through his consistent references to the themes of death and rebirth and birds as vehicles for both that theme and Christ himself. Aldhelm’s desire to live a life reflective of and honoring

²⁸ See Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3.

²⁹ Song title written by Bob Ferguson and performed by Ferlin Husky, which tells the story of Noah’s ark.

Christ, too, appears within the collection, and also contributes to his stated purpose in celebrating and glorifying God. I will continue to explore this transformation of perspective as it appears in the Exeter Riddles throughout Chapter Three.

3 “THE BONNY SWANS”:³⁰ HOW CLOTHING WORDS SHAPE CREATION

3.1 “On My Father’s Wings”:³¹ The Exeter Riddles and Aldhelm’s Legacy

In Chapter Two, we examined the significance of Aldhelm’s storytelling of birds within riddles as it relates to the celebration of God. Aldhelm utilizes them as teachers of how to live or be closer to Him. They are messengers, riders between heaven and earth that bring tidings or demonstrate the power of Christ’s rebirth. They are respected as creations of God and used to demonstrate how best to worship him and live Godly, heaven-facing lives. We saw, too, how even those birds that exemplify “nominal Christians”³² are not dismissed by Aldhelm outright, but are instead presented as lessons to those who could receive the chance for redemption. Even these creatures are not outside God’s grace, as they were selected to be saved and always have the chance to return.

Within this chapter, I move to examine Aldhelm’s poetic inheritor, the Exeter Riddle Poet,³³ where cannot help but notice how more than 200 years³⁴ changes a great many things. As I will explore below, the way the Riddle Poet speaks of birds shifts toward a more nominal position within the text of the *Exeter Book* Riddles, than does his spiritual predecessor Aldhelm. The language that describes Riddles 7 (Swan), 9 (Cuckoo), and 10 (Barnacle Goose)³⁵ specifically defines this shift. Instead of situating the bird subjects as creations of God to be

³⁰ Loreena McKennitt’s song, “The Bonny Swans,” finds its basis in Child Ballad 10: Twa Sisters, in which the elder sister kills the younger over a man and throws her body into the river, where she either turns into a swan or is mistaken for one, some versions are unclear, and is then harvested for the parts to construct a musical instrument.

³¹ Carole Bayer Sager and David Foster’s song, “On My Father’s Wings,” performed by The Corrs, speaks to a journey paved by a parent’s steps, in this case, as the Exeter Riddles Poet would speak to Aldhelm.

³² As I explained in Chapter Two, I will be using Gatch’s definition of “nominal Christian,” one who is baptized but remains “the worldly Christian who strays from the narrow confines of strict religious life” (5).

³³ For clarity and consistency, I choose to identify the poet or poets involved in composing the *Exeter Book* Riddles under a singular moniker without engaging in the debate of authorship.

³⁴ Patrick Murphy notes the *Exeter Book* was compiled between 965 – 975 (1). Robert Stanton suggests the poems were written as early as the 8th century (29).

³⁵ To avoid confusion, I will only capitalize riddle titles, not quote them, due to the title and the subject being the same, and, to reiterate, all Exeter Riddle numbers cited within refer to the K&D numbering system.

celebrated, instead of using metaphor to explore how creatures exemplify God's grace, creativity, and foresight (as we saw in the *Enigmata*), the Riddle Poet utilizes material-centric language to situate these birds within a specific Middle-Space³⁶ between the two theological extremes of asceticism and nominal Christianity. The language connotes a world of human construction rather than words associated with the natural world, the God-created world. This is not to debate Godly words versus human ones, but rather to discuss human *creations*. Aldhelm's riddles explore birds didactically in the context of Christian pedagogy. The Exeter Riddles, however, move toward teaching that birds, as messengers flying the line of heaven and earth, can celebrate how we as humans can exist in the Middle-Space between the two without losing our sense of self or our chances into heaven, as if, in the years separating Aldhelm and the *Exeter Book*, birds ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, too.

Aldhelm lauds his featured birds' beauty, talent, and versatility throughout his *Enigmata*, and, in doing so, admires God's handiwork as the creator of such animals.³⁷ He also consistently compares them to Christ via his use of the death and rebirth metaphor, and uses the voices of his birds to speak Christian maxims like *enigma* 64 (Dove) and its message of humility.³⁸ These voices reflect human qualities and values, laying the groundwork for readers to see themselves in the speakers even as the speakers compare themselves to Christ. The poems speak to both the mortality of earth-bound creatures and the divinity in these animals as reflections of God and Christ – most directly so in the Peacock's (*enigma* 14) immortal flesh. This suggests, in turn, one will not be condemned to Hell for not living a completely ascetic life. Aldhelm's message, though, clearly stays on the stricter religious side of the middle lane, as seen in his discussion of

³⁶ Further, I will explore my theory of the Middle-Space and how it is defined by the birds of the Riddle Poet. I will, however, use Fabienne Michelet's definition of space as the "*imaginaire* and the mental map" (8-9).

³⁷ See Chapter Two, p. 13.

³⁸ See Chapter Two, p. 16.

enigma 63's (Raven) nominal Christianity and the Dove's contrasting humility and obedience to God's word, as well as *enigma* 57's (Eagle) messenger qualities, their ability to move in the sky, a kind of pocket between heaven and earth.³⁹

The same fascination with flight is written into in the Exeter Riddles, alongside the use of human voice and the conflict of mortality and divinity, which are to be expected in poems that, on the whole, were influenced by Aldhelm's work. A newcomer, however, stands out: a focus on earthly temporality and man-made creations, which shifts the Riddle Poet away from Aldhelm's stance in the ascetic-leaning side of the middle (and central purpose of praising God by celebrating the animals He created) and toward an evaluation of the creations of man in the finite. All three Exeter Riddles (Swan, Cuckoo, and Barnacle Goose) maintain a consistent conceit within their text - that of using clothing language to describe their feathers, specifically with words like *hrægl*, *hleosceorpe*, and *hyrste*. In superimposing the language of material culture on creatures made by God, the poet emphasizes the celebration of humankind's ability to create as an extension of God's. The focus on temporality and celebration of human creative strength within the Exeter Riddles defines the Middle-Space, a place that allows for humans to celebrate their creative power as a gift from God without condemning that creativity as being too worldly. The stark difference, then, between the *Enigmata* and the Exeter Riddles lies in the *Enigmata*'s celebration of the power of God's creation, the gifts those creations are, and the knowledge and awe we as readers gain upon reading them as compared to the Exeter Riddles' definition of and their existence within the Middle-Space. They do evoke similar lesson and admiration of the powers of creation, if from the angle of God's creation of humans in his image

³⁹ See Chapter Two, p. 27-28.

(Gen. 1.26-30),⁴⁰ which grants humanity the power to create. The Exeter Riddles do retain the same essential purpose, however, in that they express a celebration of creation, doing so by using language centered around man-made things alongside the temporality of those creations and existence itself.

3.2 “The Sound of Silence”:⁴¹ Building and Exploring the Middle-Space

In the previous chapter’s discussion of the *Enigmata*, we explored how the poems proselytized for people to live a more religious life, even if they couldn’t completely commit to asceticism. To some degree, these didacticisms worked as homilies did: as a request to turn one’s life as heaven-ward as possible by avoiding sin, all while enlightening the soul and disregarding the body, and, presumably, the world in which it exists, all to achieve a place in heaven.⁴² Aldhelm, in his *De Laude Virginitate*, did condemn the dress of “persons dedicated to the Church” for dressing elaborately, rather than in more ascetic clothing (Owen-Crocker *Dress* 26). Conveniently, this treatise also offers the only real gloss of Old English clothing words, as well as the confirmation that wool was the ascetic’s preferred garment instead of the softer linen, associated with being too worldly (26). Applied to Aldhelm’s poetry, this knowledge only emphasizes the heaven-focused tones discussed in Chapter Two. While this treatise only specifically refers to those dedicated to the Church, it may have informed his opinion for his secular flock to be less worldly as well. The *Exeter Book’s* bird riddles pick up on the nuance within their predecessor’s text and suggest that, while bodies may harbor souls and act as mouths for prayer, they also house minds and hearts bound to this world and God’s creations within it, sliding past the issue of condemning anyone into the Middle-Space between asceticism and

⁴⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references come from the Douay-Rheims Vulgate translation.

⁴¹ Simon and Garfunkel’s “Sound of Silence” discusses communication, or lack thereof, within a community.

⁴² For more on this, see Jacob Rieff’s discussion of dualism and the Body-and-Soul theme.

nominality. These riddles thus favor the clothing and material language that Aldhelm's *Enigmata* avoid, shifting focus from God-as-Creator to humankind's creative handiwork which helps give form to the Middle-Space.

We see the expansion of the Middle-Space most specifically between heaven-focused and nominal Christian mentalities within the Swan, Cuckoo, and Barnacle Goose of the *Exeter Book*.⁴³ Beyond simply saying, "It's okay to live life, just please also worship God and save your soul," the concept of the Middle-Space represents a reverence for God without sublimation of the human imagination. Aldhelm might have started out on the road toward this space, may not have outright condemned his Raven (metaphorically symbolizing the nominal Christian), but he did point out how inappropriate the bird's actions were and advised against them. These Exeter birds, though, represent a whole shift toward non-judgment of themselves, and perhaps non-acknowledgment of the nominality issue at all. Instead, they focus wholly on existing squarely center. The Swan, first of the Exeter birds, physically flies the middle road between heaven and humanity. The Cuckoo grows between kindness and abandonment, two extremes of religious doctrine. The Barnacle Goose exists in a middle space between the water and the sky, life and death. Together, these birds exemplify the creation and support of the Middle-Space.

A central focus of the text of the Swan riddle is in flight, and the sounds – or lack thereof – in the bird's movement which also remains a key piece of how scholars solved it. The poem uses "sound patterns - especially alliteration, assonance, and stress – [which] gesture to natural systems, not only of human speech but also of animal noises" (Stanton 31). These patterns become more apparent as we look at the text more closely below. Utilizing sound patterns within the writing itself also speaks to the vocal nature of riddles. Riddles as a genre are meant to be

⁴³ There are other riddles within the collection, and the text at large, that in part support this discussion. As these examples are the most thorough, however, these will be the main focus.

spoken aloud, and the sentiment remains the same for the more literary Exeter Riddles in their many requests to “say what I am called” and the common connecting threads reflected throughout the collection, demonstrating the nature of riddling is a cultural and worldwide pastime (Tupper 178).

Indeed, the swan's name, both *cygnus* and *swan* (Old English), comes from the sound that it makes, according to Isadore of Seville; its voice also “produces another form of in-betweenness,” and it’s “onomatopoetic” name preserves the “distinctive sound” of its voice and combines “the product of assigned human signifiers, and [its] own natural” voice (Warren 16). To name a creature by its sound, in other words, relegates it to a space not quite its own, a space also occupied by humans, especially when we consider that birds' flight “engages these creatures in transformative evasions that literally leave no trace” of evidence (15). This further reinforces their existence in this liminal Middle-Space. The birds in the Exeter Riddles, to be more specific, act as a “subject of transformation [and] also as pedagogical agents - exacting and edifying creatures whose innate diversity and riddling existence engage them with intellectual operations that the Exeter Riddles reflectively scrutinize” (20), the edification of diversity emphasizing the Middle-Space.

The Swan’s unique juxtaposition of the celebration of sound of flight in “*swogað...swinsiað / torhte singað*” (ll. 7-8a) and sparse silence, “*swigað*” (ll. 1a) on land creates alliteration as a kind of transformation-in-progress.

<i>Hræl min swigað</i>	<i>þonne ic hrusan trede,</i>
<i>oppe þa wic buge,</i>	<i>oppe wado drefe.</i>
<i>Hwilum mec ahebbað ofer hæleþa byht</i>	
<i>hyrse mine,</i>	<i>ond þeos hea lyft,</i>
<i>5 ond mec þonne wide wolcna strengu</i>	
<i>ofer folc byreð.</i>	<i>Frætwe mine</i>
<i>swogað hlude</i>	<i>ond swinsiað,</i>

torhte singað, þonne ic getenge ne beom
flode ond foldan, ferende gæst (emphasis mine) (K&D 7).

[My garment is silent when I tread upon the ground, or when I inhabit my home, or swim through the waters. Sometimes they [my garments] heave me up above the halls of heroes and this high breeze, these accoutrements of mine, and the strength of the clouds bears me above the people. My adornments loudly make music, make pleasing melody, sing bright and clear when I am not near the river or the earth, a wandering stranger.]

The emphasized lines, those with the “sw” sounds, stand out as the most consistent use of sound within the poem (Paz 84).⁴⁴ While alliteration sounds, features of verbal riddling, play as large a feature of verbal riddling, play as large a part here as in any Anglo-Saxon poem, a true pattern in sound otherwise does not emerge. “*Swigað*” and “*þonne*” of the first line play on the “eth”/“thorn” sounds, but the otherwise alliterative value is not nearly as consistent as the “sw,” which led to the widespread and unanimous naming of the Swan riddle. If we also consider the otherwise consistent alliterative concerns throughout the surrounding poems, the poet’s purposeful avoidance of a sharper pattern beyond this sound would have called attention to the riddle as using the soundplay as an additional “hint.” This move would push the Swan and its metaphors into a poetically-liminal space, as, other than the avoidance of alliterative pattern, it fits thematically within the surrounding poems. Structurally, then, the poem is in flux, even as the poet describes the Swan itself as transitional, unsettled as it moves between the worlds of the earth, “*þonne ic hrusan trede*” (ll.1b), and sky, “*ond mec þonne wide / wolcna strengu*” (ll. 5). The message and metaphors the Swan riddle carries would then carry this same transience, the same key to existing within the Middle-Space.

⁴⁴ See also Bitterli p. 55.

Folktales from the long ago speak of faeries or other mischievous creatures taking children for their own and to leave a “substitute” creature, a “changeling,” in exchange, “one of the oldest parts of the fairy beliefs” found in written record as early as those of Ralph of Coggeshall and Gervase of Tilbury (Briggs 69-70). This changeling could be anything from a piece of “wood roughly shaped into the likeness of a child and endowed by GLAMOUR [a magical disguise] with a temporary appearance of life, which soon faded, when the baby would appear to die,” though “[m]ore often a fairy child who did not thrive would be left behind, while the coveted, beautiful human baby was taken” (70). Frances James Child collected more than a few ballads containing the person-exchange motif, most notably “6. Willie’s Lady,” “39. Tam Lin,” and “40. The Queen of Elfan’s Nourice.” Willie’s wife was in labor when his witch of a mother cursed her to never bear the child. He finds a faerie, who advises him to make a child of wax (as if his wife had actually birthed him), which tricks his mother into letting go the curse and saving his wife and child (Child 81-88). Tam Lin was taken by faeries as an adult and trapped, soon to be sent to hell. A young maid finds him, falls in love and gets pregnant, and then pulls him free of the Faerie Queen’s curse to return to human land, in some versions holding onto him as he transforms between various animals as the Queen attempts to keep him (335-358). “The Queen of Elfan’s Nourice” is but a fragment, and describes the kidnapping of a woman to be a faerie’s nursemaid. In his introduction to the ballad, Child also describes another folktale in which a faerie requests a mother raise its child alongside hers in exchange for food and clothes (358-360).

So does the cuckoo remind us of changeling lore, a bird notorious for laying eggs in other birds’ nests for them to raise, essentially abandoning their chicks to push their non-siblings from

the nest as they grow (Salvador-Bello “Patterns” 358). Riddle #9’s Cuckoo, however, speaks of a foster-mother who offers only kindness to this new chick (ll 1; 5).

*Mec on þissum dagum deaden ofgeafun
 fæder ond modor; ne wæs me feorh þa gen,
 ealdor in innan. Ða mec an ongon
 welhold mege, wedum þeccan,
 5 heold ond freopode, hleosceorpe wrah
 swa arlice swa hire agen bearn,
 oppæt ic under sceate, swa min gesceapu wæron,
 ungesibbum wearð eacen gæste.
 Mec seo friþe mæg fedde sibþan,
 10 oppæt ic aweox, widdor meahte
 sibas asettan. Heo hæfde swæsra þy læs
 suna ond dohtra, þy heo swa dyde (K&D 9).*

[In those days my father and mother abandoned me for dead; there was not yet a soul in me, alive within me. When a sole kindly kinswoman covered me with her garments, kept watch, protected and defended me, covered me honorably with her protecting clothes as her own child, until I under her bosom(garment?) became, with unrelated ones, enlarged with life. The peaceful kinswoman fed me afterward until I grew mighty, to set my journey on the wide path. She had less of her own sons and daughters than she did.]

The Cuckoo’s otherwise parasitic existence is thrown sideways – a mother whose own children die (ll. 11-12) still supports the chick as if it were her own (ll. 4b-9). This particular riddle, too, is perfectly clear from the start the speaker is a cuckoo, and instead asks the reader to examine the wordplay and message behind it (“Patterns” 358). The Cuckoo is an “ungrateful foster-child” (359) who “betray[s] its foster-mother” during its growth by “knocking the legitimate fledglings out of the nest” (358). At the same time, the foster-mother seems to legitimately care for the Cuckoo as one of her own, “*hleosceorpe wrah* (covered [me with her] protecting clothes)” (ll. 4), alongside the action of raising the chick “*swa arlice* ([emphatic] honorably)” (ll. 6a). Some scholars argue that the Cuckoo is *intentionally* parasitic, yet, the riddle describes the abandonment and later nurturing of the Cuckoo without any intention at all, and even those are

acted *upon* the Cuckoo. The Cuckoo is “*deaden ofgeafun* (given up for dead)” (ll. 1b) *by* its parents, its “*fæder ond modor*” (ll. 2a). Those with agency perform the action – in this case, the parents abandon the child – and the Cuckoo’s “*mec*” (ll.1a) is in the accusative case, clearly indicating the Cuckoo was left behind, was acted upon. Indeed, in a first-person voiced riddle, the Cuckoo uses only two personal pronouns beyond this “*mec*” in the nominative case, “*ic*” on lines seven and ten, and seven specifically refers to it having been acted upon. “[*I*]c *wearð* (I became)” (ll. 7-8a) past indicative form of “*weorðan*,” is a sub-optimal yet valid form of the passive voice in Old English (Smith 85), again indicating the Cuckoo exists in a passive bubble.

This bird, condemned by Alcuin to metaphoric existence for a once-devout novice who moves into nominality (“Patterns” 359) is meticulously described with no actual agency within Riddle 9, and the speaker does not judge it or the foster-mother. Instead, she laments the loss of her other children in the final lines. The riddle’s tone, completely non-condemnatory due to the passivity within, grants the reader implicit permission to impose their own judgment, to see the Cuckoo’s situation as complex and worthy of contemplation – reinforced by the absence of any guessing-invitation involved in the poem’s construction. Furthermore, this riddle uses its own structure to allow the reader to take up existence in the Middle-Space. The Cuckoo is not blamed for its birth any more than its foster-mother is blamed for her protection and nurturing of it, even as those actions cause harm to her own children. Similarly, the Christian cannot be blamed for avoiding asceticism as long as their actions do not cross God’s will. The poem, in this way, asks us to consider the moral implications and consequences of our actions. If you are a good Christian, worship God, and do not allow yourself to act in sin or fall entirely into nominal Christianity, you, too, can be forgiven for avoiding the ascetic lifestyle, for living in the Middle-Space.

Our third Middle-Space bird is the Barnacle Goose. Its poem describes a birth from the sea, passes by a nearby ship – presumably housing barnacles, or shedding floating driftwood, either its birthplace – before coming to life and flying high across the sea. This reflection of the folktale of the Goose’s birth (Newall 10) inexorably connects the depth of its meaning, connects the poem itself to the community surrounding it. This signifies, in part, that any message the riddle imparts may either reflect community values or speak to the community most directly, if not both simultaneously.

*Neb wæs min on nearwe, ond ic neoþan wætre,
 flode underflowen, firgenstreamum
 swiþe besuncen, ond on sunde awox
 ufan yþum þeaht, anum getenge
 5 liþendum wuda lice mine.
 Hæfde feorh cwico, þa ic of fæðmum cwom
 brimes ond beames on blacum hrægle;
 sume wæron hwite hyrste mine,
 þa mec lifgende lyft upp ahof,
 10 wind of wæge, siþþan wide bær
 ofer seolhbapō. Saga hwæt ic hatte (K&D 10).*

[My nose was on narrowly, and I beneath the waters, the underflowing of the tides, streams, sank strengthened, and upon swimming arose forth. From above waves covered my body, near to a solitary travelers’ wood (ship). Whenever I came out of the embraces of the sea and the beam, I would be endowed with life in black garments; some were white, my trappings. Air heaved that living me up, the wind from the waves afterward bore me far over the seal’s bath. Say what I am called.]

When, then, the Goose rises from the waves near a ship “*anum getenge / liþendum wuda* (near a solitary travelers’ wood)” (ll. 4b-5), and continues on its journey, it moves from its beginning [its death-to-life transformation] past a community, and flies on into the sky. As we discussed in Chapter Two, water, death, and movement into life can readily represent the baptism of the soul.

A bird species born of driftwood, or barnacles, as the Barnacle Goose was believed to be, would likely birth many birds, though perhaps not all at once. If we consider a ship to house a

community's worth of barnacles, the Goose's singular flight at first strikes a discordant note. Seeing this bird as a metaphor for humanity, the message would, on the surface, advise the reader to leave a person's community and all its comfort and security behind for the freedom of the open sky, of the heaven that lies above it. Yet in the "*wind of wæge, / sibþan wide bæc / ofer seolhbabo* (the wind from the waves afterward bore me far over the seal's bath)" (ll. 10-11a), the Goose flies *over* the sea, not *toward* heaven, remaining in the space between the two. Though the whole riddle is written in past tense, the phrase "*Hæfde feorh cwico, þa ic of fæðmum cwom*" (ll. 6) sticks out as slightly problematic, literally translating as "had life endowed / when I out of the embraces came." "*Hæfde*" coupled with "*cwom*" can be read as the use of a subjunctive "whenever," which could indicate this event happens often (as with its other siblings). Whether we translate the phrase in the generic or subjunctive past, the Poet, by using past-phrasing instead of present (as we see in the Swan), places the Goose as speaking from a space beyond, outside of life while still having the voice *to* speak - a Middle-Space. Moreover, while the Goose is born from the ship's barnacles and leaves the ship and any unborn siblings behind, other ships and other communities lie on and over the sea, as do other geese fly between it and the sky. Through this slight shift in perspective, then, the Barnacle Goose joins this sky community, the messenger realm between earth and heaven, rising post-baptism into the same transient Middle-Space as the other birds in this selection,⁴⁵ all of which suggest metaphors for how to live between heaven and earth, how to celebrate humankind and its creativity.

⁴⁵ For sake of brevity, I have removed the full discussion of the other birds that support the Middle-Space, though for thoroughness, I will include the general idea here: Exeter Riddle 8 (multiple-voice dissonance, past nostalgia – simultaneously encouraged and discouraged by the Church); 13 (their birth spans the distance between life and death); #24 (voice modulations please many at once, as in splitting the line between pleasing the self and the Church).

3.3 “Make a Little Birdhouse in Your Soul”⁴⁶: Material Culture

The liminal, Middle-Space that I suggest exists within this text stands between the nominal Christian lifestyle and asceticism, and allows humanity to celebrate their creativity, their relationships with God, and themselves on their own terms without seeming arrogant or conceited. The Middle-Space is transformative, a flying road between heaven and earth, and lies in the relationship between God and humankind - His creatures who fly through the Middle-Space shape it. And yet, it simply is not enough to observe the phenomenon, to tie humankind to it, to consider further how humanity’s creative abilities come into play. No, in the spirit of birds, let us go “higher, further, faster”⁴⁷ into the realm of how space and time interact to better understand how the Middle-Space exists within the context of humans and their God-given ability to create (*Captain Marvel*). Let us, then, move first to the language of the Riddles, and then into the creations of man which are layered atop them.

The Exeter Riddles we have so far focused on [the Swan, Cuckoo, and Barnacle Goose] all contain specific reference to man-made objects. The bird riddles we explored in Chapter Two, the *Enigmata*, contain no references to man-made items, instead referencing only God-made, natural ones. Aldhelm gives his birds voices, describing their beauty, even comparing the Peacock to “ruddy gold” (ll. 4) which outshines the world over with its beauty. Aldhelm downplays the Nightingale’s beauty, describing it as “dingy” or dirty (ll. 3), but makes no mention of its listeners, only its lifecycle. Aldhelm speaks to its natural beauty, its coloring, its God-given talents, just as he does with the Swallow, but neither as they relate to humankind,

⁴⁶ This is a lyric from They Might Be Giants’ “Birdhouse in Your Soul,” which considers how such a simple thing as a nightlight can be important to a person who relies on it – that material culture, often overlooked, plays an important role in our lives.

⁴⁷ Beyond being a quote from *Captain Marvel* (2019), which inspires the titular character to do and be more than she is, “higher, farther, and faster” references *The Right Stuff* (1983), a docudrama film of the Mercury 7 astronaut program.

only to the natural world. Even when we consider his collection as a whole, those objects made by man are described in specifically natural terms. Aldhelm's #61, *Dagger*, mentions that it was made, in part, "from a ferocious bull or fetid goat" (ll. 3) and its "house is built / Of shapen hide and smooth wood split from trees" (ll. 6-7). The descriptions of this sort in the *Enigmata*'s riddles of human-constructed things still emphasize the natural world and God's creation powers rather than the power of man to create them. Of the birds we have already examined in the *Enigmata*, the Peacock's "gold" remains the closest verbiage to anything man-made. Admittedly, gold can be shaped by man into objects of importance; the reference here, however, specifies only the color and the value of the gold itself, a naturally occurring metal.⁴⁸ The riddles' nature-focused language speaks to God and the celebration of him, reinforcing the conclusion of last chapter – that, while Aldhelm supports a middle-road approach to Christianity for the layman, he still believes the heaven-focused lifestyle, the "narrow confines of strict religious life," is the best road to heaven's gates (Gatch 5).

By the time of the Exeter Riddles we see a change in tack, the Riddle Poet packing plenty of descriptions of the man-made into each bird riddle, which consequently explores the notion of temporality. The Poet's preoccupation with God's creations, these birds and humans that are by nature bound to and by time and the cycle of life, juxtaposes against the infinite, unchangeable, fixed being that is Christianity's God – immortal, all knowing; He is by nature non-transient and outside of time.⁴⁹ At this intersection of wrestling with the understanding of the nature of things lies, at the heart, a quintessential Anglo-Saxon struggle - "a desire to control space and to strengthen one's own identity" (Michelet 30). The Middle-Space, as I've striven to define it, is a

⁴⁸ One could argue this fact, but for these purposes, because the gold is not specified as having been shaped, I will consider it natural rather than man-made.

⁴⁹ See Rev. 1.8, Is. 40.28, 1 Chr. 16.34, Ps. 147.5, and others.

primarily human-focused in-between place of imagination that manifests within the Exeter Riddle birds as a way to examine how humans can situate their creative power within their theological framework. These bird riddles express the transience and temporality that surround and permeate this Middle-Space by imposing language associated with manmade objects upon God's creations. This further situates them in human-oriented time and space with the use of such descriptions. Erin Sebo, in her discussion of the Creation Riddles 40, 66, and 93, suggests these riddles acted as an in-between space to question humanity's orientation within the cosmos. The "three Creation riddles...trace a progression. The earlier Creation riddles tend to be more concerned with the concrete constituents of Creation and with the place of humanity within it and of God to it," of grappling with the relationship between humanity, God, and the rest of creation; Riddle 40, she says, "emphasizes the affectionate relationship between God and his Creation, although it displays unease about the place of humans in this schema" while Riddle 66 tackles Creation as "a unified force, living, moving and with agency, rather than simply existing" (154). The latter Creation riddles, on the other hand, "express an increasingly abstract conception" of how these fit together (154). The bird riddles, too, express an intense focus on these "concrete constituents of Creation," layering material language and an intense occupation with temporality atop physical manifestations of Creation.

Whereas Aldhelm's birds are mostly static, describing what they look like, how they act as a bird, or what they have previously done mythically in order to identify and celebrate them, the Exeter Riddle birds move and interact with their surroundings, demonstrating creatures alive and transient. Some of this difference is due to the authors' most overt purposes in writing – Aldhelm's was to celebrate and discuss wildlife rather than have readers guess them, whereas the Riddle Poet penned riddles for the guessing by leaving them unnamed. The Exeter Riddle birds

physically move, experience the cycle of life and death and rebirth, grow and change even within their small texts, the Poet using clothing language and human spaces to reflect a transient, temporal element within.

Each of the *Exeter Book*'s bird riddles explore transience and temporality in a fashion uniquely their own. The Swan “*mec ahebbað ofer hæleþa byht* ([my garments] heave me up above the halls of heroes)” (ll. 3), the poem calling attention to its movement – its flight – and the stationary building below. The poet describes its feathers as clothing (“*hrægl*”) in the first line, superimposing human-created objects over God-made animals alongside the clothing’s non-living movement atop the feathers that keep the birds aloft. The Cuckoo is dropped into a new home for new life and, in the process, causes the death of others, a transient leech of a creature itself, wrapped in the garment-feathers (*wedum, hleosceorpe*) of its foster-mother (ll. 4b, 5b). The Barnacle Goose rises to life from death, even as it physically moves through a baptism metaphor on “*blacum hrægle / sume wæron hwite hyrste mine* (black garments / some were white, my trappings)” made of feathers (ll. 7b-8) and past a ship of humans, “*lipendum wuda* (travelers’ wood)” (ll. 5), the ship a transient “home” itself. In all this movement, though, lies a pattern, a literal driving force – the feathers-as-clothes conceit.

The imposition of the feathers-as-clothes metaphor across these and other poems in the *Exeter Book*⁵⁰ further supports the existence of the Middle-Space. The Riddle Poet’s use of human-centric language rather than the nature-centric language of his predecessor Aldhelm, indicates the importance of temporality – and yet it is neither spoken as concern or lament, instead retaining the celebratory tone he also inherited. The centering of humanity’s creative

⁵⁰ *Christ II, Phoenix*, Riddle 13 (Ten Chickens), and others incorporate the metaphor in their descriptions of birds. This conceit is widely recognized as present across scholarship, including such researchers as Salvador-Bello, Paz, Hyer, Owen-Crocker, and others.

powers within the bird riddles does not eliminate the didactic focus of maintaining a heavenly eye, nor do they replace God. The birds themselves are still central to the riddles, the metaphors layered atop them meant to obscure their forms but not remove them from their places, so the ultimate end remains a celebration of God's power of creation.

The clothing conceit, however, does not disappear upon readers realizing the central purpose of the poems remains to glorify God. The riddles rely on a specific, known metaphor for teaching their readers: birds represent people. Pliny and Plutarch both readily admit that birds were closer to humans than some other animals (cited in Stanton 36-37). The Exeter Riddle birds, too, speak using human voices and personal pronouns to describe themselves. These birds wear clothes, clearly underscoring the Anglo-Saxon use of birds as metaphors for people, much as we discussed in Chapter Two. Scholars have noted that *hrægl* and other garment words were “typically used in the bird context” (“Patterns” 360) and identified the “metaphorical tricks... of bird plumage [as] human clothing” (Meaney 140) patterned throughout these and other birds. The pattern of clothing words is notable, and noteworthy, but we should also recognize that, yes, while there *is* a pattern of clothing words, there is *also* this clothing-as-feathers conceit which reinforces the veneration of the creative power of humanity. In the Swan, the poet specifies “*Hræl min swigað / þonne ic hrusan trede*” (ll. 1). We see “garment” – “*hrægl*” having the additional property of being one of the most generic words for a garment of either sex – as the first word, the emphasis clearly defining the parameters of the garment-feather conceit in both the rest of the riddle *and* the poems that follow it (Owen-Crocker *Dress* 335).

The *Dictionary of Old English* gives *hrægl* five separate entries, devoting eighteen letter-sized pages to this word alone. From “generic garment of indeterminate shape,” then, we move to “*hyrste*” (ll. 4a) and “*frætwe*” (6b), both plural for “accoutrements” or “adornments”

according to the *Dictionary*. *Frætwe* has the additional honor of describing the “plumage of the Phoenix” according to its entry (d.). All these words denote man-made coverings, which, when used to describe the feathers of the Swan, ascribe human intentionality in exchanging created objects for natural ones, as well as informing the metaphor of Swan-as-human for additional didactic emphasis. The Cuckoo riddle uses “*hleosceorpe*” (5b) and “*wedum*” (4b) for the protective coverings and clothing its foster-mother provides. The former appears only once as this compound in the Old English corpus (“*hlēo-sceorp*”). The latter is a form of *ge-wæde*, or garment/covering worn by a person (Bosworth-Toller “*ge-wæde*”). The Cuckoo’s terms are not used in any of its nearby cousins’ riddles, perhaps as a way to set it further apart – the Cuckoo asks its readers for contemplation and not guesses, after all (“Patterns” 358). The Barnacle Goose returns to *hrægl* and *hyrste*, though here *hyrste* may lean more toward “garment” than “accoutrements” as Mercedes Salvador-Bello suggests – or perhaps even “undergarment” if we use the answer to make sense of the riddle (*Isidorean* 312). Even the in-between Riddle #11 (Wine) uses both terms, as well as introducing “*reafe*” (ll. 2b), another very common word for garment (*Dress* 335), which may suggest another line of examination of the man-made objects that are in riddles themselves and how they explore the celebration of humankind’s creative power as it relates to God’s.⁵¹ This is echoed in Riddle #13, Ten Chickens, which additionally returns to “*frætwe*” (10b). The consistent use of words related to garments and coverings, then, continues to reinforce the deliberate – as this *is* a clearly defined pattern – discussion of human creation.

Garments, adornments, accoutrements, all, no matter the nuance, are man-made items, pieces meant to cover our nakedness. The generic nature of the words, so many non-specific

⁵¹ As this chapter discusses how clothing language surrounds birds as the objects directly created by God, however, I will leave this line of inquiry for other scholars to explore.

terms for coverings, are not merely a door to let in metaphor, but also to let in culture. Clothing, design, “textiles and their production” were always “daily matters for Anglo-Saxons” (Hyer “Woven Works” 157) as “there must have been a constant need for cloth” (159), which could only be created by hand with much time and greater effort. Depending on the type of fabric, the process could take much more than a few days’ labor: flax and wool both take time to grow and harvest, with flax a much more intensive process to create linen, as it is made from plants rather than wool from sheep-shearing, although both were fairly prominent in Anglo-Saxon society (161-2). Time between collection of fibers to spinning and weaving, again, depended on the fiber, but tended to be a more straightforward process before being “finished” to be more durable (174). Garment construction by hand was (and still is) labor intensive, necessary, and central to medieval life, the process most likely community-created in some larger spaces to spread out the massive amount of time and labor each family would otherwise devote to it (*Dress* 289). Fabric and garments were given as gifts in heroic tales (20) and willed to others, as in 10th century Æthelgifu’s will (“Woven Works” 179), another indication of textiles’ importance and the awareness medieval folk had about the clothes they wore.

3.4 “Peaceful Easy Feeling”:⁵² Conclusion

Clothing, material culture, was clearly a valued commodity within Anglo-Saxon society, from the utilitarian to the artistic. Using such “everyday art form[s]” as a basis for a continued, purposeful feather-metaphor, then, loads much more weight onto the riddles, and, by extension, other texts, as a “vivid reminder of the compelling contribution [of] textiles and textile production” (Hyer *Textiles in the Exeter Book* 39). Moreover, the use of these products further

⁵² The Eagles’ song “Peaceful Easy Feeling” approaches a relationship understanding that, while the end may be just around the corner, knowing where you stand can be a solid force against anything that may come next.

situates the poems, the birds, the celebration of human creativity and of humankind itself, into the Middle-Space. The liminal bubble that is the Middle-Space served as a place for humans to celebrate their creative powers as a reflection of God's, but also to honor that gift. These *Exeter Book* bird riddles bring it to life, give it the natural vibrance that only humans and their creativity can provide, while simultaneously acting as the bridge between humans and God without inviting either hubris or overly-ascetic devotion. The bird riddles create a space for humans to be, in short, humans, all while being human poetic creations that carry the worship of God in their own way. Their feathers become man-made quills to make the very writings they feature inside. Their migratory patterns are unknown to Anglo-Saxons and either guessed-at or made folklore, as are those like Aldhelm's Nightingale, providing great cultural vibrancy.⁵³ These all contribute to the birds' fluidity of existence within poetic metaphor, to how they as riddles can create and support the Middle-Space.

⁵³ *Enigmata* #22

4 THE SWAN SONG: CONCLUSION

Every story must come to an end. So, too, does this one. Let us take a moment to reflect and look forward, then, before we close.

Aldhelm, poet and abbot, composed his riddles with a specific purpose in mind: to celebrate God. He tells us this, expects his readers, on some level, to take that reading for granted while we look for other lessons within. He teaches us in his Raven and Dove riddles that we are better off turning to and obeying God to give us the best chance at heaven, but that even if we stray from the path of the ascetic-adjacent and into the extremely nominal Christian lifestyle, we have still been baptized and can therefore still have that chance. Above all, though, his attention to natural beauty and avoidance of the human sphere of influence shine through his bird riddles to reveal a truly dedicated servant of God.

The Exeter Riddle birds inherited much from Aldhelm, including their celebratory tone. The Swan moves gently, joyfully making music through the skies above the world and its people. The Cuckoo asks us as readers to contemplate the innocence of new life and the joy it brings to families, even if those families will suffer, too. The Barnacle Goose carries an old folktale and travels from community to community, reminding its readers that even as we move from one existence to another, we are not alone. Each poem focuses on movement, on these birds' interactions with humanity, to tell their stories. The poems use the language of material culture to describe their subjects, which shifts the focus of their celebration to humans and their creative power, rather than - or in addition to - God's. By doing so, by such a simple thing as using clothing words to allude to feathers, the Riddle Poet creates the Middle-Space, a space to reflect on humanity's creativity. The liminality of the Middle-Space allows for the celebration of

that creativity without recourse, allows for the glorification of God *through* the celebration of human creation.

Riddle poetry, above and beyond being a place for celebration, acts as a didactic medium. Aldhelm's teachings throughout his bird riddles speak volumes: glorify God, respect and understand nature, be humble. He describes his Peacock as beautiful to teach his readers about the beauty of God's world, to respect it just as much as gold,⁵⁴ and emphasizes his Nightingale's beautiful voice as a gift much more worth a celebration than its drab coloring.⁵⁵ The Exeter Riddle Poet, too, uses his riddles to teach respect for the natural world for the glory of God. He takes particular care to emphasize the sounds of the Swan in Riddle 7,⁵⁶ stepping out of the bounds of the poetic genre to teach his readers of the liminality of transience, and brings the folklore of Riddle 10's Barnacle Goose to the forefront, emphasizing our need for community.⁵⁷ Yet above all, the Riddle Poet couched those teachings in human terms and created the Middle-Space inside them for humans to celebrate themselves without guilt.

What talent – to use clothing words for feathers, to impose such a culturally-significant phenomenon onto another! Birds and clothes both had a wide array of words to describe them,⁵⁸ and were essentially everywhere a person looked. Birds were everywhere in poetry, too, from the story of Noah's Ark to the legendary *Phoenix*, and represented much in the way of religious metaphor, including Christ Himself in the *Phoenix* poem. Aldhelm was the first vernacular example of clothing description, as we discussed in Chapter Three. Not only did he assist future scholars in glossing Old English words where there were previously none, but also educated us

⁵⁴ See Chapter Two p. 19.

⁵⁵ See Chapter Two p. 21.

⁵⁶ See Chapter Three p. 35.

⁵⁷ See Chapter Three p. 39-40.

⁵⁸ See Kitson, Owen-Crocker for partial glosses.

in the importance of clothing - those nuns preferred the feel of soft linen over coarse wool, and smudged the vows they gave to the Church in order to continue wearing it.⁵⁹ In *Beowulf*, Wealtheow gave garments to Beowulf as thanks for his immense help, teaching us “that a garment might be a precious possession” and that “the poet may have thought a garment a particularly appropriate gift for a lady to give, since textile production was traditionally women’s work” (*Dress* 20). Clothing displayed “cultural and social identity” (317) and “would have been instantly visible” as one could easily distinguish between simple weave and “sophisticated patterned weaves and rare imported fabrics” (320). Every person wore clothing; as we discussed in Chapter Three, communities were closer to the means of production and were therefore aware of the time- and energy-consuming methods involved.⁶⁰ To combine two such important aspects of Anglo-Saxon life into a singular metaphor, much less have that metaphor travel multiple riddles and poetic works? While it is moot to ask which talented poet first conceived the notion – considering how little a corpus we have left – a detailed investigation may be warranted, if only to see whether the phenomenon is indeed widespread or only confined to the *Exeter Book*.

So this study examines a microcosm in the world of Anglo-Saxon riddling, yet, the feathers-as-clothes conceit is part of a broader story. At the turn of the fifteenth century, John Siferwas illuminated *The Lovell Lectionary* with two half-bird people in its margins, both dressed, with hats on (f.16). William Drummond of Hawthornden, in the early seventeenth century, described his nightingale as “attired in sweetness” (138). Alicia Donne’s 1906 “Robin” describes its development and clothes the robin in “the smart waist- / coat we all know” (90). Most recently, Mary Oliver demonstrated her love for the clothing-as-feather metaphor, describing her hummingbirds with “pale-green dresses” and “sea-green helmets”

⁵⁹ See Chapter Three p. 32.

⁶⁰ See Chapter Three p. 47.

(“Hummingbirds” 209) and the beautiful swan as “a perfect commotion of silk and linen” (“Swan” 15). Swan maidens, as the folktales go, transformed from swans to beautiful women sporting feather cloaks (Briggs 386) and Selkies shapeshifted between seals and humans wearing seal-skins, both of whom can be captured by stealing their clothes and made into wives (354). Perhaps, then, folktales brought the feathers-as-clothes conceit through, though whether they came before or after the Exeter Riddles we may never know, and carried into the poetry of future generations.

The metaphor of clothes-as-feathers may not have been a ubiquitous symbol for birds in Anglo-Saxon England, but, like Aldhelm on the *Exeter Book* Riddles, the conceit itself did have an impact on English poetry. Further research within the larger Old English corpus may yield a deeper understanding of the impact clothing and its construction had upon the Anglo-Saxon subconscious. Folktale transmission, too, might bring results, especially if one were to follow the line of the shapeshifting maidens like Selkies or swans. Following this line of thought, the children’s poem “The Jays” refers to the blue jay as wearing “a blue coat / And a hat of gray” (ll. 3-4), which in turn suggests specifically considering the transmission of children’s tales and songs.

The feathers-as-clothes metaphor is a tradition steeped in reflection. God created humans in his image – He creates, so people do, too. The power to create is, therefore, a holy one. When we, in our poetry, layer such a clearly *human* thing – clothing – onto such a clearly *natural* one, we celebrate both. We celebrate the creative power of humanity, and, in doing so, continue to celebrate God.

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