Everyday Wonders and Enigmatic Structures:
Riddles from Symphosius to Chaucer

by

Jessica Jane Lockhart

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Centre for Medieval Studies
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Abstract

As I am proposing it, the medieval everyday is “what we see” rather than “what we know”—it is made up of the sights, objects, and encounters of lived experience. This dissertation points to a way of thinking about the everyday that I trace from Latin and Old English riddles through to late medieval riddles and Chaucer’s dream vision poems. My approach is structured by two key claims. My first is that riddles seep into other literary genres through what I call ‘enigmatic structures’—passages of heightened uncertainty governed by riddling conventions. My second claim is that for my medieval authors and their readers, everyday wonders—wonders in lived experience—are often understood through enigmatic structures and vice versa. My chapters are about poets for whom the wondrous in the everyday was a shared concern as they debated the origins of wonder, teased out questions about their own poetics, and applied riddling techniques to philosophic and literary problems.

Chapters 1 and 2 show how a particular affective mode of engaging with the everyday coalesces in Anglo-Saxon riddles and wisdom-texts, and acquires enigmatic structures and distinctive wonder-related vocabulary. Chapter 1 explores the origins of this trend in the Latin riddle collections of Symphosius, Aldhelm, and Alcuin. Chapter 2 examines how everyday wonders
and enigmatic structures create a technology of wondering in the Old English *Boethius, Solomon and Saturn II*, and the Exeter Book Riddles. My final chapters argue that late medieval riddles inform Chaucer’s approach to everyday wonder. Chapter 3 surveys the landscape of late medieval riddling and examines Chaucer’s deployment of enigmatic structures and everyday wonders in *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls*. Chapter 4 proposes a new intertext for Chaucer’s House of Rumour in the *Secretum philosophorum*, and offers a new reading of the “queynte hous” as a *were*—a pun that refers both to a fish weir, and to a condition of radical uncertainty. From the Anglo-Saxon period to the fourteenth century, riddles both inscribe and respond to wonder within the familiar world, charting a wise approach to the everyday’s deep mysteries.
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ALC</strong></td>
<td>Riddles found in Alcuin of York’s letters and collected writings.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ALC D</strong></td>
<td>Alcuin’s <em>Disputatio Pippini Regalis et Nobilissimi Juvenis cum Albino Scholastico</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALC P</strong></td>
<td>Alcuin’s <em>Propositiones ad Acuendos Iuvenes</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ALD</strong></td>
<td>Aldhelm’s <em>Enigmata</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BD</strong></td>
<td>Chaucer’s <em>The Book of the Duchess</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BED</strong></td>
<td>Riddles found in Bede’s writings.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BER</strong></td>
<td>The Bern Riddles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BON</strong></td>
<td>Boniface’s <em>De virtutibus Aenigmata</em> and <em>De Vitiis Aenigmata</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CP</strong></td>
<td>Boethius’s <em>Consolatio Philosophiae</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CT</strong></td>
<td>Chaucer’s <em>The Canterbury Tales</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOE</strong></td>
<td><em>Dictionary of Old English</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DV</strong></td>
<td>The Vulgate Bible (Douay–Rheims)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EUS</strong></td>
<td>Eusebius’s <em>Enigmata</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EXE</strong></td>
<td>The Exeter Book Riddles</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>HF</strong></td>
<td>Chaucer’s <em>The House of Fame</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LOR</strong></td>
<td>The Lorsch Riddles</td>
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<td><strong>MED</strong></td>
<td><em>Middle English Dictionary</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Metre 28 (M28)</strong></td>
<td>Old English <em>Boethius</em> C-Text, <em>Metre 28</em> (translating <em>CP</em> 4m5).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OED</strong></td>
<td><em>Oxford English Dictionary</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OW</strong></td>
<td><em>The Order of the World</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PF</strong></td>
<td>Chaucer’s <em>The Parliament of Fowls</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ps-BED</strong></td>
<td>The <em>Collectanea of Pseudo-Bede</em></td>
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<td><strong>SolSatII</strong></td>
<td><em>Solomon and Saturn II</em></td>
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<td><strong>SolSatFrag</strong></td>
<td>The <em>Solomon and Saturn Fragment</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SP</strong></td>
<td><em>The Secretum philosophorum</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SYM</strong></td>
<td>Symphosius’s <em>Aenigmata</em></td>
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<td><strong>TAT</strong></td>
<td>Tatwine’s <em>Enigmata</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TC</strong></td>
<td>Chaucer’s <em>Troilus and Criseyde</em></td>
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Introduction:
Riddles, Wonders, and the Everyday

This dissertation project takes aim at the intersection between everyday wonders and riddles in early and late medieval Britain. My approach considers how riddles cultivate a wonder-oriented affective response to the everyday in human experience. It also explores how everyday wonders, and the riddles that articulate them, become a place to test the properties of imaginative writing, and of medieval wonder itself.

Everyday wonders challenge long-held ideas in medievalist scholarship that the marvellous in the medieval period exists primarily at the margins, or at moments of mixture or metamorphosis. While marvels do, importantly, occupy such margins, the most cursory search of linguistic corpora also shows usages of a vocabulary of wonder wherein people marvel at one another; at animals; at athletic performances; at the persistence of everyday problems of the world; at unexpected or insufficiently explained communications; even at absences and


2 “Alle the yonge folkes almoiste of this towne dyde rune yesterday to the castell to se a bere batyde with fers dogges within the wallys. It was greatly to be wondrede, for he dyde defende hymselfe so with hys craftynes and his wyllynnes from the cruell doggys methought he sett not a whitt be their woodenes [madness] nor by their fersnes.” In William Nelson, ed., A Fifteenth Century School Book from a Manuscript in the British Museum (MS. Arundel 249) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 27.

3 For example, in the History of William Marshal, a stone-casting competition:

Pié e demi plus la geta
Que li boens geterres d’asez.
“Par fei! cist est de trop passez,”
Feit sei li chivaliers adonques.
“Par fei! ce est mon, ce n’avint unques,”
Fait chascuns, & molt se merveille,
Qu’unques ne virent tel merveille. (lines 1828–34)

He threw it a good foot and a half further than the good thrower had. “My word! this man has been beaten by a long way,” the knight said. “My word! he has indeed, the like of this never happened before,” they all said, and were totally amazed, because they had never seen such an amazing feat.”


4 An anonymous lyric, “Whon Men Beoth Muriest at Heor Mele,” observes,

But yit me merueyles ouer al
That God let mony mon croke and elde
silences. Moreover, medieval writers, like modern ones, also deploy wonder-language where the object of wonder is not yet understood, is heard about second-hand, or even only anticipated; people not only wonder why or how, but what, and why not, and where, and what will happen. The capaciousness and expansiveness of this concept, but also its flexibility of register—its tendency to crop up in the most casual usages as well as the most extreme—suggests that medieval wonder can best be understood by modern scholars as an affect, a relation between a body and the outside world. However, this affective relation is also, I will argue, thought of throughout the Middle Ages in terms of communicative, and specifically rhetorical difficulty. I will suggest that when medieval writers try to articulate what is wondrous in the everyday, they often arrive at riddles as a way to do so, when they think about how literature creates an affect of wonder in readers, they often arrive at analogies between imaginative works and everyday wonders. The two halves of this present project examine this trend, first in the intersection of Anglo-Saxon enigmatography and wisdom literature, and again in the riddles and imaginative writing circulating in fourteenth-century England that inform Chaucer’s dream vision poems.

What follows in this introduction is a set of brief summaries of recent scholarship pertaining to foundational terms for this project: What is the everyday? What is wonder? What…

Whon miht and strengthe is from hem fal
That thei may not hemself awelde… (49–52)


8 Not all the time, obviously; the immediate analogy is often between the event in question and a supernatural or preternatural occurrence. Riddles and enigma creep in when this gets further exploration.
is *enigma*, and what is a riddle? What is an enigmatic structure? After addressing these concerns, I summarize the scope of this project, situate it with respect to the relevant scholarship on my primary texts, and detail the content of the chapters.

**What is the Everyday?**

Of *quod scimus* cometh clergie, a konnyng of hevene,  
And of *quod vidimus* cometh kynde wit, of sighte of diverse peple.⁹

As I define it for this project, the everyday is comprised of the objects and encounters that make up the tapestry of lived experience. My category is related to terms deployed by other medievalists—especially the ‘familiar’ of Anglo-Saxonists Elizabeth Tyler and Britt Mize,¹⁰ and the ‘ordinary’ and ‘commonplace’ as deployed by Helen Cooper¹¹—but it is sufficiently different that I will give it a thorough explanation here.

In modern theory the everyday has been theorized by the likes of Maurice Blanchot, Michel de Certeau, and Henri Lefebvre, among others. Although they disagree both about the construction and about the critical and political potential of the everyday,¹² these accounts

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¹⁰ The familiar, for Elizabeth Tyler and Britt Mize, is what is fundamentally *well-known*, similar to the Anglo-Saxon *cuð*. Something can be extraordinary and also be familiar (but, I will argue, it is hard for it to be familiar and also wondrous, unless that familiarity is disrupted). See Elizabeth Tyler, *Old English Poetics: The Aesthetics of the Familiar in Anglo-Saxon England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2006), 2:

> The ‘aesthetics of the familiar’ holds together both what is familiar because conventional and what becomes familiar because it recurs within an individual poem. The ‘familiar’ does not, however, hold together the ordinary and the well-known. In a linguistic context, by ordinary, I mean syntactic structures, phrases and expressions which also occur, as far as we can gauge from the written record, in everyday language as opposed to those structures, phrases and expressions which are well-known in and special to poetry. Conventions are not ordinary, but rather, well-known.” (2)


¹¹ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For Cooper, the ‘ordinary’ (147) is roughly synonymous with ‘what operates by familiar criteria’ (142), but it is not necessarily *boring*; rather, as she explains, when convention threatens to deflate the marvellous in medieval romance, “One way to restore the wonder to such episodes is to *intensify the naturalism of the background*: to portray a world that looks as if it operates by familiar criteria, and then to disrupt it. … It is as if the supernatural is killed by the rational, but *can only be saved by the commonplace*.” (142, my emphases.)

emphasize the everyday as at once the condition in which we primarily live, and the unexamined leftover from more highly signified processes. For Blanchot, the everyday is at once most obvious—it is “ourselves, ordinarily”\(^{13}\)—and what is marvellously unperceived: “the residual life with which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse,” “[t]he everyday escapes. This makes its strangeness—the familiar showing itself (but already dispersing) in the guise of the astonishing.”\(^{14}\) In an influential definition, Lefebvre likewise posits the everyday as a “totality” which is “[i]n a sense residual, defined by ‘what is left over’ after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis”.\(^{15}\) These critics agree on the modern everyday as being beneath the notice of and thus escaping the attention of authoritative knowledge and analysis.\(^{16}\) As such, the everyday is also now examined by various theorists as the site of other activities: ordinary and minor aesthetic judgments,\(^{17}\) false consciousness and “common sense,”\(^{18}\) improvisation,\(^{19}\) Plato’s *doxa* rather than *episteme*.\(^{20}\) The everyday persists, a grab-bag of indeterminate and poorly considered things, when everything worth knowing is known.

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\(^{13}\) Maurice Blanchot and Susan Hanson, “Everyday Speech,” *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 12–20, at 12: “the everyday is what we are first of all, and most often” (12).

\(^{14}\) Blanchot, “Everyday Speech,” 14. Blanchot reiterates: “the everyday escapes. This is its definition. We cannot help but miss it if we seek it through knowledge, for it belongs to a region where there is still nothing to know.” (15)


\(^{17}\) See Hannah Freed-Thall, *Spoiled Distinctions: Aesthetics and the Ordinary in French Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Freed-Thall’s subject is French modernist treatments of ordinary objects: “They invite us to behold objects too evanescent or ubiquitous to be masterfully displayed: not the monumental statue, but the squat coffee table statue; not the classical fountain, but the modest glass of tap water.” (1); cf. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2012).


Although the medieval everyday I hope to approach here is different from the modern, I wish to begin by acknowledging some key commonalities between medieval evaluations and those of modern critics. Premodern writers likewise tend to understand the everyday as lying apart from authoritative knowing. In my epigraph to this section, Langland’s formulation of “clergie,” as opposed to “kynde wit” serves as an example of this, as it draws a clear distinction between \textit{quod scimus}, sure knowledge given in revelation and authority, and \textit{quod vidimus}, the “diverse sightes” of “diverse peple” that engender experiential, practical, everyday ideas for getting by.\footnote{Langland, \textit{The Vision of Piers Plowman}, B.XII.66–67.}

In some respects the premodern everyday escapes discussion because the objects of the everyday are seen and experienced so commonly—for example, Macrobius argues of ordinary dreams that “We need not explain further the nature of this dream since everyone knows from experience what it is.”\footnote{Macrobius, \textit{Commentarius} 3.14: “quod quale sit non a nobis exponendum est cum hoc unus quisque ex usu quid sit agnoscat”; trans. William Harris Stahl, \textit{Commentary on the Dream of Scipio} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 90.} Yet this realm of common, unexplained experience can turn into wonder in a heartbeat. In a passage I hope to have contextualized by the end of this dissertation, Chaucer’s \textit{Troilus and Criseyde} identifies the wonder of the everyday in

\begin{quote}
\ldots al thilke covered qualitee
Of thynges, which that folk on wondren so,
Whan they kan nought construe how it may jo
She loveth hym, or whi he loveth here,
As whi this fissh, and naught that, comth to were.\footnote{Geoffrey Chaucer, \textit{Troilus and Criseyde} 3.31–35, in Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., \textit{The Riverside Chaucer}, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).}
\end{quote}

As I will discuss in my Chapter 4, Chaucer deploys a fundamentally enigmatic understanding of the problems of the everyday here, both in his use of the idea of ordinary things having a “covered qualitee” and in deploying an analogy between the mysteries of animal life and human love. Lefebvre frames the modern everyday in a similarly varied list, proposing that “The everyday implies on the one hand cycles, days and nights, seasons and harvests, activity and rest, hunger and satisfaction, desire and its fulfillment, life and death, and it implies on the other hand the repetitive gestures of work and consumption.”\footnote{Lefebvre, “Everyday and Everydayness,” 10.} A key idea about the everyday present in
medieval writing is the understanding that all the different objects and questions of the everyday are linked in their mysterious and potentially educative value: for example, Langland, too, explains that

\[\text{Ac kynde wit cometh of alle kynnes sightes—}
\text{Of briddes and of beestes, [of blisse and of sorwe],}
\text{Of tastes of truthe and of deceites.}\]

Like the modern everyday, the medieval everyday includes ordinary routine time, work time, mealtime, playtime, bedtime; it also includes the greater movements of life and death, and elements of the sacred, the moving, and the extraordinary, although I would propose that the truly supernatural and miraculous are more properly thought of as irruptions upon the everyday, than extensions of it. Time moves in a number of ways through the everyday, and although the default of the everyday is the present tense, the everyday can exist in palimpsest with other times. The everyday is, however, near, local, and present: it does not include temporalities such as the distant past, except when that past is either brought into the experience of the present, or considered as having its own everyday. The everyday likewise does not include the End Times—when medieval writers write about the Signs before Doomsday, those are signs that the

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26 In this judgment I follow both my own reading of Langland’s inclusion of the selkouthes that thei seighen in his category of “alle kynnes sightes” producing kynde wit (Piers Plowman B-Text Passus XII.132, cf. 131–136), and the claim of Becky McLaughlin and Bob Coleman, eds., in Everyday Theory: A Contemporary Reader (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005): “the everyday need not be limited to the ordinary, banal, or mundane, for our everyday existence also includes profoundly powerful experiences of love, desire, ambition, illness, and alienation, to name only a few.” (2) From a medieval perspective, the sacred is woven into the fabric of daily life. Cf. the similar point made by Lefebvre, above, n. 24.


world is no longer in the everyday. The everyday is a worldly echo or shadow of eternity but is not the same as eternity. To move into eternity is to move, explicitly, out of the everyday. \(^{29}\)

The medieval everyday is discussed by writers as if it is universal, a realm of experience to which all human beings—indeed, all beings—lay claim. However, the objects of the everyday also tend to be both geographically and socially local. As such, any given everyday is implicitly curated, susceptible to social and societal forces.

This dissertation is about everyday wonders, a topic which demands some further clarification here concerning the relationship between the everyday, the ordinary, and the familiar. The everyday is sometimes construed, by premodern writers as well as modern ones, as that which does not provoke interest or wonder because it is both ordinary and familiar—precisely not what is extraordinary. In an often-quoted passage, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* makes this distinction clearly as it posits the difference between sunrises and sunsets, which “are marvellous to no one because they occur daily [cottidie],” and extraordinary phenomena such as eclipses, concluding that “Docet ergo se natura vulgari et usitata re non exsuscitari, novitate et insigni quodam negotio commoveri”—“Thus nature teaches that it is not excited by the common [vulgari] and usual [usitata], but is moved by novelty and the outstanding, particular affair.” \(^{30}\)

Yet medieval poets treating the everyday as their subject reveal this evaluation itself to be one of the fallacies of daily experience. The Old English *Boethius* scorns the foolishness of those who “þæs hit seldor seldnor gesihð  swiðor wundrað” (wonder more intensely at what they see more seldom), not recognizing that novel objects have their own histories and are rarely ‘new’, while objects otherwise considered common, ordinary, or familiar, can also erupt with wonder at any time. Thus it may be helpful to think of the everyday as the primary field of encounter between subjective human experience, and whatever makes up external reality.

\(^{29}\) See Dinshaw’s account of asynchrony in the exemplum of “The Monk and the Bird” in *How Soon is Now*, 48–53; the monk, desiring a small experience of eternity, is entranced listening to the single marvellous note of a bird in the forest; when he emerges, many years of daily life have passed without touching him.

Taking ordinary, common, and familiar rather than extraordinary objects as their starting-point, medieval riddle-poets direct attention to different aspects of this field of encounter. Sometimes an ordinary subject reveals the marvellous impact of artful language on perception; sometimes, the everyday itself is revealed to be enigmatic, and filled with wonder. More questions beyond these are possible. My dissertation chapters are about clusters of poets and writers for whom the wondrous in the everyday was a shared concern as they debated the origins of wonder, teased out questions about their own poetics, and applied riddling techniques to philosophic and literary problems. More work remains to be done on the medieval everyday; I start this work by exploring everyday wonder through riddling.

What is wonder?

My approach considers the affect of wonder from the standpoint of medieval imaginative writing, using everyday wonders represented in riddles and related wisdom poems and dream visions, to investigate how wonder is theorized and how it is pressed into service. In this respect my project builds on the important studies done in recent years with respect to “the marvellous” in medieval culture. By turning attention to everyday and riddling wonder it also addresses current gaps in that scholarship, while answering recent calls for a renewed attention to affect and aesthetics in literary studies.

In an address to the American Historical Association published in 1997, Caroline Walker Bynum outlined four central attributes she considered characteristic of medieval ideas of wonder. The address is worth quoting at some length, because its premises—together with Bynum’s work on the distinctions between the marvellous, miraculous, and magical in high medieval scholasticism—have formed the foundation for much of the conversations on medieval wonder over the course of the last twenty years.31 Bynum writes (the emphasis and numbering are mine):

1. “All theories of wonder saw it as a significance-reaction: a flooding with awe, pleasure, or dread owing to something deeper, lurking in the phenomenon. ... Wonder was a response to

something novel and bizarre that seemed both to exceed explanation and to indicate that there might be reason (significance—not necessarily cause) behind it.”

2. “The wonderer was situated; wonder was *perspectival* (even if miracles were not). *What is remarkable to one may be expected to another*; as Mandeville observed, to the one-eyed, those with two eyes will seem deformed[.]”

3. “To wonder is emphatically not to consume and incorporate.... But *if you do not believe the event, you will not marvel at it. You can marvel only at something that is, at least in some sense, there*. Marveling responds to the there-ness of the event, to its concreteness and specificity.”

4. “Amazement is suppressed by the citing of too many cases, the formulation of general laws, the *inductio exemplorum*. *Wonder is at the singular* – both its significance and its particularity.”

Bynum draws these premises—wonder is a ‘significance reaction’, wonder is perspectival, wonder requires belief in the event, wonder is suppressed by the general—from discourses on wonder she perceives to be emergent in three different fields of high and late medieval thought and writing: scholasticism and natural philosophy; hagiography and homiletics; and a ‘literature of entertainment’ including histories, wonder-collections, and travellers’ tales (but not more conspicuously fictional genres such as romance).33

Bynum’s early work on wonder in the late 1990s shares its moment with another important work: Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park’s *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750*. This “history of wonder as a passion of natural inquiry” considered its object as the starting-point both of surprised pleasure and of the drive to explain. For Daston and Park, wonder functions as a linchpin for studying how evolving concepts of marvels and of inquiry in the circles of courtiers, doctors, natural philosophers, and collectors influenced the history of science from the medieval and early modern periods.34 Daston and Park’s study shares with

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33 See Bynum’s note: “I have excluded the romance from consideration because the genre itself dictates a certain matter-of-factness of response, the analysis of which is a complex matter of literary interpretation.” “Wonder,” 7 n. 23; *Metamorphoses and Identity*, 209, n. 23 to p. 42.

Bynum’s nearly contemporaneous monograph *Metamorphosis and Identity* the argument that medieval intellectuals after the 12th century placed emphasis on wonder as particularly characteristic of category-transgressions, mixtures, and transformations; as Daston and Park put it, “To register wonder was to register a breached boundary, a classification subverted.”35

The understanding of medieval wonder developed by Bynum, Daston and Park has been generally accepted and is a common starting-point in subsequent discussions of medieval attitudes to the marvellous.36 However, there are several important lacunae in it that subsequent scholars have worked to address, a project to which my work also contributes. For example, although Bynum’s work acknowledged the importance of wonder in the category she called “literature of entertainment,” it did not treat the wonders represented in conspicuously literary or fictional texts, such as romance, nor the issues raised when wonders are mediated by writing—a question I take up in considering the wonder of riddles and enigma. Daston and Park similarly took a natural-philosophic and cultural rather than literary approach to wonder. Secondly, Bynum’s and Daston and Park’s work largely left early medieval and Anglo-Saxon wonders out of the discussion, although Anglo-Saxon terms and idioms of wonder have been a resilient feature of the English language throughout the Middle English and even the modern period. Thirdly, while both Bynum’s and Daston and Park’s formulations of wonder include concerns that are relevant for what I am calling everyday wonder—in particular, its ‘perspectival’ nature—they do not address it directly, and affective wonder at ordinary things is not a serious possibility for them.


More recent studies of the marvellous and of medieval wonder in cultural and literary contexts have worked to fill in some of these gaps. For example, Scott Lightsey’s *Manmade Marvels in Medieval Culture and Literature* (2007) emphasizes that wonder-traditions such as mechanical marvels created for Richard II’s court were not particularly rooted in the intellectual and philosophical traditions of wonder preserved in the universities:

[M]anmade *mirabilia* and the wonder they inspired were transmitted through the experience of things, rather than via the abstractions of written authority. This is no mere conceit, for while it is obvious that the rich philosophical discussion of marvels and wonder predates manmade marvels by centuries, it is equally certain that most of the people who experienced these marvels did not associate them with philosophy.  

While Lightsey emphasised the pragmatic and material aspects of wondrous experience, other scholars have focused on its cognitive dimensions. In a pair of recent articles, Michelle Karnes addresses the critically neglected role of the imagination in medieval theories of the marvellous.  

Karnes describes what she calls the “extraordinary imagination”—that is, the role of the imagination in *generating* marvellous effects, as in prophecy and magic—as well as literary representations of wonder. Karnes proposes that

> What has escaped notice is that imagination was enlisted in the pursuit [of natural explanations for marvels]. By troubling the crucial boundary between things that exist objectively within the soul and those in the world outside, it helped to explain how marvels could mean more than the events that constitute them.  

Karnes’ interventions from the perspective of medieval theories of imagination and cognition lay critical groundwork for a sustained theory of wonder in response to reading, and to reading of imaginative texts.  

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wonder— a question that is close to the heart of my own project, as I will show. For Karnes, wonder and marvels are particularly useful as objects of study because they were recognized by medieval writers to be a shared ground between literature and philosophy:

Poets seek to preserve or inculcate wonder while philosophers are motivated by it and seek to replace it with knowledge. Because literature and philosophy intersect at wonder, the inquiries of either field can benefit the other. Each is interested in the far-reaching power of imagination’s forms. The topic of marvels thus provides an ideal opportunity to appreciate the mutual relevance of medieval philosophy and literature.41 Karnes also provides a strong argument for the ‘reality’ of imagined wonders, whether encountered through reading or storytelling, or through dream or the activity of the mind.42 She offers a new reading of Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale* by focusing on Chaucer’s juxtaposition of the wonder occasioned by marvels in the Tale’s first part, and by the metaphoric description of the deceptive terclet in the second, proposing that “The true value of wonder, according to the tale … is its ability to incite powerful and inventive imagining.”43 Karnes’ work thus brings the discussion of medieval ideas of wonder into contact with medieval literary theory and practice: thorny areas that have received a lot of attention in recent years in different fields.

Before addressing more fully this issue of the place of wonder in medieval literary theory, I’d like to briefly acknowledge some threads of study of the marvellous and miraculous, to which my project on everyday wonder does not relate. Scholars have directed attention toward wonder at the margins of the world, as depicted in texts such as the Alexander romances, some Saints’ Lives and the Wonders of the East texts, and culminating in works such as Mandeville’s *Travels*.44 Bynum, Rachel Koopmans, and others have provided influential analyses of the place

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42 She writes that medieval imaginary phenomena “lack reality in the sense that they remain within the soul—recall that ‘real’ derives from res, or ‘thing.’ That does not mean they are without reality in the modern sense of the word. We might equate physicality with existence, but medieval writers typically do not.” (Karnes, “Marvels,” 330)
of wonder in theological and devotional thinking of the high and late medieval period. Scholars such as Nancy Partner and Carl Watkins in the field of twelfth-century historiography have invited renewed attention to the ways in which writers such as Gervase of Tilbury, Walter Map, Gerald of Wales and William of Newburgh account for their inclusion of anecdotes of unusual and uncanny phenomena in their works.

As my project is concerned not with marvels but with everyday wonder and riddling, it builds on a body of medievalist scholarship confronting the literary work of wonder in a variety of vernacular medieval genres, including romance and dream vision. Helen Cooper notes the phenomenon that straightforward magic is not usually very wondrous in medieval English romance, as novelties become stale through over-familiarity at the same time as wonders provoke retelling and re-articulation. In Middle English romance, magic often doesn’t work, Cooper proposes, for the reason that

[W]hile ‘ordinary’ magic—magic that works—may be of some use for the plot, it does not add anything of genuine significance. Magic that doesn’t work, by definition, has little to do with plot; but it can be used in a different way—psychologically rather than magically. It is, in fact, characteristic of the romances that handle the conventions of the genre most thoughtfully that the magic that fails to work should divert its expected quality of marvel to showing what unaided humanity can do—or occasionally … what it fails to do.

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47 Cooper, The English Romance in Time, especially at 137–142.

48 Ibid., 147–148, my emphasis.
Thus while Middle English romances are populated with magical objects, supernatural beings, and miraculous and improbable events, these are at the service of storytellers working to generate wonder, which is bounded within specific frameworks of generic and literary expectation for each story. Malory’s Arthur possesses Excalibur, whose scabbard protects its wielder from harm, but the one time this property comes into effect is when Arthur is fighting against it—when Excalibur’s magic can act as a measure for Arthur’s own courage and endurance, rather than eclipsing it. Other scholars, including Nicola McDonald, are seeking to explore further the role of wonder in romance; as mentioned above, elsewhere I have discussed this as an issue in the romances and historiography of Havelok the Dane.49

Scholars such as Maura Nolan have also addressed the roles of both articulations and evocations of wonder in late medieval aesthetics, and in the poetry of Langland, Dante, and others.50 In a move that has proven very useful for my approach to the medieval everyday, Nolan argues that formal poetic structures and techniques lent late medieval English vernacular poets tools to investigate ideas and philosophies often simultaneously under scrutiny on the level of the narrative.51 She writes:

It is clear that medieval poets engaged with traditional aesthetic categories, but they also put those categories to the test in a medium that foregrounded human experience, sensory perception, and cognitive apprehension. Fundamentally ... vernacular poetry enables an exploration of the relationship between theory and practice, principle and experience, upon which an account of the aesthetic must ultimately rest.52

Wonder enters Nolan’s discussion in the context of Kynde’s vision of the world presented to Will in Passus XI of the B-Text of The Vision of Piers Plowman, which pairs vivid sensory

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49 Nicola McDonald has a monograph upcoming on this, for which she has given presentations at Kalamazoo and the Romance in Medieval Britain conference in recent years; as discussed briefly above in the “everyday” section, see the notes in my article “The Sports Wonders of Havelok the Dane” for more on wonder and romance.


descriptions of the natural world with a vernacular register of wonder. As Langland has been important above for my initial formulation of everyday wonder, and this is another passage of *Piers Plowman* in which the category of the everyday wondrous is at work, I would like to linger on Nolan’s reading here. She writes,

> Will is struck by the wondrousness of the natural world, by its extra-ordinary appearance, with its ‘‘fleckedness’’ and ‘‘fele colours.’’ His expression of wonder and awe links the vision of Kynde with other alliterative verse and its ‘‘selkouþes,’’ connecting PP to a poetic tradition in which wonders, marvels, ‘‘ferlys’’ and ‘‘selkouþes’’ play a special role. ‘‘Selkouþe’’ is above all an English word, marked as a native term denoting wonders and marvels, whether secular or sacred, and it was associated with the kind of writing that Chaucer mocked in the Prologue to the Parson’s Tale with his ‘‘rum, ram, ruf’’ (X 43). …Langland uses the word instead to defamiliarize the natural world for his readers, to make flowers and grass, the ocean and the stars, seem wondrous through a kind of ‘‘estrangement effect.’’

In Nolan’s reading, Yimaginatif attempts to steer Will away from his wondering attitude to the world, seeking to replace awe at Creation’s particularity and variety with an allegorizing, interpretive posture which, under the guidance of Clergy, considers the things of the world as signifiers pointing towards universal truths instead. However, critically for Nolan, Yimaginatif also fails in this attempt because the would-be signifiers—whether birds in the natural world, or Langland’s poetry itself—resist these totalizing efforts and refuse to give up their wonder. In so doing, though, they place the perceiver in an aesthetic experience, which for Langland entails its own (fraught, and easily side-tracked) relation to the divine.

My project also responds to ongoing early-medievalist and Anglo-Saxon scholarly conversations on the nature of wonder with respect to the imagination (and medieval theories of cognition more broadly), literary convention, and practice. In particular, two recent works on Anglo-Saxon subjectivity and aesthetics have been useful in honing my focus on the question of

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53 Ibid., 229.


55 See Nolan, “Aesthetics,” 237: “Langland is an exemplary figure because he so acutely depicts the inconsistencies that inevitably plague human attempts to theorize the beautiful. At the same time, he also offers an alternative: rather than theory, he presents beauty in practice. His poetic account of the beautiful in the vision of Kynde is not merely a gesture toward natural beauty; the verse itself is beautiful as well. That is what art can do that theory cannot: it can re-create the beautiful so that its readers, or its viewers, or its listeners, share the sensation of apprehending beauty and achieve thereby what Aquinas calls ‘participation in the divine’” (237).
how wonder relates to poetic form, particularly when wonder is understood to be evoked by features in poetry as well as by the phenomena poetry describes. Taking as her object of study the peculiar “stability of the stylistic conventions of Old English poetry,” Elizabeth Tyler articulates an “aesthetics of the familiar” operating across all levels of Old English poetics:

Both formulaic language and verbal repetition are rooted in an aesthetics which grows out of, but also values, maintains and creates the familiar. …

Formulaic expressions, which involve both the use of inherited diction and the creation of new conventions, make language and ideas familiar by repeating them, diachronically, across the corpus of Old English verse. Verbal repetition works synchronically to make language and ideas familiar within a poem.⁵⁶

Britt Mize takes up Tyler’s “aesthetics of the familiar” to argue that an interest in subjective experience is an integral part of this traditional aesthetics in Anglo-Saxon verse: this will have implications for my discussion of riddles and wonder because from this argument the Old English preoccupation with wonder, as a part of subjective experience, is a part of this traditional poetics. From the standpoint of Anglo-Saxon poetics, wonder is thus, paradoxically, deeply familiar.

Yet an important part of Tyler’s claim is that Old English poetry is stable because of ongoing choices on the part of each generation of poets. Why, then, is there such a sustained interest in subjectivity as a traditional element in Old English poetry? At the conclusion to his monograph Mize proposes that the Anglo-Saxon poetics of mentality “spring[s] from points of engagement between private and public reality: places where interior mind, character, and disposition confront exterior event, community, and world.”⁵⁷ For Mize, Anglo-Saxon poets foreground subjectivity in order to portray what he calls the ethical “interface between personal situatedness and the wider world of nature and society”.⁵⁸ This interface, for Mize, is a deeply valuable and ongoing source of interest for Anglo-Saxon society and poets. I would like to propose that we can further identify this interface as being the interface of the everyday.

⁵⁶ Tyler, *Old English Poetics*, 150.
⁵⁷ Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*, 251. Mize continues, “Unexpectedly, perhaps, the constant revelation of minds in Old English poetry—seemingly an uncompromising turn inward—serves to locate individuals within a world greater than themselves” (252).
⁵⁸ Ibid., 252.
What is an enigma?

As preparation for my chapters’ linking of riddles and what I call ‘enigmatic structures,’ it is necessary first to confront the differences between enigma and riddle, as well as the slippage between these two terms.

In the classical and medieval periods, enigma referred first to a rhetorical trope, and only parenthetically to the genre of poem or puzzle we now call ‘riddles’. Aristotle in the Poetics defines ainigma [αινίγμα] as a kind of clever paradoxical metaphor:

The very nature of a riddle [ainigma] is this, to describe a fact in an impossible combination of words (which cannot be done with the real names for things, but can be with their metaphorical substitutes).\(^{59}\)

Aristotle expands on this structural definition in his discussion of metaphor in Rhetoric, noting that ainigma produces an ‘aha’ moment for the recipient when the solution is explained:

For ... the mind seems to say, “How true it is! but I missed it.” ... And clever riddles are agreeable for the same reason; for something is learnt, and the expression is also metaphorical.\(^{60}\)

Thus, Aristotle distinguishes between the recipient’s before-and-after experience of the metaphor, emphasizing the pleasures that the ainigma’s resolution affords through discovery and learning. Like other metaphorical tropes, though, ainigma has loftier associations, requiring the exercise of wisdom both to compose and interpret: “metaphors should be drawn from objects which are proper to the object, but not too obvious; just as, for instance, in philosophy it needs sagacity to grasp the similarity in things that are apart.”\(^{61}\)

Aristotle’s exclamatory statement in Rhetoric—“How true it is! but I missed it”—implies that ainigma creates a paradigm-shifting re-evaluation similar to thaumazein [Θαυμάζειν], the disposition of wonder or astonishment identified as the origin of philosophy in Plato’s

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\(^{61}\) Rhetoric 3.11.5; 1412a.
Theaetetus and Aristotle’s own works. In Aristotle’s Metaphysics, wonder is an astonished response that accompanies ignorance of the reasons “that things are as they are.” It is especially an effect of contemplating difficult problems and new discoveries—for example, “It seems wonderful to all who have not seen the reason, that there is a thing which cannot be measured even by the smallest unit.” For Aristotle, philosophic wonder dissipates as one learns the causes and reasons behind these specific effects, to the extent that for wise men, wonder is particularly a perception of impossibility: “there is nothing which would surprise a geometer so much as if the diagonal [of a square] turned out to be commensurable.” A clever ainigma would provide an enjoyable verbal encounter with this sense of impossibility, as well as a puzzle for the wise who are able to spot the hidden connections that make an apparent impossibility work out to be an accurate description of the real world. Used in play, an ainigma may ultimately reward such contemplation with a pleasing experience of epiphany or the Eureka effect.

Although Aristotle’s discussion of ainigma influenced other rhetorical discussions of the trope throughout the classical era and late antiquity, the Latin late antique grammars and other elementary schooltexts that shaped the early stages of grammatical education for schoolchildren in the medieval period frame enigma in slightly different terms. Of these, the best known and

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62 See Aristotle, “For through astonishment men have begun to philosophize both in our times and at the beginning.” (Metaphysics A 2, 982 b 12 sq., trans. John Warrington (London: Dent, 1956); see also Plato’s exchange:

Theaetetus: Yes indeed, by the gods, Socrates, I wonder exceedingly as to why (what) in the world these things are, and sometimes in looking at them I truly get dizzy.

Socrates: The reason is, my dear, that apparently, Theodorus’s guess about your nature is not a bad one, for this experience is very much a philosopher’s, that of wondering. For nothing else is the beginning (principle) of philosophy than this, and, seemingly, whoever’s genealogy it was, that Iris was the offspring of Thaumas (Wonder), it’s not a bad one.


63 Metaphysics 1.983a 16–20.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Aristotle’s example of ainigma runs, “I saw a man glue brass on another with fire,” referring to suction healing with heated brass cups. See Poetics 22 [1458a], trans. Bywater, 33.


68 For a longer survey of grammatical definitions of enigma by Augustine, Isidore, Donatus, Gregory the Great, Bede, and others, see Nancy Stork, Through A Gloss Darkly: Aldhelm’s Riddles in the British Library MS. Royal 12.C.xxiii (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), 27–70. Nota bene: I use the spelling ainigma for
earliest-encountered would have been the fourth-century grammarian Donatus’s definition of the trope of *enigma* in the *Ars Maior*, where it appears as one of the seven species of allegory. Donatus explains,

Aenigma est obscura sententia per occultam similitudinem rerum, ut mater me genuit, eadem mox gignitur ex me, cum significet aquam in glaciem concrescere et ex eadem rursus effluere.⁶⁹

An enigma is a sentence not well understood because it plays upon a hidden similarity of things, as, “My mother bore me, and soon she will be born from me,” which signifies water solidifying into ice and melting from it again.

These two definitions—Aristotle’s *ainigma* as “impossible combination” via metaphoric substitution; Donatus’ *enigma* as a species of allegory that operates through a “hidden similarity”—present complementary structural descriptions of rhetorical tricks commonly at work within riddles as a genre. As for Aristotle, *enigma* for Donatus creates a distinct before-and-after experience of its metaphorical object, and expresses a non-obvious relationship that requires wisdom both to compose and to appreciate. However, where Aristotelian *enigma* emphasizes the overabundant state of “impossible combination,” Donatus’s description employs adjectives with visual and spatial associations of concealment (*obscura, occulta*) to set up the recipient’s initial encounter with *enigma* as one of lack, of missing connections awaiting revelation.

By emphasizing *enigma*’s initial obscurity, Donatus’s account also aligns itself with a body of Biblical and exegetical texts that celebrate *enigma*’s didactic and ethical potential as an exercise for sharpening wisdom and perceiving truths that plain language cannot express. In 1 Kings 10, the Queen of Sheba comes to test Solomon’s famous wisdom in riddles;⁷⁰ Samson in

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⁷⁰ 1 Kings 10 (DV), “sed et regina Saba audita fama Salomonis in nomine Domini venit temptare eum in enigmatibus.” (But also, the queen of Sheba, having heard the fame of Solomon in the name of the Lord, came to test him with enigmas.) (my trans.) All subsequent references to the Vulgate Bible (DV) are to *The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation*, ed. Edgar Swift and Angela M. Kinney (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010–2013).
Judges 14:14 proposes a riddle that his enemies cannot solve without insider help. Each of these instances serves in part to emphasize the social fallout of such wisdom-contests, where interpretative wisdom is a means of gaining or losing political power. This equation between interpretation, wisdom, and rulership or power is the context in which Chapter 1 of Proverbs (attributed to King Solomon) begins with the advertisement that

\[
\text{audiens sapiens sapientior erit et intellegens gubernacula possidebit;}
\]
\[
\text{animadvertet parabolam et interpretationem verba sapientium et enigmata eorum.}
\]

The wise man who listens will become wiser; understanding, he will possess the reins of government; Let him attend to the parable and to interpretation, to the words and enigmas of the wise.

However, it is not only human figures who exchange enigmatic utterances in the Bible; enigma also has mystical dimensions as a tool for communication between the mortal and the divine. God explains in Numbers 12:6–8 that although he speaks to Moses face to face on account of his special privilege and faithfulness, he communicates with almost all prophets in dreams, enigmas, and figures:

\[
6 \text{ dixit ad eos: audite sermones meos: si quis fuerit inter vos propheta Domini, in visione apparebo ei, vel per somnium loquar ad illum.}
\]

\[
7 \text{ At non talis servus meas Moses, qui in omni domo mea fidelissimus est:}
\]
\[
8 \text{ ore enim ad os loquor ei: et palam, non per enigmata et figuras Dominum videt. Quare igitur non timuistis detrahere servo meo Mosi?}
\]

He said to them, hear my words: if there is a prophet of the Lord among you, I will appear to him in vision, or I will speak to him in dream, but not this my servant Moses, who is most faithful of all in my house; for to him I speak face to face and openly, not through enigmas and figures, he sees the Lord—and therefore why did you not fear to speak against Moses, my servant?

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71 Judges 14:14 (DV), “dixitque eis de comedente exivit cibus et de forte est egressa dulcedo nec potuerunt per tres dies propositionem solvere.” (And he said to them, from the diner came dinner, and from the strong came forth sweetness—and they could not solve the proposition in three days.) (my trans.)

72 The political careers of dream-interpreting prophets such as Joseph and Daniel also feed this motif.

73 1 Proverbs 5–6 (DV) (my trans.)

74 Numbers 12:6–8 (DV) (my trans.) As a living man, even Moses cannot look at God directly; on Moses and God’s face, see Exodus 33:18–23, and Suzanne Akbari’s discussion in Seeing Through the Veil, 4.
In 1 Corinthians 13:12 Paul develops the imagery of Numbers 12:6-8 with a famous passage, which in the Latin Vulgate is rendered “videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate [en ainigmate]; tunc autem facie ad faciem; nunc cognosco ex parte tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum” (“We see now through a glass in a dark manner [in an enigma]; but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known.”)\(^7\) It is worth noting that Paul’s formulation is itself enigmatic in an Aristotelian sense: to describe the perceptual distortions and mysteries attendant upon fallen human cognition, Paul’s phrasing juxtaposes an optical analogy for visual misrecognition of an afterimage (\textit{videmus nunc per speculum}) with a word (\textit{enigma}) for a rhetorically puzzling utterance. This seems to imply that perceptions are mediated by distortions both physical and rhetorical, just as God’s appearance and utterances synaesthetically mix sensation and communication. As Suzanne Akbari has noted, the difficulty presented by this combination has been reflected in modern scholarly discussions of medieval allegory, which tend to focus either on allegory’s iconographic aspects or its rhetorical ones, without perceiving that by avoiding the limitations inherent in literal language, allegory creates meaning \textit{within} the reader, bypassing the inevitable degeneration of meaning as it passes through the obscuring veil of language. The paradox, of course, is that it is this veil which makes the transmission of meaning—the revelation—possible. Allegory is trope when it is expressed through language; but it is intelligible image at the moment of the reader’s illumination.\(^7\)

Modern English translations of Paul’s formulation frequently resolve this odd juxtaposition in Paul’s language by resorting to visual contrasts of light and dark, obscurity and clarity, but the ideas of ‘seeing’ through or inside an utterance—and the rhetorical framing of creation, perceiving the visible world as an enigmatic utterance that can offer indirect access to the divine—are essential aspects of much medieval riddling, as we will see.

Augustine was especially interested in Paul’s formulation and incorporated the Pauline struggle to understand divine and scriptural mystery into his discussions of \textit{enigma}—discussions which popularized a metaphoric vocabulary of veils and concealment for understanding what Chaucer calls “thilke covered qualitee of thynges” \textit{(TC 3.31-32)}. Defining \textit{enigma} in one

\(^{75}\) 1 Corinthians 13:12 (DV); trans. Swift and Kinney.

discussion as “an obscure parable, which is understood with difficulty.” Augustine reflects elsewhere that

> Velamen quippe omnimodo intercludit aspectum, aenigma uero tamquam per speculum sicut idem apostolus ait: ‘Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate,’ nec eudentissimam detegit speciem nec prorsus obtegit ueritatem....

Indeed a veil entirely covers the vision; an enigma (as if through a mirror, as the apostle says: ‘We see now through a glass darkly’) does not uncover the most evident aspect nor does it absolutely hide the truth.

Augustine’s understanding of enigma here is lofty, and does not merely offer playful practice in recognizing things by their distorted reflections. Rather, following Paul, Augustine’s enigma offers a technology of thinking beyond the limits of human communication and imagination, approaching mysteries that exceed those limits from the perspective of the degraded and unusual forms by which they can be partly apprehended.

Seventh- and eighth-century treatments of enigma mediate between its possible incarnations as rhetorical trope and game. Bede’s discussion draws on Donatus but emphasizes enigma’s allegorical activity in the Bible. Isidore, whose seventh-century discussion of enigma seems comparatively prosaic and limited about its signifying potential, substitutes for Donatus’s typical “mater me genuit” example an Old Testament connection to Samson’s lion:

> Aenigma est quaestio obscura quae difficile intellegitur, nisi aperiatur, ut est illud (Iud. 14:14) ‘De comedente exivit cibus, et de forte egressa est dulcedo,’ significans ex ore leonis favum extractum. Inter allegoriam autem et aenigma hoc interest, quod allegoriae vis gemina est et sub res alias aliud figuraliter indicat; aenigma vero sensus tantum obscurus est, et per quasdam imagines adumbratus.

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79 See Akbari’s discussion of the blending of the ‘good’ (sense-extending) and ‘bad’ (deceptive) mirrors in Neoplatonic thought in Seeing Through the Veil, 7, 12–14; on Augustine’s relationship with enigma and scriptural mystery, see also Stork, 61.

80 Bede, De schematibus et tropis, CCSL 123a: 162–163; see Stork’s discussion, Through A Gloss Darkly, 64.

An enigma is an obscure question which is understood with difficulty unless it is explained, for example ‘From the eater came forth meat, and from the strong came forth sweetness,’ which signifies the honeycomb taken from the mouth of the lion. The difference between allegory and enigma is this: allegory has a double meaning and beneath certain things it indicates something else figurally; but in an enigma only the sense is obscure and shadowed over by certain images.

While borrowing his first definition nearly verbatim from Augustine, Isidore’s discussion edges the term enigma away from metaphor (cf. Augustine, parabola) and closer to what we now describe as the genre of riddles. For Isidore an enigma is a “question” (quaestio) which must be “opened/unfolded” (aperiatur), like Samson’s riddle, rather than a mystically veiled utterance (as when God speaks enigmatically in Numbers). In other words, where allegory fosters multiple meanings, Isidore’s enigma has only one: res, received in the distorted or obscured perception through sensus. For Anglo-Saxon riddlers influenced by Isidore, this feature of enigma makes riddles a particularly useful genre for staging questions about the relationship between res and sensus, matter and sign.

For each of the different perspectives articulated above, an enigma is an incongruous or apparently impossible description of an object or relation. It works by metaphoric substitution to expose resemblances between disparate objects, a resemblance that usually requires wisdom or special knowledge to perceive. If paired with its explanation, an enigmatic expression can generate a before-and-after experience of surprise and realization (sometimes for comic or pleasurable effect, as for Aristotle) or alternately, mystery and revelation.\(^{82}\) In the Old Testament, an enigma is a tool of social exclusion that can conceal information, generate confusion, and withhold power indefinitely from those without the key connection, while configuring good interpretive skills as marks of wisdom and authority. According to writers such as Paul and Augustine, such practice in making connections can have wider applicability to worldly and otherworldly mysteries, such that wondrous aspects and behaviours of the visible and invisible worlds can be thought of as dark texts of this kind.\(^{83}\)


\(^{83}\) For other examples of world as text and God as a rhetorically savvy poet than those I’ve quoted above, see for example Augustine,

Neque enim Deus ullum, non dico angelorum, sed uel hominum crearet, quem malum futurum esse praescisset, nisi pariter nosset quibus eos bonorum usibus commodaret atque ita ordinem saeculorum
As a rhetorical-grammatical trope, Aristotelian *ainigma* emphasizes an overabundant state of “impossible combination,” but Donatan *enigma* also accommodates lack and concealment—of context, of associative connection, or of substance, as Samson’s riddle *Out of the strong came forth sweetness* demonstrates. The trope of *enigma* is often (but not inevitably) a core element in a riddle’s concealment of its subject, and the medieval riddle writers I discuss in this dissertation often use the term *enigma-enigmata* in synecdoche to refer to the texts in their collections. However, just as in Paul’s formula the mirror (*speculum*) provides the medium for perceiving the reflected enigmatic image but is not identical to it, so too riddle and *enigma* are not properly the same thing. *Enigma* is a rhetorical trope. At once a puzzle and a poem, a riddle is a two-part utterance consisting of a proposition and a solution, as I will explore below.

**What is a riddle?**

Before introducing the definition and conceptualization of riddle I will use in this dissertation, it is helpful to address some of the history of recent attempts to define riddles.

Many twentieth-century definitions of riddling have adopted a social approach, whether focusing on the position of the riddle composer or would-be solver. For example, folklorist Archer Taylor defines traditional “true riddles” broadly as “descriptions of objects in terms intended to suggest something entirely different.” Abrahams and Dundes argue that “riddles are questions that are framed with the purpose of confusing or testing the wits of those who do not...”

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know the answer." More specific definitions have extrapolated a set of rules for fair play in riddle-gaming; for example, W. Pepicello and Thomas A. Green argue that by convention a riddle “is potentially solvable from the information included in the question if the riddlee is able to determine the witty devices for confusion employed to frame the riddle.” Drawing on their definition, Jonathan Wilcox argues that “[o]bliquely described elements should add up to a recognizable object.”

However, others have cautioned against attempts to define the riddle either by reference to external factors such as the supposed confusion of an imagined audience, or alternately by reference to techniques of concealment, none of which techniques apply to all cases. Anthropological studies suggest that most riddle solutions are intended to be known rather than guessed. For example, John Blackling reports of the Venda that “[r]iddle and answer are learned as one unit, and it is knowledge of the riddle that is more important than the ability to work it out.” John Messenger also argues of Nigerian riddling that “riddles are not told with the end in view of baffling the audience and stimulating its members to provide correct answers.”

As Patrick Murphy summarizes:

In practice, both literary and oral riddles offer a range of positions for posers, solvers, and side participants. It is probably better, then, to stress the solver’s imagined position less, and put more emphasis on the relationship between a riddle and its solution, for the situation is rather more complex than a simple routine of asking and answering implies.

92 Murphy, Unriddling, 33.
For the purposes of this dissertation I adopt Murphy’s structural definition of riddles and the terminology of ‘proposition’, ‘solution’, ‘fit’, and ‘focus’ that he outlines.93 For Murphy, riddles have a binary structure that sets up a relationship of synonymy between the riddle’s description (hereafter called the proposition) and its solution.94 “The proposition is understood to stand prior to the solution”—so implying, if not always generating, a before-and-after experience of puzzlement and clarity.95 The solution is understood to be “the compressed equivalent of” the proposition;96 hence, good practice solves medieval riddles in the same language as the proposition, in order to preserve correspondences based on etymological play or gender agreement.97 The “fit” is the semantic synonymous relationship between proposition and solution.

Riddles establish the fit between the proposition and solution in a variety of ways. Sometimes, as Murphy writes, “the fit between proposition and solution is complicated only insofar as the description may rely on unusual facts[.].”98 The solver may need to know an etymology, unscramble a spelling code, or solve a math problem. However, riddles also commonly complicate the fit by employing tactics of semantic distortion, which distract or confuse the mind’s eye away from the solution. Murphy employs the term ‘focus’ to refer to “a core metaphor [...] It is a misnaming (whether actually stated or not) that accounts for a larger pattern of semantic ‘slim chances’ in the riddle’s description.”99 For example, the focus of Donatus’ traditional riddle, “mater me genuit, eadem mox gignitur ex me,” disguises ice and water as a mother-daughter pair. In Donatus’s riddle, the idea that a mother could be born from her own daughter is a “slim chance” that lets us know that the riddle is about ice and water, rather than about human beings. However, the proposition, even with its slim chances, builds an interesting fit or analogy, between ice and water and the relationships of living creatures. The

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93 Ibid., 33 and following.
94 Ibid, 34 and following. cf. Heller-Roazen: “That a single riddle falls naturally into two units—one obscure, one clarifying—is commonly accepted.” Dark Tongues, 66.
95 Murphy, Unriddling, 35.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.; the challenge to critics to give solutions to riddles in the original language comes from John D. Niles, Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts, 5, 101–48.
98 Murphy, Unriddling, 50.
99 Ibid., 47.
focus thus usually encodes, in Donatus’ terms, an *occult similitudinem rerum*—a “hidden similarity between things”; in this case, the similarity that ice and water can by melting or freezing generate an independent yet closely related material which is comparable to the relationship between children and their mothers. The “slim chance” in this riddle equates with Aristotle’s reference to “impossible combination,” that a mother could be born from her own daughter.

One of the powerful aspects of the bipartite structural definition is that, with the idea of a guesser de-emphasized, it is easier to perceive that riddles do not measure their success solely by their ability to encode yet conceal their hidden material. Exeter Book riddles, for example, are usually much longer than would be necessary if guessing or concealing the solution were the only object. A riddle’s structural, rhetorical, and metrical features can each contribute to that riddles’ mnemonic endurance and poetic reputation, as will be suggested in Chapter 1 with respect to Aldhelm’s interest in mining Symphosius’s collection for metrical examples. In many cases the riddle’s showmanship rests on the additional imaginative work the proposition performs while developing the focus, as for example by the riddle’s interactions with other material, including adjacent riddles, similar riddles in other riddle collections, Isidorean etymology, Biblical or Christological exegesis, or vernacular genres such as heroic elegy. Terms for riddle in medieval Latin include most commonly *enigma*, but also *quaestio, problema, parabola, cribrum or cribellum, ambages, griphus*, and *cautela verbalis* (verbal trick). The riddles in late antique and early medieval collections tend to be poems as well as puzzles, and they may pursue any number of different thematic interests or resonances.

The bipartite definition of riddle in terms of “proposition” and “solution” also has the advantage of conforming to one of the earliest examples of vernacular Anglo-Saxon riddling that we possess: the early eighth-century Franks Casket bears an inscription of elegiac Old English lines about an unhappy fish cast on the shore, along with a compressed explanation (*hronaes ban*), the relationship of which creates an imaginative origin-story for the material of the casket itself.¹⁰⁰

*Fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig;*

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion of the Franks Casket as riddle, see Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*, 3–6.
Warp gasric grorn þær he on greut giswom.
Hronæs ban.\textsuperscript{101}

The flood heaved the fish up onto a mountain; the gasric [terror-king?] grew miserable where he swam on the sand. Whale’s bone.

\textbf{Figure 1 The Franks Casket with whale riddle}


The Franks casket recounts the death of the animal from which the casket was made in emotive yet relatively transparent terms, perhaps fundamentally in such a way as to be provocative about the relationship between material and art.\textsuperscript{102} The casket is a stunningly elaborate and beautiful object, elaborately carved with scenes from Germanic legend, the birth of Christ, and Roman legend and history—images surrounded by inscriptions in Old English (in runes) and Latin (in Roman letters). This riddle—when paired with its solution, a tersely carved summary carved in

\textsuperscript{101} Trans. Mize, \textit{Traditional Subjectivities}, 3.

\textsuperscript{102} Mize takes a fascinating different interpretation, focussing on the ways that this brief whale-poem enacts the traditionality of mentality as a fundamental aspect of Old English poetry; see Mize, \textit{Traditional Subjectivities}, 3–6.
smaller runes that directs attention back at the physical material of the box—expresses the transformation by which the mighty whale’s life in the ocean converted to helplessness and now is reborn in a new type of magnificence, eternally subordinated to the task of communicating the elaborate design of the carver. The fit between riddle and solution is literally enacted in the paradoxical ‘fit’ of speaking runes raised out of once-living bone. In this respect the Franks casket bears especial comparison with the suffering-and-speaking codex riddles of the Symphosian collections, such as BER 24, EXE 26 and EXE 28.103

As is suggested by Aristotle’s reference to ainigma’s “How true it is! But I missed it,” riddles have one additional feature worthy of special note. If the proposition is given separately from the solution, it generates a different experience than that produced by contemplating the proposition and solution together. The before-and-after temporal experience of riddles is particularly prominent in those riddles presented in dialogue or narrative form, and a sequence of riddles can carry their own narrative momentum, as in the Historia Apollonii Regis Tyrii, when Apollonius’s long-lost daughter Tarsia proposes a sequence of riddles related to Apollonius’s adventures, that ends with their mutual recognition;104 alternatively, some obscure passages in riddle-adjacent narrative poetry can take on an enigmatic structure.

What is an enigmatic structure?

As I define it here, an enigmatic structure within a narrative work is a brief passage of heightened uncertainty, often appealing to riddling conventions such as enigma, a riddle challenge, paradox, antithesis, and language of wonder. The opening passage from the first prose of Boethius’s Consolatio Philosophiae gives a useful example:

Haec dum mecum tacitus ipse reputarem querimoniamque lacrimabilem stili officio signarem, astitisse mihi supra verticem visa est mulier reverendi admodum vultus, oculis ardentibus et ultra communem hominum valentiam perspicacibus colore vivido atque inexhausti vigoris, quamvis ita aevi plena foret ut nullo modo nostrae crederetur aetatis,


While I was thinking these thoughts to myself in silence, and set my pen to record this tearful complaint, there seemed to stand above my head a woman. Her look filled me with awe; her burning eyes penetrated more deeply than those of ordinary men; her complexion was fresh with an ever-lively bloom, yet she seemed so ancient that none would think her of our time. It was difficult to say how tall she might be, for at one time she seemed to confine herself to the ordinary measure of man, and at another the crown of her head touched the heavens; and when she lifted her head higher yet, she penetrated the heavens themselves, and was lost to the sight of men.

These lines show Boethius beginning his *Consolatio* with an extended embedded riddle, providing details of an unnamed woman in such a way as to allow his readers to close in gradually upon the woman’s identity and to determine the significance of each aspect of her appearance. Such a quest also necessarily involves contemplation of Boethius’s choices in phrasing and arrangement, as his opening simultaneously constructs an initial allegorical definition of Philosophy and positions his *Consolatio* in relation to other works. Boethius frames Lady Philosophy in ways that both align her with the flashing-eyed goddesses of classical literature and indicate that her description should be taken metaphorically. Within this larger riddle structure, however, Philosophy’s “statura discretionis ambiguæ” (height of uncertain judgment) is a wonder that twists this account into intensely enigmatic terms. Philosophy’s uncertain height is a literal wonder in the ways it seems to change, evoking the famous description of Fama’s growth in Book 4 of the *Aeneid*. However, where Fame’s height increases in time with the growth of her rumours, Philosophy’s height is a wonder in a more pointed

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106 The title of Boethius’s work, and presumably in many cases the manuscript apparatus (not to mention its cultural familiarity) would likely make the woman’s identity an open secret. Nonetheless, this is a riddling structure, involving a performance of unknowing and analysis on the patient’s part as well as the readers’. Analysis can take place on two fronts—going through Boethius’s clues to gather information about Philosophy, and examining his literary choices. The fact that the patient-Boethius does not immediately recognize Philosophy despite their previous acquaintance and must have his eyes wiped by her, of course, contributes to his characterization as well.

107 See Homer’s Athena in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.231–232, etc. In Virgil’s *Aeneid* Book 2, Venus cleans Aeneas’s eyes so that he can perceive the gods in their true forms, as Philosophy does for Boethius in 1pr2.

108 cf. *Aeneid* 4.174–177:
way: it is defined by how it poses difficulty for the intellect, a difficulty which is directly pertinent to another fact about her (her transitional being, as a human concept and a cosmic essence). Philosophy’s appearance is a riddle, and her height is especially difficult, because as a personification of a concept that bridges between humanity and the widest limits of the universe, Philosophy’s nature can only be partly apprehended by humans. It is impossible to comprehend Philosophy at her greatest, and yet it is in registering and confronting her very strangeness that Boethius’s opening prose models the beginning of a process of understanding. As Plato quotes Socrates: “this experience is very much a philosopher’s, that of wondering. For nothing else is the beginning (principle) of philosophy than this.”\(^\text{109}\) While commentators on Boethius understood his description to be an allegorical representation, I wish to emphasize the ways that it is a riddle as well: it opens with the fiction of delayed recognition, inviting the reader to make the connections at which Boethius hints.\(^\text{110}\) Many medieval riddles begin a phrase such as “I saw a man” or “I saw a strange creature” and then report the ‘sight’ in riddling terms; Boethius’s description beginning “visa est mulier” achieves a similar effect.

An enigmatic structure, then, resembles a riddle proposition in rhetorical technique, imagery, and/or structure, and like a riddle it can produce either temporary wonder, in the struggle to find a solution that is not revealed, or more permanent wonder, in the contemplation (as in Boethius’s moment here) of the complex ‘fit’ between proposition and solution. Enigmatic

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\text{Fama, malum qua non aliud velocius ullum:} \\
\text{mobilitate viget virisque adquirit eundo,} \\
\text{parva metu primo, mox sese attollit in auras} \\
\text{ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit. (Aeneid 4.174–177)}
\]

Fame, swifter than any other evil: she thrives in movement and gains strength as she goes; tiny first in fear, soon she raises herself to the skies and treads the earth while her head is hidden amongst the clouds.


\(^{109}\) *Theaetetus*, trans. McDowell 155d; see above, and cf. Aristotle, “For through astonishment men have begun to philosophize both in our times and at the beginning.” (*Metaphysics* A 2, 982 b 12 sq., trans. Warrington.)

\(^{110}\) As recent Boethius scholars have pointed out, this is only the first of the ways that Philosophy’s appearance and behaviour pose puzzles for readers; see Antonio Donato, *Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy as a Product of Late Antiquity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 68–73.
structures can be small, taking the space of a few lines or even a few words; they can also be larger, in the form of a mysteriously riddling turn in content or structure within a work. My chapters to come deal with enigmatic structures emerging in two literary contexts: in Anglo-Saxon wisdom-poetry, where the Old English *Boethius C-Text Metre 28* and the wisdom dialogue *Solomon and Saturn II* deploy the extended structures of Old English riddles in order to address philosophic questions about the everyday in an enigmatic mode, and Chaucer’s dream vision poems, which (I will argue) draw on Macrobius’s recognition of enigmatic structure in Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis* as well as late medieval riddling techniques to address Chaucer’s own everyday wonders: human grief, love, story.

**Riddle Studies**

Most of the primary texts of this project lie within the ambit of Anglo-Saxon and late medieval riddle studies; here is a brief update on the state of those fields.

Over the past decade scholars such as Andy Orchard and Dieter Bitterli have usefully challenged the assumption that a strict division existed between Latin and Old English riddling cultures in the seventh through to the eleventh centuries, arguing instead for what Bitterli calls “a vigorous, common tradition of Old English and Anglo-Latin enigmatography.” Furthermore, Orchard suggests, Anglo-Saxon riddlers were aware of each other’s efforts and sought to outdo them, causing gradual and far-reaching innovations in riddle form, style, subject, and opening formulae. A picture is now emerging of a creative community of riddle-writers and readers spanning several centuries and different languages, based primarily in Anglo-Saxon centres of learning but also reaching into continental Europe and Scandinavian Iceland. Scholars are also finding new ways to analyze this enigmatic material. For instance, Mercedes Salvador-Bello’s

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113 Symphosian riddle collections and material by this count include the *Aenigmata* of Symphosius (5th c); the Bern Riddles (7th c); Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* (7th c), and the *enigmata* collections of Boniface, Tatwine, Eusebius, and the Lorsch collection (8th–9th c); De Alfabeta; Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini*, his *Propositiones* and stand-alone riddles (9th–10th c), the riddles of the *Collectanea* of pseudo-Bede; *Solomon and Saturn II*; the Exeter Book *Riddles*, and the Gestumblindi episode in *Heidreks Saga*. Other important collections and texts more distantly related include the
writings draw renewed attention to the ordering and arrangement of *enigmata* collections, while Patrick Murphy’s work has not only provided new structural frameworks for riddle description and analysis, but also shown that many riddle-subjects and tropes featured in these early medieval collections also appear in English collections of the early modern period. In order to conduct the first half of my project, and insofar as was possible, I have surveyed the whole corpus of early medieval Latin and Anglo-Saxon riddling. A group of texts inspired by the riddle collection of the late antique poet Symphosius, hereafter called the “Symphosian tradition,” is the main subject of my study in the first two chapters. My key figures in this narrative are Symphosius, Aldhelm, and Alcuin of York (Chapter 1), as well as the anonymous composers of the Old English *Boethius, Solomon and Saturn II*, and the Exeter Book Riddles (Chapter 2).

In the later medieval field, broader-reaching literary and rhetorical studies of *enigma*, metaphor, allegory and ‘dark writing’ by scholars such as Eleanor Cook and Suzanne Akbari, are opening up new ways of exploring enigmatic turns in the poetry of Dante, Boccaccio, Christine de Pisan, and others. Erin Sebo’s monograph study of European reception of a single riddle from the late antique to late medieval periods is due to be published in October 2017. On late medieval English enigmatic writing the most significant recent studies are two articles appearing in *Speculum*: Andrew Galloway’s “The Rhetoric of Riddling in Late-Medieval England: The ‘Oxford’ Riddles, the *Secretum philosophorum*, and the Riddles in *Piers Plowman*” (1995), and Curtis Gruenler’s “How to Read Like a Fool: Riddle Contests and the Banquet of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*” (2010). Gruenler’s monograph *Piers Plowman and the Poetics of Enigma*

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(2017) appeared too late to be included in my thesis, but it is the first full-length study of the interrelation of riddles and literary culture in late medieval England. Galloway follows on from the work of W. A. Pantin in the 1930s to identify and discuss what he calls “the Oxford Riddles,” a selection of Latin enigmata (one of which, Galloway reveals, is quoted in Langland’s *The Vision of Piers Plowman*) which seem to have circulated in the manuscripts of Oxford-trained rhetoricians and scholastics. Galloway shows that these riddles are also discussed in the never-before-edited late thirteenth-century treatise, the *Secretum Philosophorum*, which treats riddles alongside other forms of tricks (including sleight-of-hand and optical illusions). Galloway’s work makes a strong case for the need for further multilingual study of late medieval riddling “textual communities” for what they can reveal about “the theory and practice of rhetoric in late-medieval England.”

Gruenler’s approach, arrived at by way of further investigation into Langland’s engagement with enigmatic modes in the episode of the Banquet of Conscience, seeks not merely to identify, contextualize, and ‘solve’ riddles in narrative works, but to examine their implications for the modes of knowledge put forward in the surrounding text. Gruenler proposes, “[R]iddles […] form community around a means of knowing that yields not just a coded solution but a way of looking at (and being in) the world.” Gruenler’s approach yields a fuller sense of the parameters of late medieval riddling, and as I draw attention to a different corpus of riddles and turn the conversation to Chaucer, my work has likewise benefited from his discussion of Langland’s engagement with enigmatic form.

One of the affordances of this project has been to bring scholars of late medieval aesthetics and cognition, like Nolan and Karnes, into dialogue with riddle scholars working on adjacent problems; another is to draw together riddle scholarship on different periods and languages. Gruenler’s understanding of riddles as ‘a means of knowing’ in late medieval England

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119 Gruenler, “How to Read Like a Fool,” 593.
has a counterpart in the recent work of Patricia Dailey on wonder in Old English riddling. Dailey proposes that

In a simple sense, responding to the unknown in riddles exposes something about the respondent’s mind and, by extension, a moral (or other) quality associated with the respondent’s person. In provoking an answer, responsiveness renders audible a trace of the inner, a sign of how one reads.

Dailey’s analysis is very productive in its focus on reader response and in its attention to how riddling highlights the limits of linguistic and human knowing.

**Synopsis of this Project**

Chapter One explores the entanglement of the concepts of wonder, the everyday, and *enigma* as a matter of emerging literary theory in Anglo-Saxon Latin riddling of the seventh and eighth centuries. My analysis focuses on two Anglo-Saxon responses to the riddles of the Roman poet Symphosius: the first a collection of riddles by Aldhelm, Abbot of Malmesbury (ca. 680–700); and the second a riddling dialogue by Alcuin of York, a scholar within the court of Charlemagne (ca. 790). In Symphosius’s collection, riddles have the power both to disguise the ordinary and to highlight the wondrous within it: a matter to which Aldhelm and Alcuin take two polarizing responses. Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* do not propose to conceal his subjects, but to unveil in verse their hidden and essential natures, and the wonder he seeks to evoke springs from the majesty of creation, the subject of his collection. Nonetheless, Aldhelm’s collection deploys the everyday *enigma* as a corrective category that exposes where authoritative knowledge ends and faith must take over. At the other end of the spectrum are the riddles of Alcuin. During the wisdom-dialogue *Disputatio Pippini* Alcuin playfully defines *mirum* (a wonder) using a perplexing riddle about a distorted reflection in water. Alcuin’s riddles can be thought of as finding wonder in the distorted reflection of the readerly imaginative encounter with a text, super-imposed upon the familiar sights of the everyday. As a riddling effect, such wondrous distortions had been only intermittently important before Alcuin, but they become a profound source of interest in riddle collections after him, particularly in the Exeter Book.

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121 Dailey, “Riddles, Wonder and Responsiveness,” 452.
Chapter Two situates the Exeter Book Riddles (ca. 950) in the context of a turn towards everyday wonder within Old English vernacular wisdom poetry. I explore this turn to everyday wonder in a close examination of the Old English prose and verse translations of a metre of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae* and the enigmatic wisdom-dialogue *Solomon and Saturn II*. I argue that both these texts articulate the same underlying position: that riddle propositions, together with the ordinary phenomena of the world, chart a wise approach to the everyday’s deep ethical mysteries. The Exeter Book Riddles likewise hone a wisdom-producing wonder at the everyday, facilitating new perceptions of the everyday as *wundorworuld*, a riddling world of wonder. However, as my readings show, in the Exeter Book Riddles this wonder is directed as much at poetry, at riddling itself, and even at the psychology of reading and perception, as it is at the everyday world.

The second half of my dissertation uses late medieval riddling texts as a lens into Chaucer’s engagements with wonder in his dream vision poems. In recent years there has been a growing interest in Chaucer’s cultivation of what Galloway calls “answerable style” (2013) in Chaucer’s later works, particularly as a technique for building fictional believability. While many scholars have identified an ‘enigmatic’ quality in Chaucer’s poems, his works have rarely been considered in light of late medieval riddling practices. By drawing on comparisons with an expanded range of enigmatic texts, including previously unpublished late medieval riddles, I seek to arrive at a more satisfactory account of Chaucer’s engagement with wonder in his dream poems.

Chapter Three surveys the landscape of late medieval riddling and theorizes the concept of enigmatic structure in Chaucer’s dream poetry. Chaucer was obviously familiar with many texts that engage with riddles and riddling ideas, from Donatus’s *Ars maior* and *minor* to Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova*, French *demandes d’amours*, riddling romances such as *Apollonius of Tyre*, and the writings of Boccaccio and Dante. This chapter points out that

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enigmatic moments in these narrative and discursive texts were situated in a much more extensive riddling culture in late medieval England, ranging from Latin scholastic riddles, prophetic writing, and riddling disputation, to riddling dialogues and love songs in Middle English. I propose that the intellectual and affective puzzles of actual riddles manifest themselves in related structures in narrative genres, such that in Chaucer’s dream poetry wonder itself is often marked by an enigmatic structure. I argue for the interrelation of everyday wonder and enigmatic structure in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, where the enigmatic structure is supplied by Macrobius’s formulation of enigmatic and meaningless-everyday dreams. I study enigmatic structures derived from late medieval riddles in the oblique and enigmatic passages in *The Parliament of Fowls* that play a key role in constructing desire and uncertainty within the text.

Chapter Four deepens this inquiry into Chaucer’s engagement with wonder through enigmatic form. I build this chapter’s argument around a central reading of an enigmatic passage in Chaucer’s *The House of Fame*: the description of a “queynte hous” shaped like a whirling wicker cage, for which Rebecca Davis (2015) has recently proposed an ‘elegant material source’ in the eel traps referred to obliquely in the poem’s closing lines.123 My chapter proposes a new intertext for Chaucer’s passage in the *Secretum philosophorum*, a playful Latin treatise on the Seven Liberal Arts, which uses a fish caught in a net or basket weir as an example for explaining the imaginative necessity of enigmatic wonder—and for which the key ingredient is a set of wondrous windows in a strangely mobile house. I show that for Chaucer the image of a fish caught in a weir is a recurrent and powerful figure for thinking about *enigma* and the wonders of everyday life. Indeed, in Middle English, “in were” is also an expression for a situation of uncertainty or wonder. The mysterious “queynte hous,” as “were”—and riddle—is thus a fitting place for Chaucer to explore the nested origins of wonder and imaginative communication. Ultimately, I suggest, a long tradition of enigmatic texts extending from the early to late medieval period cultivates wonder at the everyday’s mysteries as offering a chance (in Chaucer’s words) to “fare the bet,” to thrive in unexpected ways. From the Anglo-Saxon period to the fourteenth century, riddles both inscribe and respond to wonder within the everyday, while paradoxically revealing imaginative narratives as wonders themselves.

Chapter 1

*Mira Primordia*: Symphosius, Aldhelm, Alcuin, and the Origins of Everyday Wonder

Those encountering the Exeter Book Riddles for the first time are often struck by several features of that collection: the variety and intricacy of its riddles, and its use of seemingly traditional riddle-openings and formulaic vocabulary appealing to wonder. Wonder is commonly the first thing the Exeter Book Riddles announce, in phrases such as “Ic eom wunderlicu wiht” (I am a wondrous creature)\(^1\) and

\[
\text{Ic wiht geseah on wege feran,} \\
\text{seo wæs wætlice wundrum gegierwed.} \quad (2)
\]

I saw a creature travel on her way;
she was marvellously adorned with wonders.

In the Exeter Book Riddles, recurring phrases and vocabulary identify wonder as a quality of a number of objects, creatures, and sights which form part of the everyday—a bow, an onion, a jay, a ship, chickens mating, (probably) the sun and moon passing into sight over a wall—as well as riddle objects that have not been identified with confidence by modern scholars. But these wonders raise their own questions. Are Anglo-Saxon riddles to be understood as artfully redeploying a category usually reserved for the marvellous and miraculous to ordinary things in order to disguise them; or as drawing attention to wonder present in everyday things; or as describing self-reflexively the effects of their own poetic representations? What does the use of wonder-vocabulary and wonder-formulas in the Exeter Book riddles do, in relation to other formal features of the individual poems, and across the collection writ large? Then again, how can this wondrousness best be contextualized: in the long history of riddle-writing in the early

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\(^1\) See EXE 18.1, EXE 20.1, EXE 24.1, EXE 25.1. All references to the Exeter Book Riddles are from George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds, *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936). I use their numbering system for convenience. All translations in this chapter are my own unless indicated otherwise.

Note: in this and the next chapter, I follow Andy Orchard’s conventions for using letters and numbers to refer quickly to riddles in different collections. EXE is the Exeter Book Riddles; SYM is Symphosius’s *Aenigmata*; ALD is Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*; ALC refers to Alcuin’s riddles found in his letters, ALC Pro is Alcuin’s *Propositiones ad Acuendos Iuvenes*, ALC D is the *Disputatio Pippini*. Other collections appearing less frequently include BER (the Bern riddles), BON (Boniface’s *De virtutibus Aenigmata* and *De Vitiis Aenigmata*), TAT (Tatwine’s *Enigmata*), EUS (Eusebius’s *Enigmata*), LOR (the Lorsch collection) or Ps-BED (the *Collectanea of Pseudo-Bede*). Critical references to these texts and their editions will be given as they arise. See Table of Abbreviations at p. viii, above.

\(^2\) EXE 36.1-2; EXE 68.1-2.
medieval period, in the traditional aesthetics of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and/or in ongoing thematic interest in the limits of human understanding present across a wide range of surviving Anglo-Saxon wisdom-texts? And this question especially has been unanswered as yet: since riddles do clearly become a part of the tradition of wisdom-writing in the later Anglo-Saxon period, why do they do so particularly in their representation of elements of the mundane and everyday?³

In one of the most recent interventions in this critical puzzle, Patricia Dailey posits a connection between Anglo-Saxon riddles and “a pedagogic method that is not exclusive to this genre and may represent a particular use of wonder in Anglo-Saxon England.”⁴ Dailey argues,

The most compelling rationale for the coupling of the marvellous or wonder with riddles is, as I have argued, not merely as a rhetorical means of obfuscation, but rather as a means for teaching something other than the right answer, perhaps for teaching how things may be wondrous if perceived in and responded to in nuanced fashion.⁵

Dailey proposes that Anglo-Saxon riddles cultivate certain forms of “responsiveness” in the questions they pose—responsiveness that brings to light not merely the solution, but also information about the riddle-solver (whether his wit and familiarity, for Carolingian riddling; his education, for learned and etymological riddles; or his relation to the body’s urges, for double entendre riddles).⁶ Dailey further argues that riddles often intervene, not only to expose such responses, but also to cultivate pedagogically desirable forms of responsiveness, that are aligned in the Exeter Book Riddles with a distinctive concept of ‘wonder.’⁷ For Dailey, that is, the Exeter

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⁶ Ibid., 452–455.

⁷ Ibid., 464.
Book Riddles teach wonder, and as a critical enterprise, inquiring further how riddles convey their meanings, and what philosophy underlies them, goes some way to uncovering how Anglo-Saxon wonder works.8

My work in the first half of this dissertation takes up the challenge Dailey poses, and the final question I outline above. This chapter and the next chart the emergence of a poetics of everyday wonder in the riddle tradition inaugurated in late antiquity by Symphosius and carried on in riddle collections of the seventh through thirteenth centuries—collections including the anonymous Bern riddles, and the *enigmata* and riddles of Aldhelm, Boniface, Tatwine, Eusebius, Alcuin, the *Collectanea* of pseudo-Bede, the Lorsch collection, *Solomon and Saturn II*, and the Exeter Book, as well as *Heiðreks Saga*.9 In this present chapter I examine the emergence of wonder in the Symphosian riddle tradition in the contributions of Aldhelm and Alcuin, seeking the origins of the preoccupation with wonder present in the later Symphosian riddles within a debate ongoing within these early collections on where the grounds of wonder are to be found. My aim in this chapter is to show the concept of wonder beginning to coalesce and to be entangled with the everyday in two different responses to the wonder latent in Symphosius’s riddle collection of ordinary things.

1.2 The Symphosian Tradition: A Brief Overview

‘Symphosius’ was a poet of the late Roman empire—possibly from North Africa, likely living in the late fourth or fifth century. He was responsible for composing a light-hearted collection of *Aenigmata*, one hundred (or perhaps ninety-nine) enigmatic poems, each written in three lines of artful dactylic hexameter, with lemmata providing the solutions.10 The subjects represented in

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8 Ibid., 470: “Riddles are not only an exercise in naming, they are an exercise in responding to the world and to the unknowable—not with fright or stupor, like those who witness miracles in Mark 6:51—but with an appropriate and nuanced disposition, and even a bemused smile.” (470)

9 I call the riddles and collections influenced by Symphosius ‘Symphosian’, in preference to a geographically, linguistically, or culturally bound term such as ‘Anglo-Saxon.’ The tradition does seem primarily carried on by Anglo-Saxons but not exclusively so, and there are Anglo-Saxon riddles (such as the Franks casket) that are not part of the Symphosian tradition.

Symphosius’s collection are primarily everyday things: man-made objects and structures (stylus, ring, anchor, ball, ladder, bathhouse, tombstone), animals and plants (bookworm, frog, bull, onion, rose, apple tree), weather (rain, snow, clouds), and phenomena of the world (echo, sleep, shadow). There are also a couple of mythical creatures (a centaur) and, near the end of the collection, unusually specific subjects: a woman bearing twins, a tightrope-walker, a club-footed soldier, a one-eyed garlic vendor. Symphosius’s is the most famous and one of the most popular of the riddle collections of the late antique or early medieval period. It was not composed in isolation, and contains many elements of imagery, style, format, and subject that attest to a relationship with other works. Nonetheless, it outshines all other examples for longevity and breadth of influence. Symphosius’s riddles were incorporated in other contexts, such as the widely-circulated Latin Historia Apollonii regi Tyrri—and its influence appears

Symphosius, from the fifth or sixth century; see Mercedes Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2015), 121–124. There has been much debate as to whether Symphosius’s collection contains a hundred or ninety-nine riddles, with SYM 96 (“Verba” or “De VIII tollas VIII et remanet VI”), which survives only in one family of manuscripts, considered a medieval interpolation by most modern editors. However, Leary, *Symphosius*, at 14 and 237–241 argues that while the lemma ‘Verba’ is probably not original, the riddle itself is a genuine Symphosian treatment of a traditional subject, citing parallels of vocabulary and style with other Symphosian riddles. This matters in my study only insofar as SYM 96, like SYM 94, is one of the two poems to address the question of reader incredulity in an initial line. Alcuin selects SYM 96 for re-purposing in the *Disputatio Pippini*, so at least one of the Anglo-Saxon writers received it as being by Symphosius.

Nota bene: I follow Leary and others in spelling Symphosius’s collections as *Aenigmata*, as opposed to Aldhelm’s and others’ *Enigmata*.

11 Symphosius’s riddle-solutions are known because their titles were part of their original composition and are included in most of the manuscripts. On Symphosius’s list of subjects, see Leary, *Symphosius*, 13 and following, and Glorie, *Collectiones*, 619, on their ordering in the different branches of the manuscript tradition.

12 Symphosius’s riddles survive in collection in some twenty-five manuscripts dating from the eighth through thirteenth centuries, and selections of Symphosius’s riddles were further transmitted in the dozens of manuscripts of the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyrri* and the *Gesta Romanorum*, as well as lesser-known works and individual compilations such as the *Collectanea* of Pseudo-Bede. See Glorie, *Variae Collectiones*, 612–614, and Leary, *Symphosius*, 32–36.

13 See Leary, *Symphosius*, 5–32, especially 6–13 on Symphosius and Martial, and 28–32. Symphosius’s is the main Latin collection to survive from late Antiquity, but there are some Greek collections—for example, in Book 14 of the *Palatine Anthology*, and Athenaeus’s *Deipnosophistae*, 10.448B–459C. On these Greek collections, see Leary, *Symphosius*, 10 and Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24–25.
especially in the proliferation of new Symphosian-inspired riddle collections by Aldhelm of Malmesbury and his successors.¹⁴

The fashion for riddling collections in the Symphosian model lasted several hundred years; a brief overview will suffice here. In the seventh century, Symphosius’s *Aenigmata* found at least two admirers: the anonymous author or authors of the so-called Bern collection (consisting of sixty-two six-line Latin riddles composed on the continent, perhaps by an Irish or Anglo-Saxon expatriate);¹⁵ and Aldhelm of Malmesbury, whose collection of one hundred riddles found wide circulation.¹⁶ Within a generation of Aldhelm, Latin riddle collections were composed by Boniface,¹⁷ Tatwine,¹⁸ ‘Eusebius’ (perhaps Hwætberht, Abbot of Wearmouth and Jarrow)¹⁹, and pseudo-Bede (someone with access to Irish, English, and continental material).²⁰ Along with Old English vernacular riddling in other styles,²¹ Old English vernacular riddles in

¹⁴ Among the *quaestiones* Tharsia proposes to Apollonius are ten Symphosian riddles. G. A. A. Kortekaas suggests that the riddles are incorporated into the romance from “a probably contemporary author” (G. A. A. Kortekaas, *The Story of Apollonius, King of Tyre: A Study of its Greek Origin and an Edition of the Two Oldest Latin Recensions* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 3.


¹⁶ Aldhelm’s collection of *Enigmata* (ALD) is found in two recensions and thirty-one manuscripts and fragments, and probably first circulated as a part of the *Epistola ad Acircium* (ca. 685), where it accompanies Aldhelm’s metrical treatises *De Metris* and *De pedum regulis* (Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 6). The collection also found independent circulation, though, and is often transmitted in manuscripts alongside other *enigmata* collections. See Nancy Porter Stork, *In A Gloss Darkly: Aldhelm’s Riddles in the British Library MS. Royal 12.C.xviii* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies Press, 1990), 5–26 on the Aldhelm *Enigmata* manuscripts.

¹⁷ Boniface’s “Aenigmata de virtutibus et vitiis” (BON) are found in Glorie, ed., *Variae Collectiones*, 274–343.

¹⁸ Tatwine’s “Aenigmata Tatuni” (TAT) are found in Glorie, ed., *Variae Collectiones*, 166–208.


²¹ The Franks Casket has been dated to the eighth century: see Britt Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities: the Old English Poetics of Mentality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). 3. I do not associate the Franks Casket with the Symphosian tradition, as it shares no verbal echoes with Symphosian riddles and its style is quite different. Instead, the Franks Casket and the *loca monachorum* tradition provide examples of other non-Symphosian riddling
the Symphosian tradition were composed from at least the eighth century, as is attested in the ‘Leiden Riddle’, an Old English translation of Aldhelm’s Enigma 32, *De lorica.* By the late eighth century, Alcuin of York at the Carolingian court and the anonymous composer of the Lorsch collection added their efforts to this growing corpus, also in Latin. In the early ninth century the Carolingian manuscript currently known as Vatican, Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Reginus Latinus 1553, was copied: a compilation of multiple collections’ riddles rearranged by subject. Probably sometime in the tenth century, the vernacular Old English styles circulating in Anglo-Saxon contexts. I assume that riddles were always a feature of Old English poetry, as they are for most cultures. There are also medieval Irish and Welsh riddles, which I will not discuss; see as a beginning Patrick Sims-Williams, “Riddling Treatment of the ‘Watchman Device’ in *Branwen* and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga,*” *Studia Celtica* 12–13 (1977–78): 83–117.

22 The Leiden Riddle is found in Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Vossianus Latinus Q. 106, fol. 25v (following Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* in Latin); its language has been described as eighth-century Northumbrian, although it is written in a tenth-century hand; for a recent summary and bibliography see Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions*, 14–16. The Leiden Riddle has a close counterpart in the Exeter Book Riddle 33/35. On it and the Exeter Book riddle 35, see first Thomas Klein, “The Old English Translation of Aldhelm’s Riddle Lorica,” *Review of English Studies* 191 (1997): 345–349.


24 Reg. Lat. 1553 contains the riddles of Boniface, and then a large number of selected enigmata of Symphosius, Aldhelm, and the Bern collection organized by subject. On it, see for starters Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called*, 24; Chauncey Finch, “The Bern Riddles in Codex Vat. Reg. Lat. 1553,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 92 (1961): 145–155; and Andy Orchard, “Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Tradition,” in Andy Orchard and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, eds., *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2005), 286. I got the chance to examine this manuscript briefly in Rome thanks to Will Robins’ SSHRC-funded “Apollonius of Tyre in Italy” project, and I agree with Orchard, “Enigma Variations,” 286, that there’s more work to be done on the ordering of its compilation. For example, the first riddle in the compilation of Reg. Lat.1553 is the last riddle of the Bern collection, BER 62, ‘De Stellis’, whose last line is “odiuntque lucem, noctis secreta mirantur.” (they hate light, and wonder at night’s secrets); Reg. Lat. 1553 thus begins on the note of (Boethian?) celestial wonder that ends Bern.

riddles of *Solomon and Saturn II*\(^{25}\) and possibly *The Exeter Riddles*\(^{26}\) were composed in their present form. The Exeter Book was probably compiled in the very late tenth century.\(^{27}\)

The Symphosian tradition is held together by imitation and affiliation, as later writers respond to earlier collections and either innovate or maintain received riddle subjects, clues, and conventional forms.\(^{28}\) However, before moving into my analysis it may be helpful here to indicate some of the general varieties and sub-categories by which the Symphosian tradition may be divided. Language is obviously one such division. However, Andy Orchard and Dieter Bitterli have convincingly reassessed previous critical distinctions between Anglo-Latin and Old English riddles, arguing instead for what Bitterli calls “a vigorous, common tradition of Old English and Anglo-Latin enigmatography.”\(^{29}\) Bitterli argues that

> The [Exeter Book] *Riddles* both emulate and reassess their Latin models by expanding their generic boundaries and rhetorical conventions and … recreate received topics and themes in a vernacular whose distinctive poetic language and archaic imagery provide a powerful response to this authoritative legacy.\(^{30}\)

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\(^{25}\) Daniel Anlezark suggests an origin for this in the circle of Dunstan in the early 10\(^{th}\) century; see Daniel Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (Anglo-Saxon Texts 7; Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009).

\(^{26}\) There is still controversy about when the Exeter Book Riddles were composed, and Salvador-Bello (2015) is the latest in arguing for a very early date: “it may be surmised that the Leiden Riddle and the majority of the Exeter Riddles were produced in the late seventh or the early eighth century, thus practically coinciding with the composition of Latin *enigmata* by Aldhelm and other authors” (*Isidorean Perceptions*, 15). My own opinion, following Orchard’s analysis (“Enigma Variations” 289 and following) of the changes in formulaic openings through to (or past) the ninth century in the collection, as well as my own study of the wonder-language in these riddles, is that the Exeter Book Riddles (in their present form) make more sense as coming towards the end of the tradition, and in discussing them in the context of the compilation of the Exeter Book I assume a latish date. However, the Leiden riddle provides an early example of wonder-language being added during the translation process from Latin to Old English, seemingly very early on. Aldhelm’s ALD 32.1 ‘Roscida me genuit gelido de viscere tellus’ (the dewy earth bore me from her icy innards’ is, in the Leiden riddle, “Mec se ueta uong, uundrum freorig, / ob his innaðæ aerest cændæ.” (Leiden 1–2). “The damp earth, wondrously frozen, from its innards first bore me.”

\(^{27}\) See Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called*, 3, 135.


\(^{30}\) Ibid.
This interactivity need not be one-way; Anglo-Saxons composing riddles in Latin were probably also exposed to, and influenced by, vernacular compositions.31 In my project, Chapter 1 deals with Latin riddle-texts while Chapter 2 deals primarily with Old English, but this is also a division by time (fourth to late eighth centuries; ninth to late tenth).

Presentation is another area of variety within the Symphosian tradition. The *enigmata* collections of Symphosius (99 or 100 riddles), the Bern Riddles (62), Aldhelm (100), Tatwine (40) and Eusebius (60), and the Exeter Book (*olum 100?*) are all large collections of dozens of descriptive riddles, often with an encyclopedic bent, and containing everyday subjects such as salt, snow, or eggs (and for Tatwine, charmingly, ‘bubble’), alongside ecclesiastical instruments, rare animals, and even (in some cases) letters of the alphabet or grammatical concepts.32 The Lorsch collection (12 riddles) is in a similar style but smaller scale; at the furthest extreme of orderliness and devotional subject matter, the *enigmata* of Boniface are fourteen highly patterned riddles on the virtues and vices, each one identifying its solution in an acrostic. In contrast, some Symphosian riddle-texts are dialogic in form: the riddle-sections in the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyrii*, Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini*, the *Collectanea* of pseudo-Bede, *Solomon and Saturn II*, and the thirteenth-century *Heiðrekssaga* are prominent examples. Riddles in collections tend to have their solution named upfront in a title or lemma; riddles in dialogue provide the solution after the fact, sometimes with an explanation attached. Then again, there are some collections and manuscripts that withhold their solutions, providing them only in hints, or not at all.33 In my local analyses I will leave most of these distinctions in the background (language, collection vs. dialogue; solution position or absence) but I raise them here as something to keep in mind, because each of them affects readerly expectation, and thus has local impact on how wonder operates within the collections.

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31 For a treatment of this question in terms of the relation of oral tradition and textual culture on writers in the Symphosian tradition, see Patrick J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

32 On the encyclopedism of the large collections, see Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions*.

33 On the varieties of solution-giving in Symphosian manuscripts, see Orchard, “Enigma Variations,” 285–286. EXE are a prominent example of a collection without (most) solutions.
In my analysis to follow I sometimes refer to Aristotle’s and Donatus’s definitions of *enigma*, and to Patrick Murphy’s useful terminology for the structural features of riddles.\(^{34}\) As a brief reminder, discussed at greater length in my introduction: Aristotle defines the rhetorical trope of *enigma* as an ‘impossible combination’ operating through metaphoric substitution. It produces an ‘aha’ moment when the seeming impossibility is reconciled, and although Aristotle does not say this directly, his discussions imply that the experience of contemplating the apparent impossibility may be similar to the experience of wonder (*thaumazein*) which is the origin of philosophy. Donatus defines *enigma* as a “sentence that is obscure because of a hidden similarity,” as when “my mother bore me, and in turn she shall be born from me” is revealed as ice and water, because of a hidden similarity between ice and water, and mothers producing daughters. In both definitions and examples, *enigma* is a rhetorical device relying on metaphor and/or on incomplete information to represent its subject.

Murphy defines a riddle as a two-part structure, consisting of a more-or-less elaborate descriptive ‘proposition’, paired with a ‘solution’ understood as its compressed equivalent.\(^{35}\) The ‘fit’ is the relationship between proposition and solution, and it is complicated by whatever work the proposition does to reimagine, represent, or disguise the solution.\(^{36}\) Sometimes the ‘fit’ is governed by a ‘focus’, or guiding metaphor (ice is a mother), which can then produce ‘slim chances’ that render the focus unlikely (a living mother can’t be born from her own daughter) and thus lead the recipient towards the solution.\(^{37}\)

My task now is to consider how everyday wonder emerges as a subject latent in the riddles of Symphosius in late antiquity, and is taken up by Aldhelm (seventh century) and Alcuin (late eighth).

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\(^{34}\) See Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*, 18–21, 35–37.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 18, 35.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 20–21, 35–37.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.
1.3 Mira . . . Primordia: Wonderful Origins and the Origins of Wonder in Symphosius’s Aenigmata

Symphosius’s late antique Aenigmata are the foundational collection upon which medieval writers drew for individual riddle-subjects and propositions while responding to elements of style or theme. However, the roles of the everyday and of wonder in the collection have not been fully teased out by modern scholars. In the pages to follow, I will examine these roles and argue that Symphosius’s collection is useful for later writers both for the way it positions riddles squarely in the realm of the everyday, and for the variety of approaches to wonder it contains.

In the course of his praefatio to the Aenigmata, Symphosius claims to have composed his riddles extemporaneously (and while drunk) to provide entertainment for a Saturnalian celebration and contest.\(^{38}\) As readers of Plato’s dialogues would remember, such parties can be sites for important conversation, but this imagined setting downplays the collection’s possible didactic and philosophic implications, with virtuoso lightness of verse and frivolity of subject taking precedence over weighty subjects or learned pedantry.\(^{39}\) Indeed, Symphosius positions his collection’s enigmata as, in some respects, unlikely survivors from a conversation otherwise forgotten in a drunken haze:

\[
\text{nescio quas passim magno tentamine nugas}
\]

\[
10 \text{ est meditata diu; sed frivola multa locuta est.}
\]

\[
10 \text{ non mediocre fuit, magni certaminis instar,}
\]

\[
\text{ponere diverse vel solvere quaeque vicissim.}^{40}\]

\(\text{(Praefatio 9-12)}\)

In a great contest, a long time was spent considering

I don’t know what trifles—but many a silly thing was said.
It was no little thing, but like a massive competition,
to propose or solve each different thing in turn.

\(^{38}\) Praefatio 1–15 in Leary, Symphosius, 39. In this choice of introduction, imagined inebriated setting, and subsequent poem format, scholars including Leary have seen evidence of the influence on Symphosius of Ausonius’s Grippus Ternarii Numeri (AD 364) and especially Martial’s Aphoreta and Xenia (Leary, Symphosius, 5–7).

\(^{39}\) As Orchard has noted in conversation, Symphosius’s Prologue, relating his embarrassment at having nothing to contribute to the gathering, has some strong resemblances with the story Bede relates of the initial state of Caedmon, supposedly the first Anglo-Saxon poet of religious verse, whose encounter with an angel produces poetry both beautiful and surpassingly meaningful.

\(^{40}\) Praefatio 9–12, text Leary, ed., Symphosius, 39.
Symphosius invites readers to imagine his riddles as fitting this scene, as *frivola* and *nescio quas nugas*: great in their moment, but unworthy of much sober attention, and perhaps ready to be forgotten themselves. In this respect Symphosius positions the riddles themselves as products of what I’ve called the everyday: these leftovers from a great party are already, as Blanchot says, “scrap and refuse”, though given new life in the collection.\(^{41}\) Supporting this frivolous description, most of Symphosius’s riddles to follow are on everyday subjects and many are fairly ‘easy’, lack distorting effects of *enigma* in either an Aristotelian or Donatan sense, and are better thought of as descriptive poems than as serious intellectual challenges. Such poems direct attention to their everyday subjects in new ways, but do not clearly push over the boundary into wonder, what Caroline Walker Bynum calls a “significance-reaction” or affective sense of “something deeper, lurking in the phenomenon.”\(^{42}\)

Yet the winking apology that concludes the preface—“da veniam, lector, quod non sapit ebra Musa” (“pardon me, reader, that a tipsy Muse doesn’t have any taste”)—belie the general care and coherence of the collection, as displayed not only in Symphosius’s command of verse, but also by the incorporation of semantic links among the *enigmata*.\(^{43}\) As Orchard and Salvador-Bello have observed, Symphosius’s collection generates these connections especially via oppositional pairs and clusters of related riddles, and by the placement of thematically resonant riddles at the collection’s beginning (on writing implements) and at its end (on echo, sleep/dream, and death).\(^{44}\) In addition, the collection does contain difficult, obscure, and ‘enigmatic’ riddles on some mundane subjects, often arranged together in such a way as to suggest a playful awareness of their shared qualities. I will focus my analysis to follow on three of these obscure ones: SYM 12, “Flumen et piscis” (“The River and the Fish”) which starts a

\(^{41}\) Maurice Blanchot and Susan Hanson, “Everyday Speech,” *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 14: the everyday is “the residual life with which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse” (14). Blanchot reiterates: “the everyday escapes. This is its definition. We cannot help but miss it if we seek it through knowledge, for it belongs to a region where there is still nothing to know.” (15)


\(^{43}\) On the trope of asking pardon for a bad poem, compare Horace, *Ars Poetica* l. 11 (“… hanc ueniam petimusque damusque uicissim” “we seek this pardon and give it to ourselves in turn”) and his discussion of worsening aesthetic standards with daytime drinking at ll. 210 and following, in *Ars Poetica* (Horace, *Horace: Satires; Epistles and Ars Poetica* ed. and trans. H. R. Fairclough (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1926).

string of enigmatic riddles and provides the starting-point for riddles I will examine in Chapter 4; SYM 14, “Pullus in Ovo” (“A Chicken in the Egg”), which is likewise found amidst that string of early enigmatic riddles; and SYM 94, “Luscus Alium Vendens” (“The One-Eyed Man Selling Garlic”), which is one of a string of peculiar riddles that closes the collection. I will suggest that these riddles, each of which finds imitations in the Symphosian tradition in later centuries, illustrate different possibilities for the relationship between riddles and everyday wonder. Symphosius finds wonder in three possible places: in formal surprise and variety, understood as generated by a change in riddle mode; in everyday mystery, reflected in riddles’ integumental structure; and in unlikely imaginative ‘seeing’ or distorted perception, when the rhetorical trope of enigma causes the ordinary to seem strange. These different possibilities form the building-blocks for later writers’ constructions of their own everyday wonders.

Symphosius’s first riddle, “Graphium,” may serve as an example of his typical style. It is a simple riddle on the subject of a familiar thing:

SYM 1. Graphium
De summo planus sed non ego planus in imo
versor utrimque manu; diverso munere fungor:
altera pars revocat quidquid pars altera fecit.45

1. Stylus
I am flat on top but not flat at bottom;
Turned either way by the hand, I work a double-edged duty:
One part revokes whatever the other part created.

This poem is ‘obscure’ in a rhetorical sense only if the solution is unknown, which is unlikely given that manuscripts of Symphosius’s collection almost always provide titles or lemmata for the poems.46 It offers a deceptively straightforward description of the instrument that serves both as eraser and inscriber. Given the poem’s placement at the beginning of the collection, the dual action of this pen may invite meditation on the uncertainty of the composition process, represented in the tension between revocat (eraser as a verbal calling-back) and fecit (word as

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45 SYM 1, text Leary, Symphosius, 39. All subsequent quotations of the Latin text of Symphosius’s Aenigmata are drawn from Leary’s edition.

46 On the authorial status of the lemmata, see Leary, Symphosius, 6 n. 51, and for descriptions of the thirty-plus surviving manuscripts of Symphosius’s Aenigmata, see Manuela Bergamin, ed. trans. comm., Aenigmata Symposii. La fondazione dell’enigmistica come genere poetico (Florence: SISMEL, 2005) lxxvii–lxxxvii, and further citations of descriptions in Leary, Symphosius, 32–34.
deed). It might also invite questions about the nature of the collection itself as a (written) product for which an oral composition-story has just been told. Many of Symphosius’s poems are gently ironic but straightforward in this way. Rather than (in Murphy’s terms) complicating the fit between proposition and solution using disguise, the poems that relate “easy” riddles tend to generate meanings thematically, sometimes aided by juxtaposition on a wider scale. The stylus is not metaphorically misrepresented, but it can become a kind of second-order enigma if one starts thinking about how it fits into the larger structure of the collection, or what insights one might gain from its self-description.

The first eleven poems in this collection proceed much in the model established by “Graphium,” as Symphosius invites his readers to think in similarly plain terms about the ring, the key, the roof tile, the cloud, rain, snow, and so on, where each subject describes itself in the device of prosopopoeia. This rhythm is suddenly broken in the twelfth poem, when the reader confronts dense and paradoxical imagery for the collection’s first living being, in the prospect of “Flumen et Piscis”:

SYM 12: Flumen et Piscis
Est domus in terris, clara que voce resultans.
Ipsa domus resonat, tacitus sed non sonat hospes.
Ambo tamen currunt, hospes simul et domus una. 47

12. River and Fish
There is a house in the lands that reverberates with a clear voice.
The house resounds, but the silent guest makes no noise.
They run along together, though, the guest and the house as one.

“Flumen et Piscis” is the first riddle in the collection to begin the transition to living subjects; it is also the first riddle in the collection to speak in the third person rather than using the now-familiar device of prosopopoeia, and to use metaphoric substitution for its focus (a noisy house and silent guest, both running). “Flumen et Piscis” may be Symphosius’s rendition of a traditional subject; it is certainly one of the most enduringly popular of his riddles, with a number of analogues in other collections, and it is the first of the riddles posed in Tharsia and

47 SYM 12, text ed. Leary, Symphosius, 41.
Apollonius’s confrontation in the _Historia Apollonii_. In Symphosius’s collection, this riddle is given special prominence by the change it represents in both form and subject from the familiar pattern of the earlier riddles.

“Flumen et Piscis” begins a brief run of acutely enigmatic poems, SYM 12-16; it is followed by “Navis” (Ship), “Pullus in Ovo” (Chicken in Egg), “Viper,” and “Tinea” (Bookmoth or worm). These poems ask for a different kind of reading attention, one attuned to metaphor and paradox. Significantly, one of these poems, SYM 14 “Pullus in Ovo,” is the only one of Symphosius’s collection to thematize wonder directly, placing it quite literally at the forefront. The poem runs:

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SYM 14: Pullus in Ovo
Mira tibi referam nostrae primordia vitae:
nondum natus eram, nec eram iam matris in alvo;
iam posito partu natum me nemo videbat.  
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14. A Chicken in an egg:
I will relate to you the wondrous beginnings of my life:
Not yet was I born, but I was not, already, in my mother’s womb;
now, birthing accomplished, no one saw me born.

This densely worded proposition refers to the incubation period between the laying of the egg (_partum_) and the chick’s hatching (_natum_) as a limbo of imminent, uncertain status, caught between two _mira primordia_ or ‘wondrous beginnings.’ Interestingly for a poem about beginnings, these lines quickly generate a sense of temporal confusion. The line-beginners _nondum_ and _iam_—‘not yet’ and ‘now/already,’ appear to set up a before-and-after trajectory for the speaker, but closer examination reveals that the second and third lines are occurring simultaneously. A sense of temporal crunching is emphasized by the poem’s conjunctions of disparate temporal markers, as with _nondum eram, iam eram_, and _iam posito partu_. With each of

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48 For example, fish or fish-and-river riddles can be found in BER 30, ALD 61, EUS 40, ALC D80, EXE 43, and EXE 85; a similar riddle on a fish in a net occurs at the beginning of the thirteenth or fourteenth-century _Secretum philosophorum_, as I will discuss in Chapter 4.

49 For editions of these riddles see Leary, _Symphosius: The Aenigmata_, 41. All subsequent quotations of the Latin text of Symphosius’s _Aenigmata_ are drawn from Leary’s edition.

50 SYM 14.1–3, ed. Leary, _Symphosius_, 41.

51 It is very common and unremarkable for a plural (e.g. _nostrae vitae_) to have a singular sense in poetry, but in this case _primordia_ is apt; the chick has two ‘beginnings.’
the first-person words *referam nostrae, eram nec eram*, and *me* enclosed in centre position within their respective lines, the unknown speaker nestles inside the triptych, insulated from discovery and yet obviously present. *Enigma* lies in the apparent impossibility of being born without being born, a difficulty that is both disguised and resolved by the variety of Latin words related to birth and laying (*natus, positu, partu*).

But what does Symphosius’s reference to *mira primordia* contribute in this poem? Several options present themselves, which need not be mutually exclusive. Leary draws attention to the ironic disparity between tone and subject; “this grandiose line contrasts with the humble chick.” As Leary notes, *primordia* evokes Lucretius’s “et rerum primordia pandam” (“And I will unfold the origins of things,” *De Rerum Natura* 1.55), and Ovid’s “magi primordia mundi ... docebat” (“He taught the origins of the great world,” *Metamorphoses* 15.67-8). (As I will show below, the possibility that a small riddle can merge into a grand macro-riddle on the nature of existence or the world, is especially appealing to Aldhelm.) In turn, the ‘Chicken in egg’ subject is of course familiar as an example of the causality dilemma explored by Plato and Aristotle: how did life begin, and which came first, the first chicken or the first egg, is an occasion for great philosophic wonder. Symphosius directs this question inward: when does any given egg become a chicken? Then again, the bizarre circumstances described in the next two lines—a non-birth in which the speaker departs the womb, and a birth in which no one can see the baby—fit with classical and medieval accounts of marvels as portentous events apparently contrary to nature. *Mira primordia* may imply a connection between the twice-born speaker and such marvels, providing a layer of obfuscation in the riddle’s ‘focus’ by positioning the everyday occurrence of a hatching chicken as a legendary or marvellous birth. Perhaps the simplest option, though, is that *mira* alludes to the doubled/failed birth and the temporally confusing conjunctions I have already highlighted. The chick’s origins are wondrous for the

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52 Leary, *Symphosius*, 89.
55 For comparison, we might look to the origins of twice-born Bacchus (‘bis geniti ... Bacchi’, 3.317) in *Metamorphoses* Book 3.273–317, to whom this riddle’s proposition could also apply; although his subjects are inevitably objects, phenomena, and animals found in the mundane world, Symphosius often refers to figures of classical mythology (cf. SYM 16, 24, 35, etc.)
confusion and ignorance that attend them, not only for readers in their experience of the riddle, but also for observers, in the real-life phenomenon of hatching. Since chicks chirp within their shells and break out of them themselves, it is not possible to witness the precise beginnings of their life directly, any more than it is possible to witness the precise origins of life in a mammalian foetus. The triptych emphasizes this by concluding with an image of mystery and lack of information (“no one saw me born”) that postpones the moment of the chick’s hatching beyond the main narrative of the riddle.

Taken together, then, this reference to *mira primordia* establishes several things. First, and perhaps most importantly, it asserts that elements of the everyday world, even chickens in eggs, can legitimately be ‘wondrous’ in their own right. Secondly, it creates a possible link between this concept and a riddle’s rhetorical framing. The proposition represents its hidden solution as an enigmatic speaker waiting for the poem, like the shell, to crack open, and its paradoxes thematize the paradox of life. This poem suggests that such *mira primordia* are riddles, in a sense. Thirdly, poems such as “Flumen et Piscis” and “Pullus in Ovo” recognize that a riddle-poem can represent a familiar, mundane phenomenon in such a way as to require the reader to recognize it anew. In this riddle, Symphosius’s ‘mira primordia’ give that experience a possible name by means of a concept from philosophy: wonder.

This ability of riddles to disguise their subjects is tested acutely in the second-last grouping within the collection, which especially delights in presenting oddly specific sights and experiences in strange garb as tests of reader incredulity. Symphosius’s collection ends in another string of marvellous-seeming riddles, this time on peculiarly specific subjects, including SYM 92, “Mulier Qui Geminos Pariebat” (A Woman Who Bore Twins); SYM 93, “Miles Podragricus” (A Club-Footed Soldier); SYM 94, “Luscus Alium Vendens” (A One-Eyed Garlic

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57 I will not go much further here into a discussion of eggs-as-riddles/riddles-as-eggs but it is worth bearing in mind in light of the Exeter Book’s collection of sex, cooking, and birth/hatching riddles; it seems a persistent notion that riddles both contain and produce. On reproduction riddles see Eleanor Cook, “Riddles of Procreation,” *Connotations* 8 (1998–99): 269–82. This image of the productive speaker temporarily sealed up from view can be a good way of thinking of the relationship between proposition and solution in some later riddles. See Suzanne Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), in her work on allegory and *enigma* as *integumen* or seed, 17–19.
Vendor); SYM 95 “Funambulus” (A Tightrope Walker); and SYM 96 “Verba”/“De VIII tollas VII et remanet VI” (Words/From Eight, Take Seven, and Six Remains).  (The final riddles of the collection wrap it up thematically, with the subjects of “Umbra” (Shadow; SYM 97), “Echo” (SYM 98), “Somnus” (Dream; SYM 99), and “Monumentum” (Tomb; SYM 100).)

Within this section, SYM 94 and the possibly-spurious SYM 96 both begin with a line explicitly advertising that the reader will not believe what the riddles have to report. These poems run:

SYM 94. luscus alium vendens
cernere iam fas est quod vix tibi credere fas est:
unus inest oculus, capitum sed milia multa.
qui quod habet vendit, quod non habet unde parabit?

94. A One-eyed Man Selling Garlic
Now what’s true to perceive, you may scarcely believe:
there’s one eye in there, but many thousands of heads.
he who sells what he has—where shall he gain what he lacks?

and

96. Verba/ De VIII tollas VII et remanet VI
nunc mihi iam credas fieri quod posse negatur.
octo tenes manibus, sed me monstrante magistro,
sublatis septem reliqui tibi sex remanebunt.

96. Words/From 8 take 7 and 6 will remain
Now believe me that something happens that isn’t possible:
you hold eight in your hands, but when I show you as a teacher,
if seven are subtracted, six will remain to you.

These two riddles each introduce an apparently counterfactual proposition by addressing a singular reader directly with the proposition’s simultaneous truthfulness and unbelievability. In both cases, this first line advertises a deception or misdirection to follow, as these riddles playfully depend on imaginative misunderstanding to work, whether that misunderstanding involves assuming that the eye and heads belong to the same creature, or assuming that rules of

58 These are well known and have been much discussed by scholars, particularly in relation to the Exeter Book’s garlic-seller riddle EXE 84 and other enigmata of the Symphosian tradition that involve numerical play. See e.g. Mercedes Salvador-Bello, “Patterns of Compilation,” 341; Bitterli, Say What I Am Called, 57–79 esp. 68–73.

59 SYM 94, text ed. Leary, Symphosius, 51.

60 SYM 96, ed. Leary, Symphosius, 51.
addition and subtraction are universal. Although not all of Symphosius’s successors shared his interest in defamiliarizing the mundane, introductory phrases in this model (“cernere iam fas est quod vix tibi credere fas est”; “nunc mihi iam credas fieri quod posse negatur”) recur throughout the Symphosian collections, from Aldhelm to the Exeter Book.

Symphosius’s collection lays the groundwork for future riddle-writers in several respects, not only by introducing a repertoire of possible formal features to imitate but by opening several possibilities for how riddles relate to the wondrous and the everyday in the world. Symphosius’s Praefatio suggests that riddles are mere entertainment (“frivola”) and thus ultimately part of the unnoticed everyday things (“nescio quas nugas”) which also furnish the collection’s subjects. Yet the collection itself is marked by subtlety and thematic resonance, and its approach to the relationship between riddles, the everyday, and wonders is not easy to pin down. The repertoire of formal features that impact these relationships include: an interest not only in using semantic links between riddles on similar subjects, but also in using breaks in those semantic links as opportunities to introduce new forms of poetic wonder and formal play (the River and Fish riddle); the use of explicit wonder-language to discuss a mysterious riddle on a wonder of life (the egg’s mira primordia); a language of readerly incredulity to introduce ordinary (if unusual) sights in imaginative disguise.

1.4 Aldhelm and Alcuin in the Symphosian Tradition

In the previous section, I discussed some of the formal and thematic features of Symphosius’s Aenigmata, arguing that the power of enigmatic presentation both to disguise the everyday and ordinary and to highlight the ‘wondrous’ already within it is a small but important feature of the collection. I now turn to consider how two Anglo-Saxon scholars and riddle-writers respond to Symphosius’s collection and address the elements of wonder and the everyday within it. Aldhelm (c. 640–c.710 AD), student of the celebrated Canterbury school, Abbot of Malmesbury and eventual Bishop of Sherborne, was not only highly influential on the development of Anglo-Latin prose, but also was the first and one of the most successful of the Anglo-Saxon scholars to compose Latin poetry. His Enigmata—a collection of one hundred poetic riddles of increasing

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61 On Aldhelm, his career, and his impact on Anglo-Latin poetry, see Orchard, The Poetic Art of Aldhelm (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994); Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier, ed. and trans, Aldhelm: The
lengths, inspired by Symphosius’s *Aenigmata* but diverging from them in important ways—were likely composed in the 680s, and were widely disseminated and imitated both within Anglo-Saxon England and on the continent.\textsuperscript{62} Aldhelm’s collection was the immediate spur for the development of a Symphosian tradition, and it remained an important intertext in the centuries to follow. Aldhelm responds to the features of Symphosius’s collection that I have identified above, sometimes correcting, sometimes imitating, in ways that can be seen echoed in Aldhelm’s immediate followers within the collection. Broadly speaking, Aldhelm rejects Symphosius’s characterization of his *enigmata* as forgettable *frivola*, and as scholars have observed, his choices of subject shift from being predominantly everyday to becoming more comprehensive, a serious attempt to chart the world in riddling form. As I will show, the extraordinary wonders of the natural world take a greater share in Aldhelm’s collection as this occurs. Nonetheless, I will also show that Symphosius’s dual experiments in finding wonder in everyday things like the egg, and also in drawing attention to the power of riddles to test reader credulity about unusual yet mundane phenomena, are both adapted by Aldhelm and integrated into the centre of his project. Placing wonders in the world and wonders of riddling together in a continuum of affective responses to the inexplicable, Aldhelm thus represents a critical stage in the formation of the everyday wonder as a central question in Anglo-Saxon riddling.

My second focus is Alcuin of York (c. 735-804 AD), academic ringleader at the court of Charlemagne, whose *Disputatio Pippini cum Albino Scholastico* responds to Aldhelm’s collection as well as Symphosius’s and represents another crucial movement in Anglo-Saxon riddling. Although the collections of Boniface, Tatwine, and Eusebius were inspired by Aldhelm’s and written before Alcuin’s, it is in Alcuin’s work that we next see everyday wonder picked up again strongly. Although similar in some key respects—both situate riddles in an educational program, for example—Aldhelm and Alcuin represent different attitudes to everyday wonder and to the work of riddles, which recur as alternate modes of riddling in the vernacular works I will examine in Chapter 2.


\textsuperscript{62} For an overview of the extant manuscripts of Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*, see Stork, \textit{In A Gloss Darkly}, 5–26.
1.5  *Nolo fidem frangas*: Aldhelm’s Everyday Wonders

I referred in my introduction to the everyday as a distinction between *quod vidimus* and *quod scimus*: the everyday is a realm of experience rather than received knowledge or *clergie*. Aldhelm seems to prefer the latter category; he moves away from Symphosius’s positioning of the riddle genre as light entertainment, born out of and preoccupied with the everyday, to one where riddles are primarily vehicles of learning. Aldhelm’s primary stated interest in the genre is as a vehicle for teaching Latin poetic meter, his scope is encyclopedic, and his introductory apparatus suggests a vision of the enigmatic poem as the explicator of the subject, often by reference to Isidorean etymology, rather than the concealer of it. Meanwhile, recent scholarship on Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* has sometimes been critical of the collection’s rhetorical mystery; Orchard goes so far as to argue that in Aldhelm’s collection “the riddling element has all but disappeared.” Yet despite Aldhelm’s apparent move to displace them, I argue that both the everyday realm and the potentially wondrous effects of riddles retain an important place in Aldhelm’s poetics, and indeed ultimately prove central to Aldhelm’s expression of his final riddling insight in the grand *Creatura* (Creation) riddle that closes the collection. Without seeming to be very interested in the everyday, Aldhelm’s riddle collection brings the everyday, wonder, and riddling much closer together.

I’d like first to consider the place of the everyday and wonder in Aldhelm’s riddles. As Salvador-Bello has most recently explored, Aldhelm’s poems frequently draw on the encyclopaedic tradition in order to provide material for his propositions, and critics generally agree that the collection itself has encyclopedic aims, as ninety-nine *enigmata* on varied subjects and four to ten hexameter lines each, lead up to a hundredth massive riddle, *Creatura*, which encompasses all that has gone before in eighty-three lines. In Lapidge and Rosier’s terms:

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64 Orchard, *Poetic Art of Aldhelm* 158. See also Susan Crane, “Describing the World: Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* and the Exeter Riddles as Examples of Early Medieval Ekphrasis” (PhD Dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2006).

Rather than write a didactic treatise on cosmology (in the manner, say, of Isidore’s *De Natura Rerum*), Aldhelm had the brilliant idea of casting his cosmology in the form of *enigmata* so that the reader would be led to consider the fabric of nature strand by strand.

At first glance this may seem to minimize the everyday in favour of a grander context. While Symphosius’s collection primarily focussed on objects, animals, and people that were part of ordinary life (e.g. SYM 59-65, “Pila” (Ball), “Serra” (Saw), “Anchora” (Anchor), “Pons” (Bridge), “Spongia” (Sponge), “Tridens” (Trident), “Sagitta” (Arrow)), Aldhelm’s collection explicates a greater proportion of the majestic (sun and moon, evening star, the pole of the heavens) and the exotic—the peacock, the flying fish, the elephant, the unicorn, the minotaur. Yet Aldhelm’s treatments of learned subjects recontextualize rather than displace the *quod vidimus* of the everyday, as my reading of a thematically linked pair of riddles will start to demonstrate. ALD 37 “Cancer” (Crab) and 38 “Tippula” (Water Strider), occur side by side and both describe many-legged water creatures with unusual walking behaviour. Yet this pair of creatures is also a juxtaposition of received knowledge and experience as two ways of understanding the natural world:

**ALD 37 Cancer.**
Nepa mihi nomen veteres dixere Latini: 
Humida spumiferi spatior per litora ponti; 
Passibus oceanum retrogradā transeo versis: 
Et tamen aethereus per me decoratur Olimpus 
Dum ruber in caelo bisseno sidere scando; 
Ostrea quem metuit duris perterrita saxis.

**ALD 38 Tippula.**
Pergo super latices plantis suffulta quaternis 
Nec tamen in limphas vereor quod mergar aquosas, 
Sed pariter terras et flumina calco pedestris; 
Nec natura sinit celerem natare per annem, 
Pontibus aut ratibus fluvios transire feroce; 
Quin potius pedibus gradior super aequora siccis.

37. Crab.
The Romans of old called me by the name ‘Nepa’:
I walk through the wet shores of the foamy sea;
I cross the ocean retrograde, with turned steps:
Yet celestial Olympus is decorated with me.

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When I climb the sky, red, with a dozen stars;
I whom the oyster fears, alarmed by hard stones.

38. Water Strider
I proceed over the flow, braced on four feet,
And yet I do not dread that I will sink in the waters,
But on my heels I tread lands and streams alike;
But nature does not permit me to swim through a swift stream,
Or to cross wild rivers by bridges or rafts;
Rather, I step with dry soles on the smooth surface.

ALD 37 and 38 present the distinction between the known and the everyday in their pair of unusual watery walkers of the animal kingdom. ALD 37 represents the crab, above all, as an object of knowledge: it has an ancient name, it not only scuttles along shorelines but crosses the ocean with its distinctive walk, it transforms into its constellation, and then returns to its animal nature, in a reference to its predation on the oyster. As Salvador-Bello has pointed out, most of these details can be tracked back to Isidore’s *Etymologiae* XI.iv.3 and XII.vi.51; the oyster-hunting using stones is a ‘common medieval belief’ discussed at length in St. Ambrose’s *Hexameron* and medieval encyclopedias. The ‘fit’ of this proposition with its solution shows the crab to be a thoroughly discussed and mythologized animal. In contrast, ALD 38 describes the Water Strider using information that can be gathered from observation. The proposition leads with the insect’s most distinctive visual element—the four long splayed legs with which it balances on the surface of calm water—and there, seemingly, knowledge ends. The proposition has the opportunity to consider many artful synonyms for ‘water’ (*latices, limphas... aquosas, celerem amnem, fluvios feroces, aequora*), and ‘feet’ (*plantis, pedestris, pedibus*), because the water strider has no further mythological or learned references to add, despite its unusual—we may say wondrous—natural ability. In comparing the everyday-wondrous water strider to the much-discussed crab, Aldhelm’s collection positions the everyday as a useful corrective, revealing a world extending beyond the apparatus of human learned knowledge even within a local level. The everyday surfaces periodically throughout the collection, in meditations on experienced objects (candle) and sights (lighthouse) interspersed amidst topics with stronger learned bibliographies.

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A part of my narrative in these two chapters deals with how a particular affective mode of engaging with the everyday coalesces in the Symphosian tradition, is called ‘wonder,’ and acquires enigmatic structures and distinctive wonder-related vocabulary. Aldhelm’s references to ‘wonder’ in his collection are usually reserved for the miraculous and exotic features of the created world, and directly relate to his speakers’ unusual and genuinely marvellous behaviour: the beautiful peacock’s unrotting flesh, the flying fish, water’s buoyancy. Aldhelm’s references can be taken as invitations for the contemplative reader to wonder. The opening lines of ALD 29, “Aqua” or Water, are a good example of this type:

ALD 29. Aqua

Quis non obstupeat nostri spectacula fati,
dum virtute fero silvarum robora mille,
ast acus exilis mox tanta gestamina rumpit? (ALD 29.1-3)

29. Water

Who is not amazed at the spectacle of my fate,
as I carry by strength a thousand forest oaks,
but a slender needle soon breaks such load-bearing?

This opening question, “Quis non obstupeat,” draws affective attention to a wondrous and paradoxical property of water: in modern physics terms, that because buoyancy is affected by the relative density but not by the mass of the object, massive objects float while tiny ones sink. This poem is not ‘difficult’ in the sense that it does not attempt seriously to conceal water’s identity, but the paradox of the oaks and needle is riddle-like in tone, directing amazed attention to
water’s behaviour rather than its identity. As with Symphosius’s egg riddle, this poem thus identifies here a kind of perplexing, enigmatic incongruity in the world, and describes it using language of wonder. A similar kind of response is encoded in the beginning of ALD 16, “Luligo” or Flying Fish: “Nunc cernenda placent nostrae spectacula vitae” (16.1; “Now the spectacles of my life are pleasing to examine”), introducing the Flying Fish’s tendency to both swim and fly.

Aldhelm’s collection thus introduces a key building-block in the development of a connection between enigmatic structures and everyday wonder in the Symphosian tradition: the concept that the world is fundamentally enigmatic. This understanding is articulated in Aldhelm’s prose preface and verse prologue, and as many scholars have noted, it is active in Aldhelm’s pairing of riddle subjects as well as the overall arrangement of his collection, where riddles about individual subjects lead to an enormous riddle about Creatura, creation. In closing this section I’d like to consider the role that Aldhelm’s apparently reduced concept of the everyday plays in this larger project.

Aldhelm’s verse Prologue to his Enigmata famously declares the collection’s intention ultimately not to conceal the identity of its subjects, but to unfold in verse their hidden and essential natures. He prays for the gifts to help him “pandere rerum ... enigmata clandestina” (7-8): “to unlock the secret mysteries of things”—a turn of phrase repeated several times in his poetry, and using “pandere” (open/unlock) rather than the traditional riddle-word “ponere” (propose) to indicate his educative approach. The crab and water strider above provide fairly good examples of Aldhelm’s typical style. Because of the collection’s approach, Michael Lapidge has proposed that Aldhelm’s term “enigmata” is best translated as ‘mysteries’ rather than ‘riddles,’ indicating that Aldhelm’s work distances enigma from its associations with riddling play. Nonetheless, Aldhelm’s riddles likewise do not entirely abandon the playful surprising disjunctions, missing connections, and treatments of obscure subjects established as poetic possibilities in Symphosius’s collection. In particular, several of Aldhelm’s riddles contain challenges to the reader or advertisements of the upcoming proposition’s unbelievable

69 See Orchard, The Poetic Art of Aldhelm, 158, on Aldhelm’s common phrase “pandens misteria rerum.”
70 Lapidge and Rosier, Aldhelm: The Poetic Works, 65.
truth to follow.\textsuperscript{71} Two of these challenges (ALD 41 and ALD 85) relate closely to Symphosius’s garlic-seller riddle opening in SYM 94.1 ("Luscus Alium Vendens"): “Cernere iam fas est quod vix tibi credere fas est” (Now it’s true to perceive what you will scarcely believe). In each case these riddles echo Symphosius’s opening line with an Aldhelmian twist: despite the reader’s perception of what Murphy describes as ‘slim chances’ in the proposition, nonetheless the riddle is literally accurate. ALD 85 (Man Born Blind) echoes the sense of Symphosius’s garlic-vendor riddle closely:

\begin{quote}
Iam referam verbis tibi quod vix credere possis,
cum constet verum fallant nec frivol a mentem. (ALD85.1-2)
\end{quote}

Now I will relate to you in words what you are scarcely able to believe, though it be true and trifles do not trip up the mind.

Aldhelm’s line here is essentially an expansion of Symphosius’s, but with a quick dig at the riddles Aldhelm’s collection ostensibly rejects: silly riddles that simply deceive the mind. Aldhelm’s word here, “frivola,” is the same as Symphosius uses in his description of the Saturnalian riddles in his Prologue.

Aldhelm does engage in this kind of riddle at least once, though, in ALD 41 ("Pulvillus"), which is about another ordinary object, the pillow. It reads:

\begin{quote}
ALD 41. Pulvillus
Nolo fidem frangas, licet irrita dicta putentur,
Credula sed nostris pande praecordia verbis!
Celsior ad superas possum turgescere nubes,
Si caput aufertur mihi toto corpore dempto;
At vero capitis si pressus mole gravabor,
Ima petens iugiter minorari parte videbor.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

41. Pillow
I don’t want you to break faith; even if they be thought silly speech,
Nonetheless, open a believing heart to our words!
I can swell up to the highest clouds—
If a head’s removed, and a whole body withdrawn from me too.
But if, pressed, I’m burdened by a head’s weight,

\textsuperscript{71} These are: ALD18.5 (on figuring out why the the myrmicoleon or Antlion has a double name); ALD 41.1–2 on the pillow, which I discuss below; ALD 54.1–2 (on the unbelievability of a double boiler having both fire and water in its belly); ALD 85.1–2 (on the apparent impossibility of giving what you never had yourself— a man born blind having seeing children); and ALD 100.80–83, the closing challenge to Creatura, which I discuss below.

\textsuperscript{72} Text ed. Glorie, \textit{Variae Collectiones}, 424.
Seeking the depths, I will seem to dwindle by an equal part.

The traditional commands for solving a riddle in Latin are pande (‘open,’ ‘unlock,’ ‘unfold’) and solve (‘untie’/‘open’). Here, the poet asks the reader not to open the riddle, but rather to open himself to it with a believing heart (credula praecordia). By beginning the riddle with this injunction, Aldhelm raises the stakes for what is to follow, increasing the pillow’s disguise by adopting a lofty tone to introduce it—just as Symphosius’s verbal echo of Lucretius and Ovid in SYM 14’s “mira primordia” raised the chick to dizzy heights. Yet the distracting disjunction between the lofty tone and the literally deflating pillow, also has a possible recuperating effect: it reclaims the ordinary subject garbed in tricky rhetoric, as creating an opportunity to practice faith and wisdom.

The value of the ordinary and the enigmatic is made evident in Aldhelm’s final and longest enigmatic poem, ALD100 Creatura (‘Creation’ or ‘a creature’), which refers back to most of the memorable images, objects and creatures of the previous poems and gives the ‘I’ of Creatura those creatures’ accumulated and contradictory attributes. As his earlier enigmata reveal the attributes of each creature and creation, so the extended conceit of this final poem is that Creatura contains and exceeds all those attributes. Thus, every creature, even if straightforward in itself, contributes to the enigma of the world. A couple of lines from the middle of the poem serve to illustrate:

\[
\text{sum gravior plumbo: scopulorum pondera vergo;}
\text{sum levior pluma, cedit cui tippula limphae. (ALD 100.40-41)}
\]

I’m more ponderous than lead; I lie with the weight of stones;
I am lighter than a feather, to whom the water strider yields.

The closing lines of Creatura and thus of Aldhelm’s collection, return to echo the pillow riddle as they assert the collection’s enigmatic challenge:


74 In the riddle proposition, ALD 41 also employs the same technique as SYM 94 of head-substitution, to the extent that Aldhelm’s reference to readerly incredulity might be a clue to assist the guesser: in SYM 94, the ‘many thousands of heads’ refer to the garlic rather than the vendor, while in ALD 41, the ‘head removed’ which causes the speaker to rise up belongs not to the pillow but to the human sleeper.

75 Murphy, “Aldhelm’s text describes the world in terms that emphasize its paradoxical totality.” (Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 154)
Auscultate mei credentes famina verbi,
pandere quae poterit gnarus vix ore magister
et tamen infitians non retur frivola lector!
Sciscitor inflatos, fungar quo nomine, sofos. (ALD100.80-83)

Listen, believers, to the utterances of my word
which scarcely an experienced master will be able to unfold
yet nonetheless, a reader does not, denying, consider them trifles!
I ask overblown sages what name I perform.\(^{76}\)

These lines in “Creatura” evoke the earlier challenges of ALD 41 and 85 in a way that gives those challenges heightened prominence as expressions of the ambitions of the collection. In the prose Prologue, whose primary purposes are to contextualize Aldhelm’s compositions and introduce the rudiments of Latin scansion, Aldhelm claims to have been inspired to compose his own riddles by the example of learned men. Aldhelm’s prose Prologue refers to Symphosius as having composed “occultas enigmatum propositiones exili materia sumpta ludibundis apicibus”—“concealed propositions of enigmata, having taken up slender material in playful letters.”\(^{77}\) Aristotle, too, the “sharpest of philosophers’ (“philosophorum acerrimus”) is a composer of “perplexa enigmata”—implying the genre’s philosophic and didactic potential.\(^{78}\) Aldhelm undertakes his own project (so he says) much as a student exercises his skills before moving on to deeper subjects. In the Pillow riddle and the final lines of Creatura, Aldhelm aligns readerly encounter with paradox with an appropriate spiritual attitude to a mystery. Riddle readers are

\(^{76}\) fungar is subjunctive or future, first person singular, for fungor, fungi, functus sum (deponent): Lewis and Short identify its most common meanings as ‘To busy one’s self with or be engaged in; to perform, execute, administer, discharge, observe, do’ and it’s a construction with ablative, or rarely accusative. Thus creatura’s proposition is busily engaged with, is discharging or performing, its name (its solution).

\(^{77}\) “Prologus,” 2–3, text Glorie, ed., Variae Collectiones, 371. I think “exili materia sumpta” is an ablative absolute.

\(^{78}\) “Prologus,” 5–6, text Glorie, ed., Variae Collectiones, 371. See Stork, In a Gloss Darkly, 82, or London, British Library, Royal MS 12.C.xiii fol. 79v ll. 1–9. I am not sure what prose riddles attributed to Aristotle Aldhelm may have encountered. As I discussed in the introduction, Aristotle gives an example of one riddle in Poetics xxii [1458a], in the passage to which we have already alluded: “The very nature indeed of a riddle is this [ainigmatos te gar idea], to describe a fact in an impossible combination of words (which cannot be done with the real names for things, but can be with their metaphorical substitutes). For example: “I saw a man glue brass on another with fire,” and the like. The corresponding use of strange words results in a barbarism.” (transl. Barnes).

If Aldhelm is not referring to this and did not know the Poetics, perhaps Aldhelm’s reference simply functions to establish the pagan connection between enigma and philosophy/learning/wisdom, which Aldhelm goes on to reinforce by reference to the psalmist and to Solomon. However, at least one later manuscript attributes enigma to Aristotle—see Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 190 (c. xiv\(^{1/4}\) and xiii), item 15 “Commentarius in septem aenigmata Aristotelis [sive symbola Pythagorica],” “quaec rectitat leronomus libro tercio contra Rufinum,” fol. 88. See Digby manuscript catalogue Catal. Codd. Mss. Bibl. Bodl., 203.
credentes, both asked to entertain what seems impossible, yet what is nonetheless also deeply embedded (pardon the pun) in daily life.

Aldhelm’s closing passage also starts to tear down the distinction between riddles and created beings. The accumulating set of conditions, the famina ... mei verbi (utterances of my word), are not only the accumulating paradoxical expressions just given in the creatura proposition. Those clues lead back to the riddles from which they are derived, which are expressions of the creatures that inspire them by acting out their natures. Each of Aldhelm’s riddles, and each riddle’s creature, is an utterance of mei verbi, the name Creatura. And from a theological perspective of John 1.1, the ‘all things’ which make up creatura, are an utterance of the divine verbum. Thus, using enigmatic language, and representing the world as an enigma, is a way of bodying forth the quality of the world as an enigmatic utterance. Marvels like water’s buoyancy allude to the mysterious principles that govern the world, and thus help to emphasize its paradox. Yet the everyday and ordinary, represented in the unnoticed water strider and or unrecognized pillow, turn out to lend themselves particularly well to grappling with the nature of enigma itself. Because, like marvels, the everyday and ordinary exist outside the limits of what humans actively know, they likewise can become objects of wonder.

Aldhelm’s riddle collection thus introduces several foundational elements for the connection between enigmatic structures and everyday wonder in the later Symposian tradition. The place of the everyday in Aldhelm’s collection is complex, and everyday wonders are not often called ‘wonders’, although Aldhelm’s collection demonstrates an interest in wonder as a concept. From the perspective of my later study, Aldhelm’s most significant contribution is his location of wonder in the world, and use of enigmata to describe and direct affective attention to that world. Where Symphosius found wonder in mira primordia, Aldhelm’s wonder is in mira creatura. In the next section of this chapter, I will consider how Alcuin challenges this approach, finding wonder instead in the phantom creations of riddled representation. Alcuin’s riddles are full of mira creatura but these wondrous creatures are projections of a riddling imagination.

1.6 Cur non intellexi per me? Alcuin’s Everyday Wonders

Aldhelm’s collection sets itself forth as a serious compendium providing knowledge on the world in which the everyday is a small yet important component, useful for furnishing perspectives that help inform his representation of creatura as a cosmic enigma. Aldhelm’s
immediate imitators in the eighth century—Boniface, Tatwine, and Eusebius are most prominent—tend to follow Aldhelm’s approach in their own collections of lengthy informative enigmata about scholarly and encyclopedic subjects, sometimes with a playful twist. The riddles of Alcuin of York (c. 735–804 AD) represent several critical shifts in the Symphosian tradition. They are a key moment of increased interest in cultivating a wondering response to the everyday, and in framing this response with language belonging to the wonder tradition. Alcuin’s riddles also are a reimagining of what riddle propositions should look like: not repositories of specialist knowledge but re-imaginings of the intimate and familiar. Alcuin’s riddles loosen the Aldhelmian grip on the Symphosian tradition, opening space for a varied approach in new collections, while affirming a connection between everyday wonder and riddle. In the pages to follow, I examine the relationship between wonder and the everyday in Alcuin’s riddling—in particular, his teaching text the Disputatio Pippini Regalis et Nobilissimi Iuvenis cum Albino Scholastico. First I contextualize some of Alcuin’s surviving single riddles in light of his history of promoting literary and rhetorical education in monastic schools, and then I will discuss the Disputatio’s unique treatment of everyday wonder.

Alcuin’s innovative approach should be considered in light of his broader educational program. Riddles were one of many forms of play intended to foster a more flexible and imaginative hermeneutics in Alcuin’s students. Alcuin was heavily involved in advancing the cause of Latin literacy in monasteries and monastic schools, and he supported—for certain gifted students—the advanced study both of the pagan authors and of Latin poetry more generally. In his letter to Abbot Baugulf of Fulda, Alcuin exhorts the monks of Fulda to exert themselves in the study of literature “so that you may penetrate the mysteries of divine scriptures

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79 The collections’ uses of wonder-vocabulary provides one rough measure of interest. In Symphosius’s collection of 99 or 100 enigmata, one riddle references wonder directly (SYM 13) and one or possibly two, directly reference reader incredulity (SYM 94 and 96, if not spurious). Ten of Aldhelm’s hundred riddles employ wonder-vocabulary or direct attention to reader incredulity (ALD 14, 16, 20, 25, 29, 41, 67, 85, 97, and 100). In Boniface’s collection on the vices and virtues, wonder vocabulary is used five times to refer to the marvellousness of the vices’ and virtues’ statements (BON 1, 2, 5, 7, 8). In Tatwine’s 40 riddles, wonder-vocabulary shows up in seven riddles in contexts similar to Aldhelm’s (usually on reader incredulity); see TAT 14, 19, 20, 21, 27, 31, 37. Tatwine follows Aldhelm and Symphosius in having eyesight-based incredulity riddles in TAT 18–20; see especially TAT 19.1–2 (“inter mirandum cunctis est cetera quod nunc narro quidem”: “what now indeed I relate is wondrous beyond all the rest” — De Strabis Oculis/’Squinting Eyes’). Tatwine also has a smattering of other wonder-language at TAT 14.3, TAT 20.5 (one eye); and opening assertions of truth/incredibility at TAT 27.1, 31.1, 37.1. In Eusebius’s 60 riddles, wonder vocabulary does not show up at all. (By contrast, in the 95-odd riddles of the Exeter Book, explicit wonder-vocabulary occurs at least 53 times.)
more easily and correctly” (“ut facilius et rectius divinarum scripturarum mysteria valeatis penetrare”). Since holy texts feature figures of speech and rhetorical devices, Alcuin argues, poetic and rhetorical training is helpful for students aiming to advance their comprehension of scripture:

Cum autem in sacris paginis schemata, tropi et caetera his similia inserta inveniantur, nulli dubium est, quod ea unusquisque legens tanto citius spiritualiter intellegit, quanto prius in litterarum magisterio plenus instructus fuerit.

But since figures, tropes, and other similar things to these may be found amidst the sacred pages, there’s no doubt that anyone reading them understands them spiritually so much the swifter, as he shall first have been fully trained in the mastery of letters.

Alcuin’s riddles and teaching texts foster the early stages of this education, rewarding increasing competence with poetic jokes and treats. Amongst Alcuin’s letters are five logogryphs, fostering a high facility with Latin, a strong vocabulary and a witty, creative sense of the relationship between words and their referents. Likewise, Alcuin’s collection of mathematical puzzles, *Propositiones ad acuendos iuvenes* (“Problems to Sharpen the Young”), offers practice to hone the student’s skills, leavened with a dose of teasing humour: for example, one of the word problems has no possible solution, and is simply there to irritate. Alcuin’s broad approach for his students is one of building from the familiar to the unfamiliar: as Michael Fox argues, Alcuin believed that “With careful reflection, we can, through the study of things that are known, come to the knowledge of unknown things.”

Like Aldhelm’s, Alcuin’s riddles display an interest in wonder; however, Alcuin’s riddles are at a critical shift away from Aldhelm’s. Aldhelm’s individual propositions emphasize etymological clues and thematically resonant yet straightforward descriptions; paradoxes and

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81 Text Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 79.


interpretive difficulty occur rarely (as in the Pillow riddle) or in aggregate, in the final riddle of *Creatura*. In contrast, Alcuin’s riddle propositions nearly always feature an imaginative disguise or veil superimposed onto familiar objects and sights. Further, Alcuin unmoors the language of wonder from referring to real-world properties, and attaches it instead to the marvellous rhetorical disguises of familiar objects.

One of the most distinctive features of Alcuin’s compositions with respect to finding the marvellous in the everyday, is the way that they appeal to the lived experience of his addressees. For instance, in ca. 794 Alcuin was given an ivory comb by his friend Archbishop Riculf of Mainz; by way of thanks, Alcuin responded with prose and verse versions of a riddle he wrote about the comb, which, as Paul Sorrell observes, are the earliest extant texts to begin with something like the ‘wondrous creature’ riddle-formulas of the Exeter Book Riddles. The style of these riddles is both more personal and more metaphoric than anything in Symphosius or Aldhelm. The prose riddle runs:

Mirum animal duo habens capita et dentes sexaginta non elefantinae magnitudinis, sed eburneae pulchritudinis. Nec ego huius bestiae territus horrore, sed delectatus aspectu, ne me frendentibus illa morderet dentibus, timui; sed blanda adulatione capitis mei placare capillos adrisi. Nec ferocitatem in dentibus intellexi, sed caritatem in mittente dilexi, quam semper fideliter in illo probavi.

A wondrous creature having two heads and sixty teeth—not elephantine in size, but in the beauty of its ivory. I wasn’t terrified in horror of this beast, but delighted by its appearance; nor was I afraid lest it bite me with its gnashing teeth, but I smiled that it reconciled the hairs of my head with its sweet fawning. I understood no ferocity in its teeth, but I loved the affection in its sender, which I have confirmed forever faithfully in him.

This proposition uses a metaphoric focus to disguise the comb as a two-headed many-toothed monster, but it also situates this monster in a personal interaction: in Murphy’s term, the ‘slim chances’ of the proposition are not only that Alcuin encountered such a monster, but that he was delighted by it.

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84 See Paul Sorrell, “Alcuin’s ‘Comb’ Riddle,” *Neophilologus* 80 (1996): 311–312; Sorrell also observes that the verse version contains slightly different information which accords with the verse riddle’s adopting riddle verse conventions; the verse version is more narrative, and more horrific, than the prose version.

In these comb riddles, Alcuin also uses wonder-language in a distinctive way. The verse form of this riddle runs on a similar combination of monstrous appearance and tame, friendly behaviour, with an added element of drama at its opening:

Bestia nam subito nostras subreptserat aedes,
In qua imago fuit capitis miranda duorum . . .

Suddenly, a beast had crept into my home,
in which there was the wondrous appearance of two heads. . .

In these riddles, ‘mira’ and ‘miranda’ refer most obviously to the two heads that the ‘animal’ wields, and perhaps to its surprisingly friendly behaviour. What is important to notice is that this wonder is attached foremost to the disguise rather than to the object. Alcuin’s ‘mira’ and ‘miranda’ are operating here in a very similar way to Symphosius’s and Aldhelm’s introductory advertisements of readerly incredulity for subjects such as the one-eyed garlic vendor and the headless pillow. Yet a part of the added cleverness of these comb-riddles is that they give this reader incredulity a name—wonder—which would also attach quite properly to the imagined monster, if it existed. Alcuin’s riddles thus make it explicit for the first time that riddles can evoke ‘wonder,’ an affective response similar to that aroused by encounter with the marvellous. Alcuin’s comb riddles are also distinctive beyond the accomplishments of Aldhelm’s and Symphosius’s riddles, though, in that they cultivate a vivid imaginative encounter with an actual gift-object known to both parties: these riddles work directly to attach wonder to the everyday.

For Alcuin’s fullest theorization of the role of wonder, though, one must turn to the Disputatio Pippini. Alcuin’s pedagogical dialogue Disputatio Pippini Regalis et Nobilissimi Iuvenis cum Albino Scholastico has been described by Martha Bayless as a unique combination of the riddle contest and the wisdom and curiosity dialogue. The Disputatio Pippini was composed for Pippin, the younger son of Charlemagne, in the last decade of the eighth century.

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86 Text in Sorrell, “Alcuin’s Comb Riddle,” 312.
87 As this is another riddle involving mistaken heads, it might even be productive to consider it in dialogue with them.
88 On dating, see Bayless’s discussion in “Alcuin’s Disputatio Pippini and the Early Medieval Riddle Tradition,” in Guy Halsall, ed., Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 157–78. Bayless defines the Disputatio’s genres in this way: “Wisdom dialogues were question-and-answer texts that defined common objects or concepts in terms of metaphors. … Curiosity dialogues, by contrast, were catechisms of biblical riddles, chiefly concerned with paradox….” (160)
while Alcuin was away in England. Like the comb riddle, it is a deeply personal text: it features both Pippin and Alcuin (in his persona ‘Albinus’) in an imagined conversation of eighty-eight questioning exchanges, ending with Pippin revealing that in his hand he is holding Alcuin’s letter. Largely based off of the proverb-dialogue *Altercatio Hadriani Augusti et Epicteti philosophi* with additional borrowings from the *loca monachorum* tradition, the dialogue preserves a love for wordplay and a facetious sense of humour which are characteristic of Alcuin’s pedagogical method as described above, and which reflect Alcuin’s affectionately playful relationships with his students and colleagues in the scholastic circles of Charlemagne’s court.\(^89\)

The first seventy exchanges of the *Disputatio Pippini* are predominantly in the wisdom dialogue format, with Pippin asking Albinus to define parts of the body, phenomena such as the sun, wind, and fire, or concepts such as dream, freedom, hope, or friendship. In the seventieth exchange Pippin asks Albinus to define a wonder, prompting a series of brief prose riddles referred to as ‘mira’ or ‘wonders.’ The exchange takes place in this way:

ALC. D70:
P. Quid est fides?—
A. Ignotae rei et mirandae certitudo.

ALC D71:
P. Quid est mirum?—
A. Nuper vidi hominem stantem, mortuum ambulantem [MS., molientem ambulantem], qui nunquam fuit.
P. Quomodo potest esse, pande mihi?
A. Imago in aqua.
P. Cur hoc non intellexi per me, dum toties vidi [hunc ipsum hominem]?
A. Quia bonae indolis es iuvenis et naturalis ingenii, proponam tibi quaedam alia mira; tenta, si per teipsum possis coniicere illa.
P. Faciam [Ms., faciemus]; tamen ita, si secus, quam est, dicam, corrigas me.\(^90\)

ALC D70:
P. What is faith?
A. Certainty of something strange and wondrous.

ALC D71:
P. What is a wonder?
A. Recently I saw a man standing, a dead man walking [MS: eating, walking], who never

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\(^90\) ALC D.70–71. Text in appendix Bayless, “Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini,*” 175.
existed.
P. How can this be, reveal it to me?
A. A reflection in water.
P. Why didn’t I understand this on my own, when I have seen this man so many times?
A. Since you’re a young man of good character and natural intelligence, I’ll propose to you some other wonders; try if you can piece them together on your own.
P. I’ll [MS: let’s] do it, but only if you correct me if I say something wrong.

This is a very strange moment. Martha Bayless’s analysis of this scene observes that Albinus’s response is unprecedented within surviving wisdom dialogues: not only does it sidestep Pippin’s request for a definition by providing an example instead; it “is a wonder itself; it constitutes its own definition.”91 Bayless argues that what Albinus describes is “something that does not define a wonder but embodies it.”92 But what precisely is the relationship between this riddle and wonder? I’d like to approach this question step by step.

Given that the question *Quid est mirum?* (what is a wonder?) immediately follows Albinus’s explanation of religious faith as *Ignotae rei et mirandae certitudo* (certainty of something strange and wondrous), it seems likely that Pippin’s question is intended to imply curiosity about the nature of wonder itself, exploiting the connection between a marvel (*mirum*) and the wondrous thing (*miranda res*) which for Alcuin is the mystery of the divine.93 Albinus’s response, an unexpected riddle proposition, suggests that a riddle can give a direct route to understanding wonder: “What is a wonder?” “A wonder is a riddle,” or “A wonder is this riddle,” this logic would suggest. Albinus’s riddle obviously ‘embodies’ a wonder in two ways: first, because like the comb-riddle, it describes a being who sounds like he might be a literal marvel—and second, because Albinus’s story provokes a wonder-response in Pippin.

Pippin’s question, “how can this be?”—*quomodo potest esse, pande mihi?*—expresses a search for cause, a question which is the expression of wonder, according to Aristotle.94 It might

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91 Bayless, “Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini,*” 169.
92 Bayless, “Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini,*” 169; see 168–170 for her discussion of this scene.
93 This would not be the first time that the *Disputatio* features punning reinterpretation of a question—see for example, Bayless’s analysis of Pippin and Alcuin’s extensive play following “Magister, timeo altum ire,” Bayless, “Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini,*” 167–8.
94 See Introduction; Aristotle claims in *Metaphysics* that “All begin, as we have said, by wondering that things should be as they are”; “because it seems wonderful to everyone who has not yet perceived the cause.” (*Metaphysics* I.983a 16, 17; Trans. Hugh Tredennick, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vols. 17, 18 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1933, 1989.) Interestingly, Plato’s prototypical question of wonder in
be a request for an explanation by which Pippin can accommodate the marvel Albinus describes as a natural event. However, Pippin’s use of the traditional Latin riddle command *pande*, unfold/unlock/open, suggests that the character understands Albinus’s ‘marvel’ to be a riddle and is asking for its solution, and perhaps also that he is asking Albinus to explain why his response successfully answers Pippin’s question about wonder.\(^95\) Albinus’s abrupt shift in conversational style in the *Disputatio*—his violation of generic expectation—is itself enigmatic, as it implies an underlying connecting significance to his response that is not immediately apparent.

Albinus’s story is a wonder and an *enigma*, then, on several levels. It is the ways that this riddle interacts with lived everyday experience, though, that bring out its deepest, and Biblical, significance. Albinus’s solution to the riddle, “imago in aqua,” resolves the wondrous puzzling textual apparition into a reflection of the riddle-teller—Alcuin himself. The strange man with whom Albinus interacted, who is imaginatively presented for Pippin’s and the reader’s examination, resolves into someone we know, like the distorted image in a reflective pool calming into recognition. There are many possible associations for a failed recognition of a reflection in a pool; Narcissus comes to mind. But it is not Albinus who fails to recognize the person in the water, but Pippin, and thus the central figure in this riddle is not Albinus, but Pippin himself: Pippin’s movement from misrecognition to ‘face-to-face’ understanding

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\(^95\) I think it a possibility that Alcuin’s riddle, which has no parallels in the *Ioca monachorum*, Symphosius, or Aldhelm, may have been inspired by the following exchange in the *Altercatio Hadriani*:


4. Hadrian: Why did you say this? Epitetus: For we see depicted apples, flowers, animals, gold, silver, and it isn’t true/real.

(Text in Lloyd William Daly and Walther Suchier, eds, *Altercatio Hadriani Augusti et Epicteti philosophi* (Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 24. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1939).) Like Pippin, Hadrian asks a straightforward question, gets a perplexing reply, requests clarification, and receives an explanation relating to representation. The *ceci n’est pas une pipe* aspect of the painted world is similar to that of the reflected one, but as I suggest, the watery reflection—and the introduction of a true riddle rather than merely an opaque definition—has more pointed scriptural and mythological references (Paul and Narcissus, rather than e.g. Pygmalion or Dido’s wall).
literalizes the line from Paul’s 1 Corinthians 13:12: “videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate; tunc faciem ad faciem”; “we see now through a reflection in an enigma; but then face to face.” The character Pippin does really ‘see’ and fail to recognize a reflection in an enigma, before coming ‘face to face’ as he re-engages in conversation with his teacher. Put together with Alcuin’s definition of faith as “certainty of something strange and wondrous,” this suggests that Alcuin even more than Aldhelm frames worldly existence in enigmatic terms. “What is a wonder?” “It is what we can see through a reflection in an enigma,” this reply might run.

Pippin’s second question “Cur hoc non intellexi per me, dum toties vidi [hunc ipsum hominem]?” (“Why didn’t I understand this on my own, when I have seen this man so many times?”) begins to bring into focus the Disputatio’s position on the everyday. Pippin wants to know why his everyday experience has not helped him to solve this riddle, and his subsequent training seems designed to allow just that. In this dialogue the power of riddles is to render the everyday unfamiliar, and Albinus’s reply, proposing that he will provide other riddling mira for Pippin to piece together, confirms that in this dialogue the student’s task is to recognize these wonders as distorted reflections of reality.

The subsequent riddles of the Disputatio are carefully chosen and presented in order to foster this semantic flexibility in the reader. The “alia mira” Albinus proposes are a series of sixteen further prose riddles and Biblical trivia questions, interspersed with a couple of further question-answer pairs drawn from the Altercatio Hadriani wisdom dialogue tradition. In turn, it is not usually specialist knowledge that allows Pippin to solve these riddles, but a kind of semantic flexibility that allows him to translate different wondrous or disturbing distortions into everyday coherence. Indeed, the everyday here acts as a tease for the Disputatio’s readers, as within a few replies Pippin stops saying his answers directly, and provides the reader only hints about where in the everyday the solution lies, for the reader to guess. (If the historical Pippin hadn’t yet solved these riddles, this tactic of his fictional counterpart must have been enormously frustrating.) Here are a sampling of these riddles and real-world hints:

ALC D76–77
A. Vidi mortuum sedentem super vivum, et in risu mortui mortuus est vivus.
P. Hoc coci nostri norunt.
A. [Norunt.] Sed pone digitum super os, ne pueri hoc audiant, quid sit. 96

96 ALC D76–77 (a pot boiling over onto a fire).
A. I saw a dead thing sitting on top of a living thing, and in the laughter of the dead one the living died.
P. Our cooks know this.
A. [They know.] But put your finger over your mouth, lest the boys hear what it might be.

ALC D78-79
A. Vidi quemdam natum, antequam esset conceptus.
P. Vidisti, et forte manducasti.
A. Manducavi.

A. I saw someone born, before he was conceived.
P. You saw him, and maybe you ate him.
A. I did eat him.

ALC D83
A. Quis est, cui, si caput abstuleris, altior surgit?
P. Vide [MS., Vade] ad lectum tuum et ibi invenies.97

A. Who is it who rises up taller if you take away the head?
P. Look [MS: Go] to your bed, and you’ll discover him there.

By providing no explicit solution for these riddles (the solutions are: boiling pot, egg, and pillow), the collection cultivates wonder in its readers, where wonder is understood as the struggle to find out a solution. All of the riddles of the Disputatio emphasize paradox, seeming impossibility, metaphoric substitution (e.g. ‘dead’ for inanimate) or incongruity. This suggests that for Alcuin, the struggle to discover the solution is the efficacious part of the riddle exercise. Yet Pippin’s hinting asides, which act as prompts to the reader—go to your bed, and see if you can find something that rises up when its head is removed—situate these wondrous descriptions in a kind of stereo with ordinary perceptions of the world.98 That the wondrous is all around in the reader’s everyday, if only seen through a different lens, is an integral part of Alcuin’s riddling.

97 ALC D83; this is a descendent of Aldhelm’s pillow riddle, ALD 41.
98 Bayless remarks of Alcuin’s transformation of Aldhelm’s pillow riddle here: “Although Aldhelm’s animated subject speaks in the first person, the poem itself is studiously impersonal; by contrast, Alcuin invites the listener not merely to guess from his own experience, but to bring his own world into the guessing-game of the riddle.” (“Alcuin’s Disputatio Pippini,” 171) In a way Alcuin’s riddles are adamant about this from the very beginning, by the way Albinus/Alcuin situates his encounters with the riddle subjects: interacting with the two-headed sabretooth, or seeing the strange man walking.
Significantly, the riddles that Alcuin has chosen to retell from Symphosius’s and Aldhelm’s collections are precisely those which are most wondrous. Of the seventeen riddles in the Disputatio Alcuin seems to have derived four (or possibly six) of these riddles from Symphosius’s Aenigmata and one (or possibly two) from the enigmata of Aldhelm; most of the other riddles have analogues elsewhere, as Bayless’s analysis has shown. Of the six riddles probably adapted from Symphosius, three (D79, “echo” cf. SYM 98; D81 “somnus/somnium” cf. SYM 99; D82 “Flexus digitorum” cf. SYM 96) are drawn from Symphosius’s final section of particularly unusual and paradoxical riddles. The other three (D77, solved as “pediculi” cf. SYM 30; D78, solved as “ovum” cf. SYM 14; and D80, solved as “flumen et piscis” cf. SYM 12) are riddles that describe apparently impossible situations—a hunter coming home with invisible and unwanted prey, being born without being conceived, and being a silent guest running alongside a noisy mobile home. Moreover, three of Alcuin’s riddles (D78 “ovum” cf. SYM 14, D81 “flexus digitorum” cf. SYM 96, and D83 “pulvillus” cf. ALD 41), have their closest ties to those rare Symphosian or Aldhelmian riddles that refer directly to an imagined reader’s amazement, although those introductory references to incredulity are edited out in Alcuin’s adaptations. If we can assume that Alcuin had access to both Symphosius’s and Aldhelm’s enigmata collections in more-or-less their complete forms, then the riddles represented in the Disputatio thus provide evidence for Alcuin’s selection process—one that privileges everyday subjects described in extraordinary and paradoxical ways, rejecting a number of enigmata on supernatural, exotic, and portentous subjects that might seem better suited to the category of mira. These riddles then undergo a process of personalization and simplification in order to suit their new setting. Alcuin’s collection thus can be said to recognize and exploit a sub-category of ‘wondrous’ or ‘unfamiliar’ riddles on everyday subjects, one with growing relevance in the Symphosian tradition in both Latin and vernacular languages in centuries to follow.

These riddle-wonders are the means by which Pippin graduates to a new level of his studies. Once Pippin figures out how to solve Albinus’s riddles, he becomes the answerer for all

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100 As previously discussed, of Symposius’s hundred (or ninety-nine) enigmata, only one (SYM 14.1) refers directly to wonder (mira ... primordia) and two (SYM 94 and 96) to an imagined reader or hearer’s astonishment or disbelief. Two of these three riddles are represented in Alcuin’s collection. As I discussed above, Aldhelm’s ALD 41 (Pulvillus) is one of the most unusual in his collection, and closely tied to the Symphosian tags.
subsequent questions in the dialogue, including wisdom questions of the kind Albinus answered at the beginning.\textsuperscript{101} This seems to suggest that these riddles have ‘sharpened’ Pippin’s wisdom in the way that Proverbs 1 advertises will happen to the young man who attends to the enigmas of the wise—\textit{sapiens sapientior erit}. This perspective accords with what we know of Alcuin’s pedagogical emphases on the importance of training to the level of teaching others, on using classroom exercises as training for more difficult hermeneutics, such as Biblical and Patristic exegesis, and on poetic and rhetorical study as a preparation to contemplate the mysteries of scripture.\textsuperscript{102} Yet on a more local level, it also suggests a more specific argument, that learning to guess and solve riddles builds a form of wisdom that draws from the everyday in the world. Alcuin’s and Pippin’s final exchange is the earliest analogue I’ve found of Tolkien’s “What have I got in my pocket?” riddle, as it shifts the playing-field of the game firmly into lived life and demonstrates the new level of mastery Pippin has attained:

\textbf{ALC D88:}  
\begin{itemize}
  \item A. Quid est tacitus nuntius?
  \item P. Quem manu teneo.
  \item A. Quid tenes manu?
  \item P. Epistulam tuam, magister.
  \item A. Lege feliciter, fili!\textsuperscript{103}
\end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
  \item A. What is a silent messenger?
  \item P. What I hold in my hand.
  \item A. What have you got in your hand?
  \item P. Your letter, master.
  \item A. Happy reading, my son!
\end{itemize}

\subsection{1.7 \textit{Quid est mirum}? Wonder and the Everyday in the early Symphosian Tradition}

In this chapter I have examined three collections with a mutual interest in the origins and uses of wonder, the everyday, and riddling, whose subtle yet important distinctions help to set the stage for the later Symphosian tradition I’ll examine in the next chapter. It may be helpful to set some of those distinctions in sharper relief here.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{101} Bayless describes, “at the word ‘wonder,’ the tables have been turned: now Pippin is answering rather than asking, an about-turn also unknown in the dialogue tradition.” (“Alcuin’s \textit{Disputatio Pippini},” 169)
\item \textsuperscript{102} See Fox, “Alcuin as Exile and Educator,” 220 etc.; Diem, “The Emergence of Monastic Schools,” and de Jong, “From Scoliasti to Scioli.”
\item \textsuperscript{103} Text Bayless, “Alcuin’s \textit{Disputatio Pippini},” 174.
\end{itemize}
The Symphosian tradition begins in the drift of Saturnalian play, as Symphosius invites readers to consider his collection as arising from the genre of the forgotten *nescio quas ... nugas* of a great drunken contest. Symphosius’s collection draws affective attention to the everyday, but it does not usually go so far as to articulate wonder at the everyday. Its two main exceptions—the egg riddle, and the one-eyed garlic vendor—come to emblematize different approaches towards wonder in the centuries to follow. The egg riddle uses paradox and its own integumental structure to thematize the beginning of life, a profound yet undiscoverable moment of unnoticed everyday wonder. This riddle further implies a similarity between the riddle and the wonder, where paradox is the best way to express real-life mystery because the origins of life are a paradox. In a subtle but important contrast, the one-eyed garlic vendor exploits the ability of riddling language not just to body forth life’s oddities but to generate a sharply distorted perception of real-life phenomena. The one-eyed, many-headed vendor is unlikely, a potentially surprising sight in real life, but he becomes monstrous only through the riddle exerting a distorting effect upon readerly perspective. The garlic-vendor example thus further implies that the wonder of marvels (whether seen directly or received through reading) can likewise be understood, at least on some level, as a product of riddled perception. Both these basic options—riddles reflect a reality which is enigmatic; riddles enigmatize or wonder-ize a reality which is ordinary—remain at play in the centuries to follow.

Symphosius’s collection also draws attention to its own macro-enigmatic patterns of compilation, from its own stylus-to-tombstone trajectory, to the distinctive groupings and styles of individual riddles, especially as dense and unusual riddles like the Fish in the River mark the moments of instability or surprise created during transitions in riddling subject matter. The possibility that unusual literary pairings and transitions, as well as overall structures, can be understood as enigmatic or wondrous, is a deeply important feature of the Symphosian tradition and its related wisdom-texts, a source of creativity and innovation for many poets.

As responders to the wondrous and the everyday in Symphosius’s collection, Aldhelm and Alcuin demonstrate both deep-lying similarity and obvious difference. On a deep level, both poets understand the relationship between riddling and the world in devotional terms. Both poets begin by situating their riddles as a fairly junior stage in a basic educational program: Aldhelm composes his riddles to teach basic scansion, and Alcuin addresses schoolboys (*pueri*) in his imagined audience for the *Disputatio Pippini*. Yet both then employ riddles and the rhetorical
trope of *enigma* to frame faithful responses to divine presence in the world. The endgame of Aldhelm’s collection is to better understand the great and small *enigmata* of *creatura* as enigmatic utterances leading back to the *verbum* from which creation proceeds. Alcuin’s *mira*-riddles in turn lead back to the *ignota res et miranda* of which faith is *certitudo*, but not necessarily understanding: Alcuin’s *vidi hominem* riddle that defines wonder in his riddling watery reflection, is a way of emblematizing Paul’s phrase, *videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate*. For both poets, then, the wonder of riddles is a ripple widening into the greater wonders of being. Critically, both poets also use ordinary and familiar objects (a pillow, a watery reflection) when they wish most acutely to explore these greater implications for wonder and riddle form.

Yet Aldhelm and Alcuin also sharply diverge in their typical riddling style, suggesting a difference in where they see such wonder springing. As I have shown, Aldhelm’s pillow riddle is useful to his overarching thematic aims for the collection, and it is his closest response to Symphosius’s riddles relying on reader incredulity, a demonstration of how riddles can create productive traps for reader perception. However, Aldhelm’s recurring claim is that his riddles are *not* deceitful or empty *frivola*, and his much more typical style is informative description of worldly objects and phenomena. Even the pillow riddle turns out to be an accurate (if misleading) description. Ultimately, then, Aldhelm’s attitude to the relationship between riddling and everyday wonder aligns more with Symphosius’s egg riddle than his garlic vendor. For Aldhelm, where wonder exists, it is to be found in the diversity, magnificence, unusual quirks and strange significances of the natural world. Riddling tools are best used to understand those worldly paradoxes and lead, carefully, to contemplation of divine *enigma*, rather than deceiving the mind (*fallant mentem*) generating wonders where none properly exist.

In contrast, Alcuin’s riddling style energizes wonder by disguising the familiar. Pippin’s question, “Why didn’t I understand this on my own, when I have seen this man so many times?” is key here, for it suggests that the work of riddles is to locate wonder in the imagination, and create thereby an experience of learning to see past semantic distortion. This fits in with Alcuin’s habit, in the *Disputatio Pippini*, of preserving the difficulty of his riddles for future readers by withholding the answers. Alcuin’s style of riddling creates marvellous, paradoxical narratives that superimpose themselves upon ordinary sights and sounds; in a way, it thus draws attention to the ways fiction interacts with the known world, rather than cultivating new knowledge about his
everyday subjects as Aldhelm would have done. Ultimately, though, by showing Pippin’s riddle-solving leading into his understanding of the solutions to wisdom-questions, Alcuin shows that an imaginatively flexible way of apprehending the world is the beginning of wisdom.

I have spent time on these three riddle-poets because I believe their differences are central to understanding how the Anglo-Saxon attitude to wonder and riddling present in the Exeter Book Riddles and other texts takes shape. Everyday wonder in Symphosius, Aldhelm, and Alcuin is a site of some consensus (all, implicitly and then directly, would agree that everyday wonder exists, is important, and has something to do with riddles and learning) but it is also a site of conversation and debate (what is wonder and where does it come from? what is the best form of riddle?). As I will try to show in the next chapter, later Anglo-Saxon vernacular texts from the Old English Boethius onwards, continue to gravitate towards the idea that everyday wonder and riddles are intertwined and have much to teach those who might subscribe to a more narrow understanding of wonder and of the world. Yet also, critically, the innovation of some later collections, such as Solomon and Saturn II and the Exeter Book Riddles, is to understand that the different approaches represented in Aldhelm and Alcuin, locating wonder in the world and in enigmatic representation acting on the mind, are complementary. These collections are freed thereby to employ a variety of riddling wonders in their pursuit of wisdom.
Chapter 2
Everyday Wonders and Enigmatic Wisdom: the Old English
*Boethius Metre 28, Solomon and Saturn II, and the Exeter Book Riddles*

Ne þincð þæt wundor micel
65 monna ænegum þæt he mægge gesion
  dogora gehwilce, ac ðæt dysie folc
  þæs hit seldnor gesiðð ñwiðor wundrað,
  þeah hit wisra gehwæm wundor ðince
  on his modsefan micle læsse.
70 Unstaðolfæste ealneg wenað
  þæt þæt ealdgesceaf ðæfre ne wäre
  þæt hi seldon gesiðð…

—Old English *Boethius* C-text: Metre 28.64–72

Nobody among men thinks it a great wonder, what he can see every day. But foolish folk marvel more at what they see more seldom, though every one of the wise consider it in his mind a lesser wonder by far. Waverers always believe that what they seldom see was never an old creation . . .

I began the previous chapter asking what it means that wonder-language in the Exeter Book Riddles is particularly attached to what I am calling the everyday—to ordinary phenomena and familiar objects which many modern critics of medieval wonder would identify as non-wondrous, by definition. In Chapter 1 I sought to contextualize that question in the early configurations of wonder, the everyday, and riddling in the *enigmata* collections of Symphosius, Aldhelm, and Alcuin. I’d now like to take up that question again by examining how everyday wonders and enigmatic structures intertwine within Old English philosophic and enigmatic poetry, taking as my case studies the Old English translations of *Boethius*, the philosophic debate poem *Solomon and Saturn II*, and the Exeter Book Riddles, dating roughly from the ninth to the late tenth century.

This project stands at an intersection of Symphosian riddle-studies and scholarship on Old English vernacular aesthetics and subjectivity. I’d like to frame my argument about the

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everyday in this chapter by delving briefly into how riddles and wonder feature in some recent work in these fields.

Within the field of riddle studies, as I mentioned in Chapter One, voices such as Dieter Bitterli and Andy Orchard are contributing to a movement in Symphosian scholarship that studies the Exeter Book Riddles as the outgrowth of a collaborative, creative community of riddle-writers, compilers, and readers spanning several centuries and different languages, based in Anglo-Saxon centres of learning as well as continental Europe and Scandinavia. As has been consistent for many decades, much of the activity of riddle-scholars remains centred on debating the solutions to given Exeter Book riddles. However, over the past twenty years, riddle scholars have been finding new ways to analyze the better-known materials of the Symphosian tradition while expanding our understanding of early medieval riddling with new editions of understudied texts. For instance, Mercedes Salvador-Bello’s writings draw attention to the ordering and arrangement of *enigmata* collections, from Aldhelm’s *enigmata* to the Exeter Book, in the context of early medieval encyclopedic writing. The editions of scholars such as Daniel Anlezark, Martha Bayless, and Michael Lapidge of collections such as the *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues, Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini*, and the peculiar *Collectanea of Pseudo-Bede* have proven instrumental in expanding our understanding of the textual relationships and sources of early medieval riddling in Anglo-Saxon England, in Ireland, and on the Continent. Patrick

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2 Symphosian riddle collections and material by this count include the *Aenigmata of Symphosius* (5?c); the Bern Riddles (7th c); Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* (7th c), and the *enigmata* collections of Boniface, Tatwine, Eusebius, and the Lorsch collection (8th–9th c); *De Alfabeta*; Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini*, his *Propositiones* and stand-alone riddles (8th–9th c), the riddles of the *Collectanea* of pseudo-Bede; the Leiden Riddle (8th c); *Solomon and Saturn II* (9th–10thc); the Exeter Book Riddles (?compiled late 10th c), and the Gestumblindi episode in *Heiðreks Saga* (13th c). Other important collections and texts more distantly related include the *loca monachorum* (<7th c), late antique disputations such as *Alternatio Hadriani Augusti et Epicteti Philosophi*, and the whale-riddle on the Franks casket. For more on these, see Introduction and Chapter 1.

3 This work is especially being taken up by younger Anglo-Saxonists in digital media. For example, Megan Cavell has for several years been building a riddle community generating new translations and commentaries on the Exeter Book Riddles through the Wordpress site *TheRiddleAges*. See also Cavell’s scholarship on e.g. “Looming Danger and Dangerous Looms: Violence and Weaving in Exeter Book Riddle 56,” *Leeds Studies in English* 42 (2011): 29–42.


5 Daniel Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (Anglo-Saxon Texts 7; Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009); Martha Bayless, “Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini* and the Early Medieval Riddle Tradition,” in Guy
Murphy’s work on the Exeter riddles and oral-traditional riddling provides new structural frameworks for riddle description and analysis, observing that many riddle tropes featured in these early medieval collections also appear in the early modern period, and in some cases persist in oral form into the twentieth century. These contributions in riddle scholarship are helping to clarify the types of scholarly learning or poetic play that underlie given riddles, and the kinds of contexts in which they circulate—as well as the permeability between the formerly held categories of ‘popular riddles’ and ‘literary riddles’ or ‘classroom riddles’.

Meanwhile, riddles and wonder also have a part to play in ongoing work investigating the rhetorical, psychological, and affective underpinnings of traditional Old English poetics—what Elizabeth Tyler calls “the aesthetics of the familiar” in Old English poetry. For example, Britt Mize’s work highlights the importance of exploring mentality in ‘classical’ Old English verse, suggesting that a poet’s “inclination … to comment on states of mind” may matter less as an idiosyncratic exploration of the subjectivities at hand than as a marker of the text’s “identity as a poem in the traditional register.” In other words, Mize argues that Old English poems have to explore mentality to maintain their traditional aesthetic. Importantly for my purposes, Old

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> The ‘aesthetics of the familiar’ holds together both what is familiar because conventional and what becomes familiar because it recurs within an individual poem. The ‘familiar’ does not, however, hold together the ordinary and the well-known. In a linguistic context, by ordinary, I mean syntactic structures, phrases and expressions which also occur, as far as we can gauge from the written record, in everyday language as opposed to those structures, phrases and expressions which are well-known in and special to poetry. Conventions are not ordinary, but rather, well-known. (Tyler, *Old English Poetics*, 2, my emphases)


English expressions of unknowing form part of this traditional poetics of subjectivity, where they are seen as strongly linked to riddles and riddling formulae. Thus, some scholars have examined expressions of unknowing as points of crossover between riddles and other genres of poem, arguing that Old English poets deploy enigmatic and riddling language to help achieve certain registers. As John Miles Foley puts it, “Riddling signals are not … confined to their ‘home’ genre. Poets composing other kinds of oral poetry draw freely from riddle-centred diction, with various aims.”\(^9\) Alexandra Bolintineanu’s research shows that Old English declarations of unknowing—“poetic evocations of wonder”—are widely embedded in oral-traditional explorations of the divine in the world, and can attract these associations even when applied to other subjects (such as the sun’s course, by no means an astronomical mystery in Anglo-Saxon England).\(^10\)

These conversations in Anglo-Saxon studies highlight that riddles, of which the Exeter Book Riddles are the largest surviving corpus, stand at a particularly fraught location for Old English poetry. Symphosian riddle scholarship portrays the Exeter riddles as sites of multilingual competition, virtuosic display, and playful innovation, as each poet seeks to outdo or reflect upon the last. On the other hand, as Old English poems in Mize’s “traditional register,” the riddles also are seen as taking up traditional concerns and topics, in ways that gesture towards a stable, shared set of expectations between poet and audience—in particular, a traditional interest in exploring mentality.\(^11\) What then, does ‘wonder’ mean for Old English riddles, and what does it mean for a riddle to evoke wonder at everyday and familiar things, within this context? At the intersection of different poetic traditions and conventions, and of vernacular and Latinate forms of expression, Old English riddles themselves are in a space of wonder—while each of these traditions, conventions, and forms can offer different insights into what a wonder is, and what kinds of wonder poetry might offer, and to what ends.

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In this situation, the work of scholars such as John Niles, Adam Davis, and Patricia Dailey that “ponders the effects of engaging with riddles” emerges as particularly important.\(^\text{12}\) Drawing on Dennis Quinn’s distinction that “wonder arises not from ignorance but from consciousness of ignorance,” in Dailey’s argument the unique work of Anglo-Saxon riddles is to bring into view their recipients’ mental processes in response to the unknown, and thereby to train recipients into a wisdom-producing wonder.\(^\text{13}\) This phenomenon is called ‘responsiveness’, and represents for Dailey “an approach to knowledge and wisdom characteristic of Anglo-Saxon England.”\(^\text{14}\) Dailey observes further that a characteristic of the riddles, as opposed to marvellous Old English texts like *The Wonders of the East*, is that

[T]he scale of wonder starts with the microcosmic, the familiar, that which would not necessarily be ‘marvellous’ at first sight. A reed-pen, for example, does not immediately transfix the gaze as do the ‘moon-headed crocodiles’ encountered by Alexander; the reed pen requires the framing of the riddle to highlight a mystery [of written communication] that is not manifest at first glance but requires language to narrate and understand its fabulous nature. Thus, even when ‘solved’, the riddles sustain or generate new mystery while simultaneously dissipating that of the question of the name.\(^\text{15}\)

I agree with Dailey that the familiarity of the marvellous is an essential quality in Anglo-Saxon riddling: the reed pen as opposed to the moon-headed crocodile, is a good distinction. Further, Dailey’s observation that riddles are needed to “highlight a mystery that is not manifest at first glance” is, in my opinion, critical to understanding how the later Symphosian tradition works. However, I think we can take these distinctions further: it is not that the reed pen is microcosmic


\(^{14}\) Ibid., 469.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
or not marvellous by nature and the moon-headed crocodile is. It is that unlike the moon-headed crocodile, the reed pen is in the everyday. The riddle draws attention to the bizarreness of a plant growing in a wetland to become an unnoticed, day-to-day object enacting a similarly day-to-day miracle. Yet because the reed pen is something that can be seen and encountered in daily life, the riddle also has the potential to alter experience of that physical object, drawing out the wonder in the here-and-now. At the conclusion to his monograph *Traditional Subjectivities*, Mize proposes that the Anglo-Saxon poetics of mentality, mentioned above, “spring from points of engagement between private and public reality: places where interior mind, character, and disposition confront exterior event, community, and world.” For Mize, Anglo-Saxon poems traditionally foreground subjectivity in order to facilitate the portrayal of “experience”—what he calls the ethical “interface between personal situatedness and the wider world of nature and society.”

The Exeter Book riddle and reed pen together can draw wonder into the interface of inner thought and outer reality, an interface that riddles reveal to be fundamentally enigmatic.

As I am proposing it in this dissertation, the medieval everyday is “what we see” rather than “what we know”—it is made up of all the sights, objects, and encounters of lived experience, but especially those things which are ubiquitous, local, present, and therefore forgettable. In this respect the everyday can be opposed to those things which exist as objects of theoretic knowledge, formal study, and authoritative doctrine—although those things can be brought to bear upon the everyday. In this chapter I make a claim for how some Anglo-Saxon wisdom-poetry and riddles come to theorize the everyday. Since the everyday is the field of encounter where perception meets external objects, both Dailey’s concept of “responsiveness”—that Anglo-Saxon riddles draw attention to the *effects* of reading riddles—and Mize’s argument that ‘traditional’ Anglo-Saxon poetry attempts to portray an “interface between personal situatedness and the wider world”—have obvious bearing. Riddles have the ability to change perceptions of external objects; riddles have the ability to draw attention to how we respond and perceive. In these respects riddles are well situated to intervene in the question of what the everyday is.

17 Ibid., 252.
The claims I wish to make in this chapter are as follows.

First, that there is a strain of Anglo-Saxon thought, heavily imbricated with the Symphosian riddling tradition in Latin and Old English, which understands wonder as inherent in the everyday. This strain is locally dominant to the point where a poet translating Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* will diverge momentarily from his source material in order to assert the legitimacy of everyday wonders.

Second, that this strain of thought sees wonder as an affective mode of inquiry to which riddles provide a set of useful structures—ways of framing the question. We saw something like this at work in the early collections in Aldhelm’s framing of *creatura* as an enigmatic utterance, and Alcuin’s riddling explanation of wonder in a reflection reminiscent of Paul’s *videmus nunc per speculum in enigmatic*, leading into Pippin’s ability to solve wisdom-questions as well as riddles. However, it becomes still more explicit in the philosophic dialogue *Solomon and Saturn II*, which shows how the challenges of different types of Symphosian riddle propositions, together with the ordinary phenomena of the world, chart a wise approach to the everyday’s deep ethical mysteries.

The Exeter Book Riddles are grounded in the philosophic potential of riddling articulated in *Metre 28* and *Solomon and Saturn II*, and they exceed those texts as they facilitate new perceptions of the everyday as *wundorworuld*, a riddling world of wonder. However, as my readings show, the Exeter Book Riddles also take up the earlier questions of Symphosius, Aldhelm, and Alcuin as they examine the interface of perception with the external world. The wonder of the Exeter Book Riddles is thus directed as much at poetry, at riddling, and even at the psychology of reading and imaginative perception, as it is at the everyday world.

In this chapter I consider the Exeter Book Riddles alongside two other texts from Old English wisdom literature. To illuminate the concept of the everyday I consider the prose and poetic translations of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae* Book 4, Metre 5. These translations were attributed to Alfred the Great (although the text’s latest editors, Godden and Irvine, contend that the versifier is different from the translator and that probably neither were Alfred) and date from the mid to late ninth century. I examine how some Symphosian riddles are deployed in the search for wisdom in *Solomon and Saturn II*, one of several dialogue poems describing a battle of wits between Solomon (speaking for Christian wisdom) and the pagan Saturn. As with many
Old English poems, scholars disagree on its date and place of origin with Patrick O’Neill attributing it likewise to the court of Alfred, and Daniel Anlezark, the text’s latest editor, proposing a most likely origin in Dunstan’s circle in Glastonbury in the early tenth century. I have chosen these texts from the wider body of wisdom literature in Old English in part because each of them exhibits to some extent the imbrication of Old English everyday wonder and Symphosian riddles which I have alluded to above. Solomon and Saturn II is the only Old English poem outside of the Exeter Book to contain multiple Symphosian riddles, and Metre 28 and Solomon and Saturn II both deploy wonder-language at the everyday in ways that suggest a shared register with the Symphosian tradition. Each also contains one or more phrases or wonder-formulas surviving elsewhere only in Exeter Book riddles; thus these texts provide valuable information on the wider currency of the Exeter Book Riddles’ wonder-language in Old English literature.

My analysis begins by considering the role of the everyday in the gradual divergence of the Old English translations from Boethius’s Book 4 Metre 5, which provides a valuable foil for Old English texts as it deploys celestial wonders against everyday phenomena to address the injustice of the world. My next section considers the role of riddles leading into philosophic problems in Solomon and Saturn II, before culminating in an analysis of the wonder in some of the Exeter Book Riddles.

2.1 “What One May See Every Day” in the Old English Boethius Metre 28

The Old English Boethius Metre 28 provides one of the most explicit discussions of the everyday in Old English literature, articulating an attitude that, I will argue, also inflects Solomon and Saturn II and the Exeter Book Riddles, and argues for the utility of everyday wonders in approaching large philosophic problems and mysteries. It is led onto this topic because a similarly explicit discussion of the everyday and wonder takes place in Boethius’s treatment of a

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philosophic problem in Book 4 of the influential *Consolatio Philosophiae*.¹⁹ The *Consolatio* was completed c. 524 during Boethius’s imprisonment, and is framed as a wide-ranging philosophic dialogue between Boethius himself, and Lady Philosophy, who has come to console him for his imminent execution. Let us consider Boethius’s approach to wonder and the everyday as a foil for what is to follow.

In Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Book 4, Prose 4, the prisoner Boethius and Lady Philosophy struggle with the problem of how a world operating by divine guidance rather than sheer chance could have punishments fall upon the virtuous while evildoers enjoy good fortune. The prisoner Boethius frames his difficulty as one of wonder, complaining that “Minus etenim mirarer si misceri omnia fortuitis casibus crederem. Nunc stuporem meum rector exaggerat” (I would wonder less if I could believe that everything was mixed up in chance accidents; now a ruling God worsens my bewilderment).²⁰ Lady Philosophy observes that while it is easy to believe in accidents when something apparently disrupts the natural order, wonder in itself—an effect of ignorance of the cause—does not mean that an event is disobedient to a deeper law. Philosophy then contributes the following metre.

Metrum 5:
Si quis Arcturi sidera nescit
propinqua summo cardine labi,
cur regat tardus plaustra Bootes
mergatque seras aequore flammamas,
cum nimiris celeres explicet ortus,
legem stupebit aetheris alti.

Palleant plena cornua lunae
infecta metis noctis opace,
quaeque fulgenti texerat ore,
confusa Phoebe detegat astra:
Commouet gentes publicus error
lassantque crebris pulsibus aer.

Nemo miratur flamina Cori
litus frementi tondere fluctu
nec niuis duram frigore molem

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²⁰ *Consolatio Philosophiae* 4.pr4.5, my transl. On Plato and Aristotle and wonder (e.g. at mathematic impossibilities), see this dissertation’s introduction and Chapter 1.
feruente Phoebi soluier aestu.  
Hic enim causas cernere promptum est, 
illices pectora turbant.

Cuncta quae rara prouehit aetas 
stupetque subitis mobile uulgus; 
cedat inscitiae nubilus error, 
cessent profecto mira uideri!  

Metre 5:  
If someone doesn’t know that the stars of Arcturus, 
glide near the pole’s height—
why slow Bootes rules the Wain
and plunges those flames late into the sea,

though he unfold his risings so very swiftly—
that person will be astounded at the law of deep heaven.

Let them fade, the horns of the full moon,
undone by the boundaries of dark night,
and the stars which she had hidden with her shining face,

Phoebe in her confusion reveals.  
Common error moves the peoples,
And they tire the bronze with constant banging.

No one wonders that the gales of Corus
beat the shore with roaring gusts,

nor that the hard kernel of snow’s chill
should melt in Phoebus’ burning heat.
For here, it is easy to discern the causes;
there, being hidden, they disturb the soul.

An ignorant person, changing with sudden change,

marvels at all that a lifetime brings rare;
Let the cloudy error of unknowing give way,
Surely these ‘wonders’ will cease so to seem.

This poem describes four celestial and natural phenomena—the movement of stars near the pole, the lunar eclipse, windy storms beating the shore, snow melting in sunlight—each obedient to the

21 CP 4.m5.

22 ‘confusa Phoebe detegat astra’ is subjunctive, matching the first condition when the horns of the moon fade, but I translate it as indicative because the actions are occurring simultaneously within that hypothetical space: if the moon is darkened, she reveals the stars. We could also translate it as ‘let her reveal’ or ‘she may reveal’.

laws of the cosmos. Meanwhile, in the responses of humans positioned on the periphery of these events, Metre 5 reflects that the wonder of the ignorant occurs in an inverse relationship with their knowledge. The common crowd may wonder at the stranger motions of the stars, but familiar forces such as the winds of the coast or the sun melting snow arouse in them no disturbance: as Lady Philosophy summarizes,

Hic enim causas cernere promptum est,
illic latentes pectora turbant. (4.p5.17-18)

For here, it is easy to discern the causes,
There, being hidden, they disturb the soul.

This poem thus makes two major points about wonder in the course of its reply to Boethius’s concern about chance and evildoers. First, as Dennis Quinn argues,

Philosophy in her poetic reply reminds Boethius that wonder arises precisely from a failure to grasp the causes of things. … To those who follow the phases of the moon, an eclipse is portentous because it seems a symptom of disorder in the movement of the heavens. When the cause is known, the eclipse is understood not as an interruption but as a manifestation of order. Boethius is suffering from this fear on a more philosophical level….24

This Metre concludes with the comfort that wonder is merely a product of ignorance; when the cloud of error recedes, so-called ‘wonders’ will cease to be sources of fear. So too, with the instruction of philosophy, the disturbing injustices and seeming accidents of human life can be rationalized to accord with the universal deeper order, and will seem no more wondrous than storm or snowmelt.

Implicit in the poem’s construction is also a second point about human wonder: its irrelevance. These heavenly and natural bodies will act upon one another in obedience to celestial order no matter how humans think or behave in relation to them. The poem’s deployment of the names Boötes, Phoebe, Corus and Phoebus for the constellation, the moon, the north wind, and sun of classical mythology gestures towards a wider perspective of agents beyond humanity; even the moon’s darkening reveals the presence of more, fainter stars. The poem’s reminder of these forces may act as a tonic for human self-involvement; from this

Metre’s perspective, humans are mere inhabitants in a magnificent cosmic order. Thus, Philosophy states that those released from ignorance will likewise be released from wonder, but her Metre also implies that the wider perspective of stars, moon, winds, and snow—and studying the reaction of humans to those events—has something to teach the aspiring philosopher.

In the late ninth century, as a part of Alfred’s program of vernacular translation, the Consolatio was translated into Old English and then versified. During this process, Metre 5 became the site of a metamorphosis in both content and structure, as represented by Chapter 39 of the Prose Version (B Text) and Metre 28 of the prosimetric version (C Text) of the Old English Boethius.25 As we have seen, in Boethius’s Book 4 Metre 5, wonder is a reaction of ignorance of the causes of rare and apparently ominous events. Philosophy’s comparison indicates that familiar and everyday things like the melting of snow are not wondrous, and that when the cloud of ignorance has lifted, all wondrous things (from celestial eclipses to apparent injustice) will be wondrous no more because their causes are known, as familiar things’ are. The Latin poem’s dynamic is clear and straightforward, repeated from stanza to stanza. In the Old English translation and versification, however, a gradual transformation occurs surrounding wonder and the everyday.

The prose translation begins wonder’s gradual transformation. It does this, first, by reframing the ‘if-then’ structure of ‘si quis … nescit, legem stupebit’ into a series of collective rhetorical questions, and then by stumbling over Boethius’s distinction between the marvellous and the familiar while subtly shifting the topics of the everyday:

\[ Hwa unlærdra ne wundrað þæs roderes færelodes and his swiftneses, hu he ælce ðæg uton ymbhwyðalne þisne middangeard? Oððe hwa ne wundrað þætte sume tunglu habbað scyrtran hwyrl þonne sume habban[?] \]

... Thisses hi wundriað and manies þyllices and ne wundriað na þætte men and ealle cweuca wuhta habbað singalne and unnynte andan betwwuh him. Oððe hwy ne wundriað hi þæs þæt his hwilum þunrað, hwilum na ne onginð; oððe eft gewinnes se and winda and yþa and landes; oððe hwy þæt is weorðe and eft for þære sunnan sciman to his agnum

25 See Malcolm Godden and Susan Irvine, eds., The Old English Boethius: An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius’s De Consolatione Philosophiae, Vols. 1–2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Chapter 39 of the B text is on Vol. 1, p. 359–360, ll.50–78 (B text manuscript fol. 79rv), with translation Vol.2 p. 81; Metre 28 is on Vol. 1 pp. 516–518, ll. 1–83 (C text manuscript fol. 108r–109v), with translation Vol.2 pp. 183–184. All future references will give the text and line number, and refer to this edition. The translations I am using below are mine but I follow Godden and Irvine’s readings fairly closely.
Who of the unlearned does not wonder at the course and swiftness of the firmament, how each day it turns about all this middle-earth? Or who does not wonder that some stars have a shorter rotation than some have? … They wonder at these things, and at many of the like, and do not wonder that men and all living creatures have an unremitting and pointless hatred amongst them. Or why do they not wonder that sometimes it thunders and sometimes it doesn’t; or at the struggle of sea and wind, and wave and land, or why ice forms and then turns to its own birthright because of the sun’s brilliance? But the unsteady people do not wonder at the things that they see each day, but wonder at what they see most seldom, though it be a lesser wonder, and think that it isn’t an old creation, but that it happened recently.

This passage endeavours to follow Boethius’s distinction between the causes at which no one wonders and the causes at which one does, but in doing so it introduces subtle changes that shift Boethius’s meaning. “If someone doesn’t know, he will wonder,” about celestial phenomena, becomes “Who does not wonder?” Rhetorically this has moved already into the territory of Aldhelm’s Aqua riddle, “Quis non obstupeat nostri spectacula fati,” (ALD 29.1), on the marvel of water’s thousand floating oaks and sinking needle: these heavenly phenomena are put forward as an awesome spectacle. Still more important, though, the prose seems to have trouble accepting the logic of Boethius’s list of unwondrous topics: what is obvious in Boethius (nemo miratur … Hic enim causas cernere promptum est (“No one wonders … for here it is easy to discern the causes”) is a subject of questioning in the Old English prose: hwy ne wundriað hi? Why do they not wonder? Although the text follows Boethius’s same point that people commonly do not wonder at ordinary things but at rare things, the Old English text asserts that a rare thing may be less wondrous (peah hit læsse wundor sie) than “what one may see each day” (þæs þe hit ælce daeg gesiehð). The Old English text thus names the everyday and identifies it with a category of sight, similar to how Langland will discuss the variety of sights and experiences that create kynede wit many years later; and implies that these everyday phenomena are, therefore, actually worthy of some wonder.

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26 B-text, 39.51–54, 39.66–75; my emphases.

27 See my opening definition of the everyday in the Introduction; the Piers Plowman passage I’m referring to is
That a distinctive category of everyday wonder is in operation here also seems supported by the change in unwondrous topics from Boethius’s Metre to the Old English translation. Boethius’s two ordinary examples of storms beating the coast and snow melting (*fervente*) in the sun have become four: the useless hatred of men and all creatures (something with no rationale I can find in Boethius unless as a gesture towards the chapter’s larger concerns with injustice); the rationale behind thunder; the struggle of waves, winds, sea, and land; and why ice (not snow) forms and then turns into its own *gecynde*. *Gecynd* in Old English mainly refers to ‘nature’ or ‘natural condition’ but it is also used to translate the Latin *generatio* (begetting/generation), and *proles* (offspring). At the least, saying that ice ‘returns to its own nature’ is a more metaphoric and resonant way of describing ice than saying that it melts, but it is worth noting that Donatus’s *mater me genuit, eadem mox gignitur ex me*, as a definition of ice and water, is a part of his definition of *enigma* and extremely well-known across the medieval period. The translator thus replaces Boethius’s (beautiful) description of snow melting with an example that happens to be the very definition of *enigma* and perhaps the best-known riddle topic in the early medieval period. While the Old English prose generally follows Boethius in this Metre, these changes collectively amount to a discrepancy allowing for a greater possibility of finding wonder in the everyday, and a redefinition of that everyday to include a wider variety of topics, including riddling ones.

The versification (hereafter called *Metre 28*) is a reworking of the prose translation and expands upon the changes introduced by the prose. The prose had replaced Boethius’s initial

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Ac kynede wit cometh of alle kynnes sightes—
Of briddes and of beestes, [of blisse and of sorwe],
Of tastes of truthe and of deceites.
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28 See DOE entry, *ge·cynd* (Noun, f. and n., cl. 3; indecl. f. gecyndo, cl. 2) which lists 11 meanings for *gecynd*; see especially 9.a, 9.b, 9.d, 10. *Dictionary of Old English: A to H* online, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2016)

29 Donatus, *Ars Maior* ‘De Tropis’, 17c. Trans. adapted from Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*, 19. The full quote is: “Aenigma est obscura sententia per occultam similitudinem rerum, ut mater me genuit, eadem mox gignitur ex me, cum significet aquam in glaciem concrescere et ex eadem rursus effluere.”
statement that “if someone doesn’t know … he wonders” with a repeated question “Who does not wonder?” Metre 28 confirms this approach of asking “Who does not wonder?”, using qualifications to indicate that these questions apply to all mankind: Metre 28 is structured upon a repeated question of “who is (on earth/of mankind/in the world/of worldly men/a thane) who does not wonder?” These repeated questions rhetorically create community among wondering men on earth, while the questions’ modifiers also subtly separate out those men no longer on earth, or not of worldly humanity, to whom these questions might not apply.

Metre 28 also strengthens the prose translation’s suggestion that there may be greater wonder in the everyday than in the rare. The foolish and ignorant do not wonder at what one can see every day because they are attracted by apparent novelty, not realizing that what they marvel at is likewise an ‘ealdgesceaf’t—an old work:

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Ne þincð þæt wundor micel
monna ænegum þæt he mægge gesion
dogora gehwilce, ac ðæt dysie folc
þæs hit seldnor gesihð swiðor wundrað,
þeah hit wisra gehwæm wundor ðince
on his modsefan micle læsse.

Unstaðolfæste ealneg wenað
þæt þæt ealdgesceaf þæfre ne wäre
þæt hi seldon gesioð, ac swiðor giæt
weoruldmen wenað þæt hit weas come,
niwan gesælde, gif hiora nægum hwylc
ær ne ðeowowde; is þæt earmlic þinc.
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Nobody among men thinks it a great wonder, what he can see every day. But foolish folk marvel more at what they see more seldom, though every one of the wise consider it in his mind a lesser wonder by far. Waverers always believe that what they seldom see was never an old creation, but more yet, men on earth think that it has come about by chance, happened newly, if something hasn’t appeared to any of them before. *That’s a wretched thing.*

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30 The prose versions of this question are: “Hwa unlærdra ne wundrað” (B-text 39.51), “Oððæ hwa ne wundrað” (B.39.53), “Oððæ hwa ne wafæð” (B.39.57) “Oððæ hwa ne wundrað” (B.39.61), “Hwa ne wafæð” (B.39.64) followed by, after the change to asking why people do not wonder at everyday things, “Ac þæt ungestæðige folc ne wundrað” (B.39.72).

31 Hwa is on earðan nu unlærdra” (M28.1); Hwa is moncynnes” (M28.5); “Hwa is on weorulde … buton þa ane þe hit ær wisson” (M28.18–19); “ Hwa is weoruld-monna” (M28.32), “ “Hwa is on worulde” (M28.41) “Hwa þegna” (M28.44).

32 C-text Metre 28, 64–75.
This passage in *Metre 28*, even more explicitly than the prose equivalent, asserts that the wise
have a different perspective on wonder than the foolish or untrained—but not an unwondering
perspective. The mistake of the ‘unlærede’ is to judge wonders along a continuum of perception:
they find especially surprising what they see rarely, and think new what is merely previously
unencountered; however, even greater wonders are in plain sight, in the everyday world that the
wise observe and train themselves to study. This position is affirmed in the Old English’s
treatment of the Latin Metre 5’s final lines. Where the Latin Metre 5 says wonder should
dissipate when the cloudy error of unknowing recedes (*cedat inscitiae nubilus error*, 4m5.21),
the prose and *Metre 28* are more explicit about how one moves from being foolish to wise:

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Ac gif hiora ænig æfre weorðeð
 to ðon firwetgeorn þæt he fela onginð
 leornian lista, and him lifes weard
 of mode abrit þæt micle dysig
80 ðæt hit oferwriegen mid wunode lange,
 þonne ic wæt geare þæt hi ne wundriað
 mæniges þinges þe monnum nu
 wæfðo and wunder welhwær þynceð.33
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But *if any of them ever becomes curiosity-driven* [firwet-georn] *to the point that he
begins to learn many arts, and life’s guardian removes from his mind the great confusion
which it has been cocooned in for a long time*, then I certainly know, that they will not
wonder at many things which now men everywhere consider spectacle and wonder.

This passage has been recognized by Leslie Lockett as a key moment where vernacular Anglo-
Saxon psychology expresses itself, diverging from its sources.34 For now I’d like to use it, with
my analysis of this poem, to sketch out my claim for Anglo-Saxon everyday wonder. In the Old
English *Boethius’s* next sections, as in Boethius’s *Consolatio*, much of the dialogue’s task is to
dissipate wonder by revealing hidden causes. *Metre 29* (cf. *CP4*m6), for example, inserts a
repeated structuring line of ‘Nis þæt nan wundor’ (that is no wonder) to affirm the orderliness
and perfection of God’s creation.35 What makes *Metre 28* distinct, I propose, is that it is treating

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34 Leslie Lockett addresses this passage in *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions*
(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 313, as evidence that “the translator of the *OE Boethius* valued
intellectual curiosity and cultivated an open-mindedness to philosophical alternatives to old, familiar beliefs”; she
discusses Alfredian reception of Boethius with vernacular psychologies in 313–323, though with no particular
reference to wonder.

35 C-text *M29*.17, 77, 93.
a combination of subject matters (a philosophic problem of injustice; wonder, its sources and relationship with wisdom and error; what one encounters every day) upon which Old English enigmatic poetry has already established a clear position. In other words, the Old English translator and versifier recognize that Boethius’s Metre 5 is in the territory of Old English enigmatic wisdom literature, and begin to articulate that literature’s position on wonder.

Old English wisdom poetry more broadly sometimes describes wisdom-giving wonder suffusing the everyday. For example, the Exeter Book poem _The Order of the World_ begins by inviting the listener to ask the poet to describe the natures of the world’s living creations,

\[\textit{þa þe dogra gehwam} \quad \textit{þurh dom Godes} \\
\textit{bringe wundra fela} \quad \textit{wera cneorissum (OW 6–7)}\]

Those which every day through God’s decision bring many wonders to the generations of men

and describes the light of daybreak that

\[\textit{cymeð morgna gehwam} \quad \textit{ofr misthleóþu} \\
\textit{wadan ofer wægas} \quad \textit{wundrum gegierwed, (OW 60–61)}\]

comes every morning over misty slopes travelling over ways [or waves], adorned with wonders

Like _Metre 28_, _The Order of the World_ positions these wonders as opportunities for learning and thus the increase of wisdom through poetic craft. Each wonder, it explains, is “a clear sign, to the one who, through wisdom, knows how to comprehend all the world in his heart” (_OW_ 8–10), and the traditional power of poets is that

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36 See _The Order of the World_, in Robert E. Bjork, ed. and trans., _Old English Shorter Poems Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric_ (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 82–89. My translations. _The Order of the World_ shares the expression, “wundrum gegierwed” with EXE 36.1–2 and EXE 68.1–2 “Ic þa wiht gesæh on weg feran; Seo wæs wrahtice wundrum gegierwed.” [I saw a creature travel on a way [or wave]; she was marvellously adorned with wonders.] (EXE 36.1–2, EXE 68.1–2 (with ‘heo’)).

37 Robert DiNapoli describes this poem as “the manifesto for a school of poetry, esoteric and visionary,” whose early sections “establishes the figure of the poet, both in the speaker’s own self-portrait and in his invoking of a tradition extending back from his present into deep recesses of antiquity.” (97); see Robert DiNapoli, “The Heart of the Visionary Experience: _The Order of the World_ and its Place in the Old English Canon,” _English Studies_ 79.2 (1998): 97–108; Alexandra Bolintineanu discusses the poem in “Beyond the Sun’s Setting: Webs of Unknowing in Old English” mentioned above, proposing that by declaring that no one knows the sun’s course after sunset (not truly an astronomical mystery, but also mentioned extensively in _Metre 28_), the poem “presents the human mind overwhelmed by the created natural world, insofar as that natural world is a work of God. …[H]uman unknowing becomes both a sign and a result of the divine presence, of God at work.” (“Beyond the Sun’s Setting,” 174).

38 _Order of the World_ 8–10:
they knew how to speak rightly,
always questioning and saying,
always mindful, what the best of mankind
knew of the web of mysteries [searoruna gespon].

*The Order of the World* and the conclusion to *Metre 28* each suggest that the right attitude of a wise person is to be inquisitive (*firwetgeorn, a fricgende*); that a wise person has learned to contemplate the whole world using tools of wisdom and approach each wonder as an “orgeate tacen” or ‘manifest/perceived sign’ (*OW* 8b); and that the task of poets is to facilitate this process. With this in mind, *Metre 28*’s passage of complaint, “Nobody among men thinks it a great wonder, what he may see every day … that’s a wretched thing,” (M28.65–66a, 75b) can be seen to motivate *Metre 28*’s other major expansion from the prose translation. *Metre 28* attaches several lines of description to each of the everyday wonders it presents, bringing those sights and sounds imaginatively before the audience:

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Is þara anra gehwam  orgeate tacen,
þam þurh wisdom  woruld ealle con
behabban on hrepre

39 *Order of the World* 13b–16; Bjork’s translation.
Ah! now many men wonder greatly at these kinds of things, and they do not wonder that all creatures, men and animals, have a great, useless enmity between them, extreme and everlasting. *It is a strange thing, that they do not wonder* how in the clouds it often thunders sorely, and by intervals it leaves off, and similarly the wave continually strives against the land, the wind against the wave. Who wonders at this, or else at another thing—why it is that ice can come from water? Beautifully bright, the sun shines in hot brilliancy; immediately the lake of ice, excellent, returns to its own nature [*on his agen gecynd*], turns into water.

The descriptions in this passage provide for the recipients vicarious sense-experiences at which they may profitably wonder. On the one hand, thunder and ice in sunlight are indeed not necessarily afforded much wonder for those who encounter them often—but like the buoyancy puzzle in Aldhelm’s *Aqua* riddle, the physical effects and causes of thunder and of the phase transitions of water *are* worth wondering about when attention is drawn to them. In providing a series of everyday phenomena for the reader to contemplate, attached to vivid descriptions and identified as wonders, *Metre 28* may in fact be seen to be performing similar work to Symphosian riddle collections. This overlap is increased by the passage’s use of vocabulary, phrasing, topics, and imagery shared by Symphosian riddles. The beings in conflict are “wuhta” (creatures/wights), a common word that is especially common describing riddle-subjects in the openings of Exeter Book Riddles.40 Although ‘sellic’ (strange/wondrous) is a common descriptor of wonder—the Rood, for example, is introduced, “Þuhte me þæt ic gesawe syllicre treow” (*DotR.*4)—the paired words, “sellic þincare” (strange thing) survive in Old English poetry outside of *Metre 28* only in EXE 31.3.41 Conflict, thunder, the continual striking of the sea against the land, and ice melting are all given riddling treatment in the Symphosian tradition.42 And indeed,

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40 Variants of ‘wiht’ referring to creatures the riddle’s subject occur 42 times in the 95 Exeter Book Riddles, in 15 of which the term is paired with a wonder-word such as ‘wætlic’ or ‘wundorlic’; see riddles EXE 18*, 20*, 23*, 24*, 25*, [28], 29*, 31* (x4), 32* (x2), 33, 34, 36*, 37, 38 (x2), 39 (x3), [40], 41, 42* (x3), 51*, 56 (x2), 57, 58, 68* (x3), 68*, 70*, 82, 84*[84], 86, 87*, 89. (* indicates pairing with a wonder-word or phrase; [] indicates ‘wiht’ referring to a creature or creatures other than the riddle subject.)

41 EXE 31.3 “Ic seah sellic þing singan on ræcede”; compare EXE 39.24–5, “þæt is wætlic þing / to seccanne.”

42 Though I haven’t found a good comparison for this and I think it refers to the philosophic problem rather than a riddle, continual profitless aggression or oppression is a very common feature in riddle propositions; see e.g. EXE 5, 13, 14, 18 for examples. As I will discuss below, thunder’s sound features in the opening lines of EXE 1.1–6. The continual strivin of the sea against the land (the ceasing of which is one of the signs before Doomsday) is discussed twice in *SolSatII*, at 145–148 and again at 215–220, where Saturn asking why water has this destiny. Elsewhere the riddle BED 15 asks, ‘Quid iugiter cedit cum siverit omen habebit’ (“What continually gives way, and when it sets down, it will be an omen?”). Ice is a riddle in Donatus, SYM 10, BER 37, BER 42, LOR 4, EXE 33 (now often
Metre 28’s vivid description of thunder, the only thing listed at which the poem directly marvels that people do not wonder at it, has a close tie with the opening lines of the first riddle of the Exeter Book (EXE1-3, sometimes described as ‘the storm riddles’ in scholarship). ExE 1 begins,

EXE 1
Hwylc is hælæþa þæs horsc ond þæs hygecraeftig
þæt þæt mæge asecgan, hwa mec on sið wræce,
þonne ic astige strong, stundum reþe,
þrymfyl þunie, þragum wræce
5 fere geond foldan, folcsalo bærne,
ræced reafige?
[...] Saga, þoncol mon ... (l. 27)

EXE 1
Who among men is so quick and so ingenious
that he can say who rouses me to journey,
when I come up strong—dire now and then
peal out all powerful—sometimes, like an outcast,
5 travel across the land, burn public buildings,
ravage the hall?
... Say, thoughtful man, ...

EXE 1’s opening passage has often been discussed for its close resemblance with other formulas of unknowing in Old English literature—in particular, with the poem Christ A, which concludes one section with the similar lament that “Forþon nis ænig þæs horsc, ne þæs hygecraeftig, / þe þin fromcyn mæge fira bearnum / sweotule geseþan” (‘Hence there is no one so quick nor so ingenious that he can clearly declare your origin to the children of men’). In other words, EXE 1 has been understood to merge a riddling formula—and the expectation that riddle-solving is a test of wits—with a related traditional wisdom-utterance, found in poems like Christ

solved ‘iceberg’) and possibly EXE 69, a one-line riddle: (“Wundor wearþ on wege; wæter wearþ to bane.” (There was a wonder on the way [or wave]; water turned to bone.”)

43 On this name cf. Erika von Erhardt-Siebold, “The Old English Storm Riddles,” PMLA 64.4 (1948): 884–888, who declares this a common name in her time. I have not yet found anyone discussing EXE 1–3 and this passage from Metre 28 together.

44 EXE 1.1–6, 27 (or EXE 2.12 depending on your numbering).

A and The Order of the World, that the divine is a source of boundless mystery beyond the power of man to express or comprehend. But in comparing EXE 1 with Metre 28 it becomes clear that both of these passages have a similar immediate function—to draw wondering attention to the thunderstorm as a natural marvel of God’s world, through initial focus on the viscerally felt sound of thunder (“þearle þunrað, þragmælum eft anforlæteð”, ‘sorely it thunders, by intervals it leaves off again’, Metre 28.56; “stundum reþe / þrymful þunie” ‘dire in intervals, powerful, I thunder’ EXE 1.5, and cf. further Maxims II 3b-4a, “Wind byð on lyfte swiftust, / þunar byð þragum hludast.”—‘Wind is in sky swiftest; thunder is by intervals loudest’). Both Metre 28 and EXE 1 produce this visceral effect using modifiers indicating a painful or fierce intensity, alongside temporal descriptors indicating intervals or periods; in the context of thunderstorms, this could be the time elapsed between thunderclaps, the gradual booming and recession as a storm passes over, or the periods between summer storms. Where Metre 28 invokes the strangeness that hæleða fela do not marvel at thunder, though, EXE 1 intervenes directly in the situation by making thunder’s description part of a riddle proposition for hwylc … hæleþpa is wise enough to solve it. The riddle, rhetorically inviting its recipients to puzzle at the description, directly cultivates their contemplation of thunder—a contemplation that may lead to the wisdom Metre 28 and The Order of the World prize so highly.

In this section I have sought to establish the existence of a category of everyday wonder in Anglo-Saxon thinking, at least as demonstrated in the Old English translations of Boethius’s Consolatio Philosophiae Book 4 Metre 5. I have suggested that Metre 28 and The Order of the World both indicate that wisdom can be gained with curiosity and training, both of which can be cultivated through the contemplation of everyday wonders, especially with the aid of poets who know how to speak about such wonders (cf. the opening to The Order of the World and indeed the entirety of Metre 28). Further, I claim that the changes in the Old English Boethius, as well as the overlap of wonder-phrasing, topics, and imagery in wisdom-poems such as Metre 28, The Order of the World, and Exeter Book Riddles, suggest that these wisdom-poems understand riddling as having a role to play in cultivating everyday wonder and thus in the search for wisdom. Indeed, Metre 28 frames the gaining of wisdom as a kind of resolution of enigmatic confusion, as error is lifted and the mind is unwrapped:

In the next section, I will examine a text that models how to use specific riddle techniques to contemplate everyday wonders as it trains its recipients in wisdom.

2.2 What is the wonder? Moving Past Riddles in *Solomon and Saturn II*

*Metre 28’s* final lines outline a set of conditions necessary to find wisdom: strong enough curiosity in a student’s disposition leads to the learning of skills, whereby with God’s help the student can shuck off the foolishness that has enveloped the mind, and come to experience mental clarity. *Metre 28* also makes it clear that finding wonder in ‘what one may see every day’—such as the sound of thunder, the useless hatred between creatures, or the melting of a shining lake of ice—has something to do with this process. I have pointed out that these topics and images are also prominent in the Symphosian tradition, and I have claimed that undercurrents of enigmatic thinking can be detected in *Metre 28*. But if so, how do everyday topics and riddles relate to one another or help create the conditions for wisdom that *Metre 28* and *The Order of the World* outline as a goal?

Helpfully, the quest for wisdom—beginning in curiosity, and learning through riddles and everyday wonders to approach a greater clarity—is precisely the path of the character Saturn in the peculiar Old English debate poem, *Solomon and Saturn II*, which deploys riddles both to gloss and to cultivate the struggle for wisdom it portrays. While scholars have offered illuminating readings of many of the enigmatic and puzzling passages in this poem, as well as noting the poem’s interests in mentality and in cultivating wisdom, the role of the riddles in the wisdom-training it offers has yet to be fully explored. As the only other surviving text alongside
the Exeter Riddles to contain multiple Symphosian riddles in Old English,\(^{47}\) this poem also provides an invaluable external perspective on the wider Old English riddling tradition and its techniques.\(^{48}\) In this section I offer a new reading of the poem’s engagement with the category of the everyday by examining Solomon and Saturn’s second riddle and the poem’s subsequent questions. My overall claim is that this poem reveals more information about the thread of Anglo-Saxon enigmatic wisdom about the everyday that informs Metre 28 and other poems. Namely, Solomon and Saturn II uses riddles to reveal one of the persistent characteristics of the medieval everyday: that everything within it can be connected.\(^{49}\) Riddles, that is, train the wise to deploy *enigma* as a strategy of thinking about the world, which allows them to perceive meaningful connections between ordinary phenomena and human problems.

Surviving in one mid-tenth-century manuscript and dating probably to the early tenth century, Solomon and Saturn II (henceforth *SolSatII*) narrates a wisdom dispute in which descriptive riddles and esoterica give way to a series of challenges of explanation.\(^{50}\) Its combatants are the Old Testament king Solomon, speaking on behalf of Christian wisdom, and Saturn, euhemerized as a learned Chaldean king, who speaks on behalf of pagan knowledge.\(^{51}\)

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\(^{47}\) The Old English *Apollonius* would most likely have been another, as the Latin versions draw from Symphosius’s *enigmata* alongside others in their concluding passages; however, the riddling exchange of Tharsia and Apollonius has not survived in the Old English text.

\(^{48}\) In addition to its two full Symphosian riddles and some one-line riddles closer to the *Ioca Monachorum* tradition, *SolSatII* is also interesting for its use of wonder-language. Like Alcuin, *SolSatII* refers to an unknown riddle subject as a “wundor” (*SolSatII*.104). *SolSatII* is also the only extant Old English text outside of the Exeter Book Riddles to employ the alliterative collocation, *wraetlican wiht* (wondrous creature: *SolSatII*.76). In the Exeter Book Riddles versions of this phrase occur six times referring to the riddle subject, in EXE 23.2 “Ic eom wraetlic wiht” (Bow); EXE 33.1 (Iceberg?) “Wiht cwom æfter wege wraetlicu liðan,”; EXE 42.1–3 (Cock and hen) “Ic seah wiht / wraetlican twa / undearunga uce plegan / hæmedlaces”; EXE 51.1 (Pen and fingers) “Ic seah wraetlic wiht / samed siðian” EXE 67.2 (Gospel Book) “Ic on þinge gefrægn þeoedcyninges / wraetlic wiht”; EXE 70.1 (Bell?) “wihte is wraetlic þæ he hysan wisan ne cunn”; both “wraetlic” and “wiht” also occur separately in the riddles to refer to riddle subjects. *SolSatII* and Alcuin’s ‘mirum animal’ comb-riddle provide our best external evidence for a wider use of this phrasing in Anglo-Saxon riddling. In *SolSatII* as I will discuss below, *wraetlican wiht* refers to an actual wondrous creature, the Vasa Mortis—but this term occurs in a context where it is the object of Saturn’s curiosity, and Solomon names it on the basis of Saturn’s description of how long he has been curious about it (suggesting that Saturn’s indirect reference is a kind of riddle).

\(^{49}\) Cf. Aldhelm’s *Creatura*, or Chaucer asking why given people fall in love and particular fish die in weirs, and Langland talking about birds and beasts and bliss and sorrow: the everyday is *associative* in medieval literature.

\(^{50}\) Daniel Anlezark dates the text to “probably the first quarter of the tenth century” on linguistic grounds. See Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 1–49; Anlezark, “The Stray Ending in the Solomonic Anthology in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 422,” *Medium Ævum* 80.2 (2011): 201.

\(^{51}\) *Solomon and Saturn II* is one of four surviving Old English dialogues between these figures. The four dialogues are: *Solomon and Saturn I* (*SolSat*), the *Prose Pater Noster Dialogue* (*SolSatPNPr*), *Solomon and Saturn II*
The poem begins with an announcement of a famous contest of wise-minded men ‘about their wisdom’ (flitan ... modgleawe men ... gewesan ymbe hira wisdom’ (2-3), of which the poet has heard. Although Solomon is more famous, Saturn is clever, having travelled widely (over thirty locations across Europe, Africa, and Asia are named) and read the books of many different cultures. The contest opens with a series of challenges to the opponent’s intelligence or learning, involving esoterica (the first question is from Solomon: ‘Sæge me from ðæm lande / ðær næg fyra ne mæg fotam gestæpann’ (32-33)—‘Tell me what land it is, upon which no one can set foot’) as well as two full descriptive Symphosian-style riddles with equally elaborate explanations (52-64 and 104-113). Gradually the contestants set aside first the esoterica and then the riddles in favour of a series of challenges of explanation, trading questions and gnomic statements in order to explore why various conditions in the world are as they are. Saturn’s questions take an increasingly existential bent as the dialogue comes to focus on problems of evil, fate, and inequality, culminating in a series of extraordinary expositions in which Solomon explains the Fall of the Angels and describes a daily psychomachia in which a good and evil
angel attempt to influence each human being daily, leaving the good angel to return home each
evening defeated and weeping (ll. 303-319). Although fairly bleak in its perspective on human
goodness and the possibility of salvation, the poem ends on a mysteriously positive note: the
nine-line poetic fragment (SolSatFrag) that likely concludes the poem explains that although
Solomon wins the competition,

Hwædre was on sælum se ðe of siðe cwom
feorran gefered. Næfre ær his ferhð ahlog.52

But he was happy, he who had come from the journey,
had travelled far. His spirit had never laughed before.

This poem continues to suffer from some critical neglect, as for many years the dominant
response to the obscurity of the Solomon and Saturn dialogues was what Anlezark terms a
‘counsel of despair’ in scholarship, seeing the bizarrities of the dialogues as deliberately
meaningless.53 Nonetheless, several scholars have noted the ways in which SolSatII models the
acquisition of wisdom. Tom Shippey argues that SolSatII has a recurrent theme in the efficacy of
wisdom as a mental power that can mitigate bad circumstances; moreover, it is a teaching text
for which “the results are not to be measured simply in terms of knowledge, but rather according
to the difference they make to Saturn’s (and the reader’s) mental state.”54 Wisdom in turn is “a
condition of mind inseparable from such concepts as resolution, power, and foresight.”55
Antonina Harbus supports Shippey’s reading, observing that “The poem explicitly constructs
wisdom as something to be pursued, struggled for: ‘Wadan on wisdom winnan after snytro’ (l.
390) ‘Stride into wisdom, struggle for sagacity’.”56 Harbus’s study delves further into the poem’s
representation of wisdom, arguing that

Where biblical and classical wisdom rely on immutable pronouncement and pure
knowledge, here human wisdom is another matter entirely. The elusive dialogue and
puzzling shifts of gear within the text, as well as Saturn’s developing appreciation of

52 SolSatFrag 8–9, ed. Anlezark, The Old English Dialogues, 78. All subsequent quotes from SolSatII and
SolSatFrag are from Anlezark’s edition, and will be given by abbreviation and line number. Translations are mine
unless otherwise indicated.

53 Anlezark, The Old English Dialogues, 15, who attributes this neglect to previous editor Robert Menner’s claim
that the poem’s sources are mysterious eastern apocrypha and that the poem in places is deliberately meaningless.

54 Shippey, Old English Verse, 63; see 63–67.

55 Ibid., 67.

Solomon’s Christian wisdom, suggest that meaning is not stable, but rather is an indefinable phenomenon, open to individual interpretation and change, and capable of development through demonstration. Gaining maximum advantage and erudition from this process requires a sharp wit and constant vigilance.\textsuperscript{57}

As Harbus’s and Shippey’s analyses illuminate, the battle of wits in \textit{SolSatII} not only models wisdom in action but offers ways to develop it: its formal difficulties act as exercises for the poem’s recipients. This practical treatment renders \textit{SolSatII}'s inclusion of Symphosian-style riddles particularly important, because as a part of its program of wisdom development it portrays Solomon’s wise responses to Saturn’s riddles and places those riddles in a chain with other forms of wisdom-text, such as the esoteric question, the maxim, and the philosophic inquiry. In other words, just as Alcuin’s \textit{Disputatio Pippini} does for the Latin wisdom-dialogue and riddle-exchange, \textit{Solomon and Saturn II} presents a rare opportunity for us to observe Anglo-Saxon riddle \textit{reception} modelled within a broader wisdom context. I’d like to pick up the thread here of Harbus’s distinction of “human wisdom” from “biblical and classical wisdom” by taking a closer look at how the poem positions the everyday’s relationship to Saturn’s wisdom trajectory leading into and out of its second riddle.

The wisdom-battle of Solomon and Saturn begins in a set of questions to do with esoteric learning and marvels of far-off lands, in which the first Symphosian-style riddle, on books and their power ofimaginative travel and wisdom, is interspersed. Saturn is introduced with the strength is that he is well-read (“sumra hæfde … boca cæga, leornenga locan” (5b-7) “he had keys of some books, locks of learning”), but this reading seems to have led to a kind of hubris. Solomon reminds Saturn about the Tower of Babel as they set the terms of their contest (29b-33) and as Anlezark observes, Saturn appears to fail his first riddle. Solomon’s first question, “Sæge me from ðæm lande / ðær nænig fyra ne mæg fotam gestæpann” (32-33) (“Tell me from what land no man may step with foot”), receives a long mysterious reply from Saturn about the Philistine “weallende Wulf” and a land where he died, seemingly tainted by his battles with poison-breathing serpents.\textsuperscript{58} Solomon’s reply, beginning “Dol bið se ðæ gæð on deop wæter…”

\textsuperscript{57} Harbus “The Situation of Wisdom,” 101.

\textsuperscript{58} This passage has been much discussed by Anglo-Saxon scholars; on this question see recently Tristan Major, “Saturn’s First Riddle in \textit{Solomon and Saturn II}: An Orientalist Conflation,” \textit{Neophilologus} 96 (2012): 301–313.
(“Stupid is he who goes out onto deep water,” 47), hints at a more prosaic solution: the seabed. Indeed, the passage’s analogue in the Collectanea of Pseudo-Bede solves a similar question of an inaccessible land with the bed of the Red Sea walked over by the Israelites. While Saturn and Solomon celebrate the power of books to cultivate wisdom in their next exchange (52-66), after line 103 the conversation moves definitively away from questions with esoteric answers to questions about the everyday. Given the overall trajectory that scholars have detected in the poem, this suggests that contemplating riddles and everyday wonders is a more advanced—or at least, a more educational—wisdom-activity than Saturn’s previous course of pagan reading. The transition takes place during Saturn’s second Symphosian riddle, which I will examine for how Saturn and Solomon reframe their topic:

Saturnus cwæð:
Ac hwæt is āt wundor ē de geond ēas worold færæð,
styrnæga gæð, staðolas beateð,
awecæð wopdropan, winneð oft hider?
Ne mæg hit stéorra ne stan ne se steapa gimm,
wæter ne wildeor wihtæ beswican,
ac him on hand gæð heardes and hnesces,
micles <ond> mætes; him to mose sceall
gegangan geara gehwelce grundbuendra,
lyfftleogendra, laguswemmendra,
dría dрeoteno ðusendgerimes. (SolSatII.104–111)

SALOMÓN CVÆÐ:
Yldо beоð оn еоðan æghwæs cраětíг;
imd hiðendre hildewræsне,
rumre ractentege, ræсеð wiге,
langre linan, lisseð eall ēат heо wiге.
Beam heo abreoteð and bebriceð telgum,
astyreð standendne stefн on síde,
afilleð hine on foldan; friteð ætеr ēam
wildne fугol. Heо ofеrwigeð wulf,
hio ofeбideð stanас, heо ofeгstigeð стyle,
hio abiteð iren mid оме, dео usиc swа. (SolSatII.114–123)

Saturn said:

59 See Anlezark, The Old English Dialogues, note to ll. 47–53.
60 See Ps-BED 15 “Dic mihi quae est terra quam non uedit sol neque uentus, nisi una hora diei, nec antea, nec postea? terra per quam exit populus Israel in mari Rubeo.” “Tell me, what is the land which the sun hasn’t seen, nor the wind, except for one hour of one day, neither before nor since? the land in the Red Sea through which the people Israel departed.”
But what is the wonder that goes through this world,
travels relentlessly, batters the foundations,
awakens teardrops, often works its way here?
Neither star nor stone, nor jewel outstanding,
water, nor wild beast, can elude it at all,
but into its hand go both hardy and weak;
great and poor. To its food there must go,
every year, of the ground dwellers,
the skyfliers, the water swimmers,
a number thrice thirteen thousand.

Solomon said:
Age is mighty over everything upon earth;
with marauding bonds,
—far-reaching chains, she reaches wide;
with her long lasso, she tames all she wishes.
The tree she breaks, and boughs she shatters,
she pulls down the standing bole as she passes,
strikes it to earth; after that, she eats
the wildfowl. She outbattles the wolf,
she outstays stones, she overcomes steel,
she bites iron with rust—and so she does to us.

Saturn’s riddle shares with the *Collectanea* and the riddles of Alcuin’s *Disputatio* a disturbing presentation of predatory cosmic forces. However, this riddle’s litany of creatures that fall victim to this wondrous creature serves not only to disguise Old Age, but also to present a worldview in miniature. The riddle proposition contains a description of the cosmos subject to time, uniting (confusingly) stars, gems and stones, water, and a vast number of individual animals in their shared helplessness in the face of advancing years. This is the sense picked up by Solomon in his long reply. Solomon’s answer reveals that he not only recognizes Old Age in the voracious monster described, but he also understands the wider point that the proposition’s list implies—that time decays everything in the physical world. In this way Solomon’s answer also models how (in this wisdom-contest at least) an appropriate response to a riddle not only

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61 We might compare Alcuin’s boiling kettle riddle in the *Disputatio Pippini*, “vidi mortuum sedentem super vivum” (I saw a dead person sitting on top of a living one) and see *Collectanea Pseudo-Beda* ed. Martha Bayless and Michael Lapidge.

62 Stars could be imagined to die as meteors in the night sky; stones crumble and gems can crack; to name water (elsewhere riddled as being in a continual cycle of birth) as being subject to age, though, is pretty low. This riddle creates difficulty by beginning with the subjects least obviously subject to time, before moving to its discussion of mortal creatures.
perceives its solution in the proposition, but pays attention to how that proposition shapes its topic, and uses their relationship as a spur to wisdom.

However, Saturn’s question and Solomon’s response also model more than this. Both of Saturn’s Symphosian riddles complicate the ‘fit’ between proposition and solution using tactics of distortion: in his earlier book riddle by portraying the book as a many-tongued monster, and in this riddle by beginning his list of things Age destroys with a collection of objects (stars, gems and stones, water) that do not obviously feel the effects of age. Solomon’s solution reverses Saturn’s misleading ordering which proceeds from inanimate objects to living creatures, clearing up the riddling clues that pose the greatest intellectual challenge to the reader while preserving the affect-laden description of time’s destructive force. Solomon models a different kind of riddling from Saturn’s, one which privileges the way a proposition can reflect on its solution, so that, put together, they form a kernel of wisdom available for later.

It is worth pondering, then, what “wundor” refers to in Saturn’s question, “Ac hwæt is ðæt wundor ðe geond ðas worold færeð,” (104 “But what is the wonder that travels through this world”). The closest Latin analogue for this riddle asks, “quae est illa res,” (what is that thing),

63 Saturn and Solomon’s exchange about old age is especially intriguing because it is likely that we have a riddle very close to, if not the immediate Latin riddle upon which this exchange was based. As Thomas Hill first pointed out and Anlezark and Orchard have since discussed, this riddle is probably a descendent of Aldehelm’s ALD 2 (‘Ventus’, Wind), but its closest surviving relative is a riddle given without a solution, listed as Item 79 in the Collectanea of Pseudo-Bede. (Thomas D. Hill, “Saturn’s Time Riddle: An Insular Latin Analogue for Solomon and Saturn II Lines 282–291,” The Review of English Studies 39.154 [1988]: 273–276; Anlezark, The Old English Dialogues, 20–21, 35 and n. 104–23; Orchard, “Enigma Variations,” 294–295.) The Collectanea is a compendium of trivia questions and riddles of Irish and insular sources, including the Ioca Monachorum tradition as well as Symphosian riddles, including ten of Symphosius and Aldehelm. Indeed, based on the closeness of the materials in the Collectanea and the Solomon and Saturn dialogues, Anlezark holds that “it must be concluded that either CollPsBedae, or a similar collection, was known in the circle which produced them [the dialogues].” (Anlezark, The Old English Dialogues, 20). See

Ps-BED 79.  *Dic mihi quae est illa res quae coelum totamque terram repleuit, silusae et surculos confringit, omniaque fundamenta concutit: sed nec oculis uideri, aut manibus tangi potest?*

Ps-BED 79: Tell me, what is that thing which has filled up the sky and the whole land, shatters woods and
shoots, and rattles every foundation: but can neither be seen by eyes nor touched by hands?

(Italics indicate clues with parallels in Saturn’s question; underline in Solomon’s response.) ‘Hwæt is ðæt wundor’ appears to translate ‘dic mihi quae est illa res quae’, neatly capturing —and intensifying—the indeterminacy of the Latin ‘illa res’. It is neat that, if this is the SolSatII poet’s base, the riddle is divided into two, with one of the best images (the wondrous creature smashing down trees) saved for Solomon.

64 A similar effect occurs after the first riddle in the dialogue, where a Book-riddle prompts Solomon and Saturn to trade wise sayings on reading’s efficacy. See SolSatII. 52–68.
and it could be that “wundor” is a neat translation for the indeterminacy of Latin ‘res’. In the riddles of Alcuin I examined in Chapter 1, “mirum” was a kind of pun on the marvellousness of the phenomenon as the riddle represented it—that is, “mirum” was a good descriptor for the monstrous creature imaginatively encountered in the proposition and an unlikely description for the familiar object (the gift comb, the reflection in water) encountered in real life. In the later vernacular riddle-text, Heiðreks Saga, the repeated opening “Hvat er þat undra” (What is the wonder) signals the mysterious and unsettling description to come in the proposition, while (perhaps) hinting that the creature described may not be what it seems: as with Alcuin’s riddles, in Heiðreks Saga nearly each riddle’s solution turns out to be ordinary. Saturn’s “wundor” in SolSatII likewise describes a monstrous creature that turns out to be part of the everyday—but it is less clear that ‘old age’ would not be described as wondrous if encountered in real life. Saturn’s riddle invites readers to seek a ubiquitous ‘wonder’ that moves throughout the world, devouring all: Solomon’s wise reply affirms Yldu’s power, representing her this time as a powerful woman ravaging the landscape and humanity alike. While Solomon’s response no longer uses the word ‘wundor’, it validates the efficacy of riddling representation to describe wonders in the world.

65 A late witness to this phrase’s use as a riddle-opening formula occurs in the thirteenth-century Old Norse Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks (hereafter Heiðreks Saga for short), in an account of a riddle contest between King Heiðrek and Óðinn, disguised as a man named Gestumblindi. The Gestumblindi riddle episode features thirty riddles, many of which have counterparts in the Exeter Book or other collections; it takes up Ch. 9 of the saga. See Christopher Tolkien, ed. and trans. Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins Vitra [The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise] (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960), 32–44. Four riddles in Heiðreks Saga begin,

Hvat er þat undra,
er ek úti sá
fyrir Delling’s durum [...]?

What is the wonder
that I saw outside,
before Delling’s door [...]?

This wonder-formula introduces its four riddles in a row: Riddle 4 (poem 48) (on bellows), Riddle 5 (Poem 49) (on spiders), Riddle 6 (Poem 50) (on the leek), and Riddle 7 (Poem 51) (on an obsidian shining in the sun). Interestingly, although (as in the Exeter Book) each riddle employs different propositional tricks after the opening formula, Heiðrek interrupts the pattern in his response to Riddle 7, suggesting fatigue with Óðinn/Gestumblindi’s riddling style:

Heiðrekr mælti, ‘Smækkask nú gáturnar, Gestumblindi; hvat þarf lengr yfir þessu at sitja?’

‘Your riddles become trifling, Gestumblindi,’ said Heidrek; ‘what need is there to spend more time at this?’ (text Saga Heiðreks, 34–35, ed. and trans. Tolkien)
If Solomon’s response to the *Yldu* riddle can be read as an implicit challenge to Saturn—to up the stakes of the wisdom-contest by using riddles for meditation, not just for game—then this challenge seems to be met by Saturn’s next question, the first of the ‘why’ riddles in the dialogue. Where he has just asked ‘Ac hwæt’ (104), here Saturn asks:

*Ac forhwon fealleð se snaw,* foldan behyðeð,
125
dëgel hie and gedrætað, ðæt hie ðragæ beðð
dëgel geclungne?  Full oft he gecostæð eac wildeora worn, wætum he oferbrægæ, gebryçeð burga geat, baldlice fereð,
130
reiða <...>\(^{66}\)

But why does the snow fall: shroud the earth, cover plants’ sprouts, bind up fruits, bear down and oppress them, so that they are, for a season, withered with cold? Often enough he is also an ordeal to many wild animals; he bridges over water, breaks the gate of the city, travels boldly, plunder <...>\(^{67}\)

As the combatants move into a new stage of the wisdom-contest, ‘Ac forhwæn’ signals the progression from the ‘Ac hwæt’ riddles just prior, but it also signals their commonality. Saturn’s lengthy description of snowfall frames his subject in terms that suggest the subject’s enigmatic qualities and the question’s close generic relationship to the descriptive riddle: it resembles both his previous proposition and Solomon’s explicating solution. For instance, the snow clearly shares Old Age’s destructive power: it ‘baldlice fereð’ just as Ylda ‘styrnenga gæð’ in the previous riddle, and like many travelling creatures of the Exeter Book riddles to come.\(^{67}\) In essence, what we seem to be looking at is a solved riddle, like Solomon’s explanation of *Bec* or *Yldu*; here though, wondering continues, as the inquiry has shifted to contemplate why this life-sapping substance does what it does.

\(^{66}\) *SolSatII* 124–130. The manuscript breaks off at this point and resumes after some loss of text.

\(^{67}\) Cf. *Maxims* I, 71–72: “forst sceal freosan … is brycgian”; it also reminds me a bit of *SYM* 11.3 (“flumina facturus totas prius occupo terras” (“About to become a river, first I occupy whole lands,”)) where snow similarly boasts its land-conquering power. Snow is also the subject of *Lorsch* 6, but it treats snow as a peaceful and delicate force, and snow is a sub-riddle in *EXE* 84 (on water), as a marvellous thatch or cover for the world. See also *Metre* 28’s Boethian Latin counterpart 4m5, which deals with melting snow rather than ice.
Saturn is demonstrating two vital skills in this passage: applying an enigmatic structure (here, that means the Symphosian tradition’s descriptive techniques, including personification) to an everyday wonder, and segueing from one subject to another in a way that draws out their hidden resemblance (snow is like old age in that they are both predatory, oppressive forces of nature). Indeed, shortly after Saturn’s snow question Solomon makes this kind of connection-building explicit, as he shows how an everyday phenomenon can give insight into a human condition:

Solomon said:
For a little while, leaves are green;
Then afterwards they turn yellow, fall to earth and they perish, turn to dust.
So then will fall those of men who until then last a long time, live in wickedness, conceal costly treasures, eagerly hole up in fortresses to the pleasure of foes, and believe, those want-wits, that the King of Glory, God Almighty, will hear them forever!

Solomon’s example of the falling leaves has been likened to Virgil’s description of dead souls as fallen leaves in *Aeneid* 6.305-12, but although pleasing, it is not necessary to make that connection. Solomon’s moralizing explanation demonstrates how to an attentive person, autumn leaves provide an image of universal mortality. All humans, the prosperously wicked ones included, will eventually fail and decay as is their nature. Properly considered, this image is a consolation to those, like Boethius in the *Consolatio*’s Book 4 and his Old English translators, who are troubled by the worldly success of evil-doers, and a corrective to those evil-doers who

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are insufficiently attentive to their own end and final judgment. Saturn’s reply to Solomon’s question confirms that he has caught the implication, as he refers to the inexorable movement of the ocean and the water standing still at Doomsday (145-148), and Solomon’s reply in turn confirms that the long-lived and proud will perish at that time (148-150).

Saturn and Solomon, then, use riddles to shift into an interpretive stance that makes enigmatic connections between the most ubiquitous and the most mysterious of everyday phenomena. As he works around the problems of fate, unhappiness, free will, and untimely death that concern the final stages of the dialogue, Saturn asks a series of interconnected “Ac forhwon” questions (“But why?”) about the everyday world, often paired with riddling descriptions as in the ‘solved’ snow-riddle above: why does snow fall? Why does the sun not shine equally over all places in the world? Why does a worse person live longer? Why can twins be born and then have different fates? Why do young people not try harder to find a good leader and to gain wisdom? In turn, Solomon’s replies indicate that he has grasped the deeper implications of Saturn’s new questions, as for instance where he responds to Saturn’s query about why the sun doesn’t shine everywhere with a more pointed variation of the same question: “Ac forhwam næron eorð<we>lan ealle g<e>deled / leodum gelice?” (But why were earth’s goods not shared out equally among people?). Both questions address the puzzle posed by the erratic distribution of benefits from the same omnipresent source, and as in Boethius’s Consolatio Philosophiae Book 4, Metre 5, the one marvel helps to explicate the other. Saturn’s reply to Solomon’s query about the goods of the earth in turn portrays a new integrated style, where the embedded metaphoric relations of riddling inform philosophic inquiry without distracting from it:

SATURN: Ac forhwan beoð da gesiðas somod ætgædre, wop ond hleahtor? ... (SolSatII.170-171)

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69 On snow: SolSatII.124–130; on the sun’s unequal shining: SolSatII.162–165; on twins: SolSatII.186–192; on a young man who doesn’t work harder to gain lordship or wisdom: SolSatII.209–211. As in Metre 28, several of these are riddle subjects. For example, snow is SYM 11, TAT 35, LOR 6, and part of EXE 84; the sun is EUS 10, BER 55–57, ALD 79, TAT 40, and probably EXE 6 and part of EXE 29; a woman bearing twins is SYM 93, ALD 90 (see Glorie, Variae Collectiones, 911–927 for an index of riddle solutions, minus the Collectanea and EXE). Intriguingly, Collectanea of Pseudo-Bede 199 and 200 are Aldhelm’s riddle on a woman bearing twins, and a reworking of the same; if the SolSatII poet had a copy of the Collectanea collection as Anlezark proposes is likely, then Saturn’s questioning of why twins can have different fates to the disappointment of their mother, might be seen as meditation on a subject raised very differently by the riddles (which do not ask these questions but focus on the paradox of someone having thirty fingers, etc.).

But why are the companions both together, weeping and laughter?

*Solomon and Saturn II* thus provides a fascinating glimpse into Old English riddling, as a text that both adapts riddles itself, and demonstrates some ways that riddles contribute to wisdom-inquiry. *Solomon and Saturn II* suggests an aim for riddles and everyday wonder comparable to Aldhelm’s interest in unveiling through his *enigmata* “the hidden mysteries of things.”

However, where Aldhelm’s riddles often provide scholarly information about the objects of the natural world, *Solomon and Saturn II*’s riddling descriptions make enigmatic connections across topics and cultivate wonder as the ongoing habit of an inquiring mind. To see leaves as a forewarning of death and judgment, or weeping and laughter as inseparable companions, or time as a ravaging lady, requires training in how to make useful connecting leaps across difference. The same training can allow a wise person to penetrate enigmatic disguise, and to approach a problem by constructing a riddling perspective that integrates it with other everyday wonders. This may even be the training that produces Old English literature’s famous everyday wonders: Bede’s sparrow flying through the hall, Alfred’s portrayal of those devastated because they can see the tracks of ancient writing but not follow them. *Solomon and Saturn II* shows how metaphorical and associative perspectives help the wise to grasp the world, applying riddling structures as tools for ever-deeper inquiry.

### 2.3 Everyday Wonders in the Exeter Book Riddles

The Exeter Book Riddles are the culmination of the achievements of Anglo-Saxon riddlers in taking familiar material objects and phenomena and reenergizing them with wonder, asking the solvers to understand them differently in light of the objects’ histories, their strange shapes and properties, their personalities, their names, and their similarities with other elements of human society and experience. In all these ways they facilitate new perceptions of the quotidian world around them, and offer to make changes in that external world by modifying—benefiting,

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71 See Aldhelm’s phrase in the Preface to the *Enigmata* “pandere rerum ... enigmata clandistina” (ALD Preface.7–8): ‘to unlock the secret mysteries of things,” and Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 158, on Aldhelm’s common phrase “pandens misteria rerum”. Note that Solomon, like Aldhelm and Symphosius with their titled *enigmata*, presents his proposition and solution together.

72 cf. the ‘conversion of King Edwin’ sequence in Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, II.13; Alfred’s “Preface to St. Gregory’s Pastoral Care.”
sharpening, amusing, humbling—their recipients and would-be solvers. Yet the wisdom-producing affect of wonder that is honed within the Exeter Book Riddles is directed not just at objects in the everyday world but also at language and signification, at riddling, at poetry, and at the intertwined nature of imaginative reading and perceptive experience. In this final section I would like to examine how a few riddles within this collection address the idea of finding wonder in the everyday, as that idea relates to (and differs from) the idea of finding wonder in a riddle collection.

In Chapter 1 I discussed several different approaches to wonder, riddling, and the everyday in the collections of Symphosius, Aldhelm, and Alcuin, surfacing especially in their use of wonder-language. Symphosius’s collection introduces two possibilities: that enigma represents wondrous and enigmatic qualities in the external world (cf. the egg’s paradoxical mira primordia), and alternately that riddles generate wonder spontaneously in the imagination by disguising the mundane as the marvellous (cf. the one-eyed man selling garlic’s transformation into a many-headed monster). Aldhelm’s riddles favour the former approach with poems that describe rather than conceal their subjects, avoiding (mostly) the trickery of imaginative misrepresentation except where, as in the pillow riddle, it can provide an exercise in faith. Alcuin’s riddles, by contrast, generate wonder in the imagination with fantastical narratives of friendly two-headed monsters and strange walking men who never existed—but invite the riddles’ recipients to attach these images to particular everyday objects in the real world, and thereby to understand that world as a site of creative play. Aldhelm’s descriptive and Alcuin’s imaginative approaches merge in their most serious engagements with enigma as a source of insight into the world, in Aldhelm’s final creatura riddle and Alcuin’s riddling association of wonder with what’s seen per speculum in enigmate, in ‘a reflection in an enigma’.

The Exeter Book Riddles deploy descriptive and imaginative enigma in an integrated style, revealing them to be complementary rather than opposed ways of approaching the everyday. Consider how these approaches come to bear on EXE 7:

EXE 7

Hrægl min swigað, þonne ic hrusan trede,
oþpe þa wic buge, oþpe wado drefe.
Hwilum mec ahebbæð ofer hæleþa byht
hyrste mine, ond þeos hea lyft,
EXE 7
My clothing keeps quiet, when I step on earth
or settle down on dwellings or disturb the waters.
Sometimes my dress and this lofty air
lift me over the home of heroes;
and widely, then, does the clouds’ strength
bear me over mankind. My adornments
sound out loud and entune sweetly,
sing clearly, when I am not touching
flood and fold, a soul faring.

EXE 7 is a riddle about the mute swan (Cygnus olor, Anglo-Saxon swon), one of the common species of swans found in medieval England. As Dieter Bitterli’s analysis has shown, the first and final lines develop etymological punning on the association with swon, singing, and silence, along with a discussion of the poem’s central marvel: the mysterious silent dress of the speaker, which sings when it carries the creature through the air. The mute swan’s feathers create unusual vibrations during flight that allow the birds’ wingbeats to be heard over long distances; according to Bitterli, this physical feature might have been the origin of the etymological associations of swan and cygnus with song in their respective languages. The riddle’s apparently metaphoric conceit (I have flying, singing clothes), which generates wonder in the imagination and seems initially like an Alcuinian disguise, blends seamlessly into Aldhelmian description of a being in the world who really does have those characteristics, which are related to its hidden nature as expressed in its name.

Let us consider, further, how this riddle engages with the everyday. The poem’s inner lines, in which the speaker is carried up over human habitations, do not relate to the etymological and feathery clues necessary for solving the riddle, and might (paradoxically) be considered to be unnecessary to the riddle overall. However, they do serve at least one function: they invite an

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73 Bitterli, Say What I Am Called, 35–46.

74 Ibid., 44–45.
imaginative vicarious experience of flight on a windy day, as the wind, the clouds’ strength, raises the speaker (and reader) above houses and trees, the familiar homes of heroes.\textsuperscript{75} Thus, where the opening and closing clues about the swan’s harmonically singing feathers highlight a particular marvel of that species, the interior lines of the poem energize another kind of wonder: an imagined experience of a bird in flight. Like Saturn and Solomon’s \textit{Yldu} riddles, EXE 7 encodes an implicit worldview in how it frames its subject. Indeed, this riddle not only represents the swan in such a way as to render it distinctive; the riddle cultivates new ways of apprehending the familiar. It renders a familiar creature wondrous, as her singing clothes carry her through the air and an astute reader can contemplate how the \textit{swinsian} singing of her feathers creates her name. It also renders wondrous the world we inhabit: this wondrous creature is \textit{local}, as she flies over human habitations. This riddle situates humans in a world of other beings with houses, who inhabit the world in many of the same ways, whose marvellousness and similarities with humans are forgotten in mistaken familiarity and lack of empathy. EXE 7, then, seems to integrate elements of a number of previous enigmatic styles in order to deepen the reader’s encounter with the swan. But what about the collection more broadly?

The Exeter Book Riddles are found in three sections towards the conclusion of a late-tenth-century manuscript of some 131 vellum leaves, housed in Exeter Cathedral by c.1072; this Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Library MS. 3501) is one of the four main surviving manuscripts

\textsuperscript{75} The riddle is a technology for imagining this perspective. It can even be compared to other imaginative technologies that aim to achieve the same effect: for example, kites sometimes aim to generate this everyday wonder, artificially expanding the horizons of experience with vicarious flight. Indeed, the pervasiveness of everyday wonder and enigmatic structures is suggested in the paradoxes that explain the vicarious imaginative pleasure of kite-flying in the film, \textit{Mary Poppins} (1964), as its final song proceeds, Old English riddle-style, from a description of the materials’ origin to a paradoxical explanation of their use:

\begin{verbatim}
With tuppence for paper and strings
You can have your own set of wings
With your feet on the ground
You’re a bird in flight
With your fist holding tight
To the string of your kite.
...
All at once, you’re lighter than air
You can dance on the breeze over houses and trees.
\end{verbatim}

of vernacular Old English poetry. Although there is some loss of text and controversy regarding how many riddles are in the surviving collection—even the scribal indicators seem to point out occasional trouble deciding where riddles began and ended—critics generally agree that the ultimate intention with the collection was probably to compile a hundred riddles, after the examples of Symphosius, Aldhelm, and the combined collections of Tatwine and Eusebius (40 and 60 riddles respectively). All the riddles are in Old English, with the exception of one, EXE 90, which is a five-line Latin enigma with clear thematic and stylistic connections to the vernacular material. Unlike most Latin enigmata collections, which name the solutions to each riddle in a title, the Exeter Book Riddles do not generally identify directly their solutions, although one-letter hints or full solutions are sometimes encoded in runes, whether embedded inside the riddle proposition or written as marginalia. As recent monographs by Bitterli, Murphy, and others have explored, the Exeter Riddles are distinctive for the wide variety of their riddle styles, which range from close translations of riddles of Aldhelm, to playful or elegiac descriptions of the afterlives of animals-turned-books, leather bags, and inkhorns; numerical monster-riddles with a return of the one-eyed garlic vendor; and double entendre riddles on saucy onions and rising dough. Beings described in the Exeter Book Riddles include human treasures and technologies, the sun and moon, ice, freshly hatched chickens, the soul and body, and creatures like the wanderer of EXE 39 (death? cloud? the spoken word?) which are likely to

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76 The Exeter Book Riddles are found in groups as 1–59, 30b and 60, and 61–95 on fols. 101r–115r, 122v–123r, and 124v–130v. The Exeter Book is probably the manuscript referred to in a will by Leofric, Bishop of Exeter, in 1072; for manuscript descriptions and studies of the Exeter Book see first Craig Williamson, The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 3–19.

77 There are some peculiarities; for instance, variants of the nine-line EXE 30 are copied in two different places in the manuscript, on folios 108r and 122v; editors differ on whether EXE 1–3 should be considered one riddle, two, or three, etc.

78 See Williamson, The Old English Riddles, 12–13; Orchard, “Enigma Variations,” 291, on the cases for unity or division of e.g. EXE 68–9 and 75–6.

79 On the arrangement of the Exeter Riddles as expanding from an earlier Aldhelm-influenced compilation of forty, see Mercedes Salvador-Bello, “Patterns of Compilation in Anglo-Latin Enigmata,” and Isidorean Perceptions.

80 On the issue of manuscripts pairing riddles with solutions, see Orchard, “Enigma Variations,” 285–86.

81 See EXE 35 on the Mailcoat or Lorica (translating ALD 33) and EXE 40 translating ALD 100, Creatura.

82 See the full-length studies of different types of riddles and clues in Bitterli, Say What I Am Called and Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles. For their summaries of the Exeter Collection as a whole, see Bitterli, Say What I Am Called, 3–12 and Murphy, Unriddling, 1–32, 234–237.
remain a mystery. Like the swan in EXE 7, many of the riddled objects are shown as living nearby or intimately alongside humans—a feature that does not necessarily make them easier to identify.

The riddles also vary in their approach to locating wonder in the everyday. I have argued above that EXE 7 features an integrated style, where wonder in imaginative description blends into wonder at the swan once recognized. Some riddles direct wonder more at the external world. For example, as I mentioned above in my discussion of Metre 28, EXE 1-3 is a majestic set of riddles (or one long riddle) that begins with a vivid description of the sound of thunder. With a riddling challenge evocative of wider Old English expressions of unknowing, the speaker provides moving poetic descriptions of nature’s destructive force and invites its reader to contemplate the paradox of its obedient relationship to God:

EXE 1
Hwylc is hæleþa þæs horsc ond þæs hygecraeftig
þæt þæt mæge asecgan, hwa mec on sið wræce,
þonne ic astige strong, stundum reþe,
þrymful þunie, þragum wræce
5 fere geond foldan, folcsalo bærne,
ræced reáfige? […]
 […] Saga, þoncol mon …

Who among men is so quick and so ingenious that he can say who rouses me to journey, when I come up strong—dire now and then peal out all powerful—sometimes, like an outcast, travel across the land, burn public buildings, ravage the hall? …
5 … Say, thoughtful man, …

The challenge in EXE 1 to name who controls the weather seems initially to suggest a similar overall point to Philosophy’s in Boethius’s Consolatio Philosophiae Book 4 Metre 5: however chaotic the forces of the storm seem, each of them by nature obeys divine law, just as the human wræce (l.4) or outcast to whom the speaker is likened must also, perhaps, be inferred to do.

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85 EXE 1.1–6, EXE 1.27 (or EXE 2.12 depending on numbering).
However, by their lengthy descriptions EXE 1-3 also provide a privileged insight into storm’s pervasiveness—it is the same force that thunders in the sky and that moves under the waters to stir the ocean to beat the shore—and its destructiveness to human civilization. Emphasizing these aspects of nature may render the being that controls nature’s force in a sense more knowable, but not, by that knowledge, less strange.

On the other hand the Exeter Book Riddles also feature many poems that trouble perception of their solutions. References to paradox, transformation, taboo, torture, and monstrosity disguise otherwise ordinary objects and animals, and reintroduce them as citizens of the *wundorworuld*, a cosmos strange and yet available for interpretation.\(^{86}\) Unknown objects may also be personified as *familiar* subjects—a bereft warrior, a noble guest, an embattled mother—and borrow the language of heroic epic or elegy to draw the reader into unexpected empathy. As in EXE 4, the speaker may seemingly accurately describe its situation, but not convey its story in a way that makes its identity known:

\[
\text{EXE 4:}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ic sceal þragbysig} & \quad \text{þegne minum,} \\
\text{hringum hæfted,} & \quad \text{hyran georne,} \\
\text{min bed brecan,} & \quad \text{breahtme cyþan} \\
\text{þæt me halswriþan} & \quad \text{hlaþord sealde.}
\end{align*}
\]

5 Oft mec slæperigne secg oþe meowle gretan eode; ic him gromheortum winterceald oncweþe. Wearm lim gebundenne bæg hwilum bersteð; se þeah bǐþ on þonce þegne minum,

10 medwisum men, me þæt sylfe, þær wiþt wite, ond wordum min on sped mæge spel gesecgan.

EXE 4
Busy at times, confined with rings,  
I must to my thane eagerly listen,  
break my bed, make known with a cry  
that a lord gave me a collar-ring.

5 Often a man or a woman has gone to greet me;  
all sleep-weary, I to those hotheads\(^{87}\)

\(^{86}\) See EXE 39.16–17.

\(^{87}\) ‘gromheortum’ is literally closer to ‘angry-hearted’, ‘fierce-hearted’; however, anger tends to be hot and pressured according to Lockett’s discussion of the ‘hydraulic model’ of Anglo-Saxon emotion; see Leslie Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions*, at 6–7 and following.
respond winter-cold. A warm limb
sometimes breaks out of bound circle, but this is good for my thane,
a half-wise man, and likewise for me,
who should know what’s what, and with my words
might tell a story with success.

Craig Williamson calls this poem “in many respects the most puzzling riddle in the Exeter Book. [. . . It] has perplexed and will probably continue to perplex the proudest of solvers.” EXE 4’s perplexity is reflected in the lack of scholarly consensus about what the riddle represents, with recent solutions including ‘bell’, ‘plough team’, ‘devil’, and ‘watchdog’ among others. As Williamson and many others note, key clues here seem to include the emphasis on rings in the proposition (‘hringum hæfted’, l. 2; ‘halswriþan’, l. 4; ‘gebundenne bæg’, l. 8), the puns on listening and obedience (is the speaker’s ‘þegn’ a master or servant?) and possible puns in the compounds (‘þragbysig’ could mean ‘sometimes active’ or ‘busy with time’, appropriate for a time-telling device. If the solution is a bell, the proposition also plays upon an inversion of roles, as the speaker describes itself as the cold and sleep-weary one who is roused by humans’ greetings, rather than the other way around.

This riddle adds a further layer of complexity in its play upon riddling communication. The riddle begins (like EXE 1-3) with a transaction of obedience by which the speaker eagerly obeys or ‘listens to’ the thane; this listening leads into the actions of breaking the bed and “breahtme cyþan” (making known with a noise) “þæt me halswriþan hlaford sealde.” This line produces a kind of crisis for interpretation: for example, if the speaker is understood as an ox, then the loud proclamation that the lord gave a neck-ring refers to the ox’s bellow in protest at

88 ‘bæg’ is ‘collar’; possibly a mis-spelling for ‘beag’, ring, or crown. A round thing is definitely intended.

89 literally, subjunctive ‘who could know aught’. The subjunctive could indicate a contrary-to-fact possibility Murphy interprets it as “and (it would be) to me likewise, if I understood anything and if I were able successfully to tell my tale in words” (Unriddling, 72).

90 Craig Williamson, The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book, 141.

91 Bitterli slightly prefers ‘flail’ (Say What I Am Called, 26) but also accepts ‘bell’ and ‘bucket’ (35); Murphy prefers ‘bell’ but also addresses Shannon Cochran’s suggestion of a ‘plough team’ with a wheeled plough — see Unriddling 71–77; and Shannon Cochran “The Plough’s the Thing: A New Solution to Old English Riddle 4 of the Exeter Book,” Journal of English and Germanic Philology 108 (2009): 301–9. Other recently proposed solutions include ‘dog’ (Ray Brown), ‘devil’ (Melanie Heyworth); for bibliography see Murphy, Unriddling, 71; Williamson, The Old English Riddles, 142–143 (preferring ‘bell’ or ‘millstone’ but leaving it unsolved); and Donald K. Fry, “Exeter Book Riddle Solutions,” Old English News Letter 15.1 (1981), 22. Orchard prefers ‘belle’ (bell).
the yoke or harness, and the cry is a signifier of obedience or domestication. If the solution is a bell, then the gifted halswripa is the bell-yoke, or perhaps (with a play on ‘wripan’ meaning ‘to twist, to curve’) a neck-wring, given to mark an occasion. Either way, the metaphoric ‘focus’ of this riddle suggests a warrior’s voluntary, though socially contracted, boasting of his lord’s generosity—a communication that is mutually understood between speaker and recipient.

Meanwhile, what the speaker ‘actually’ utters seems to be an involuntary response, an expression of the conditions that made its utterance possible and necessary. However, what humans within the riddle-world will understand from the speech is something different again: if the solution is a bell, information about a prayer hour, or a wedding, death, or service; if the speaker is an ox, the cry makes known the location and the status of the plough, and so on. This riddle thus plays in a complex way upon differences between what is said and what is known. The creature posits that it “on sped mæge spel gesecgan” (“might with success relate a story”), but while this creature relates a story, and in its work it obviously communicates many further announcements, the riddle-speaker’s identity is not revealed to us by its tantalizing communication. The wonder of this opaque communication is particularly evident in its seventh and eighth lines, which describe a warm limb breaking the bound circle: the poem achieves a description which is syntactically clear, somatically evocative, imaginatively rich, yet utterly unidentifiable with any surety. The everyday, evoked here in the routine greeting of the cold speaker and the man or woman, is shown to be an interface: wonder erupts in the cuð (familiar, known) not when something ‘new’ is encountered, but when perception changes.

Symphosius, Aldhelm, Alcuin, Metre 28, and Solomon and Saturn II each deploy wonder-language in characteristic ways. The Exeter Book Riddles, likewise, often assert the strangeness of their subjects explicitly, using words and compounds based on sellic, wreætic and wundor, and these repeated wonder-tags and wonder-terms are a more prominent feature in the opening phrases of the Exeter Riddles than in any of the collections we have hitherto discussed. Dozens of riddles describe the unknown object as a “wunderlicu wiht,” “wreætec wiht,” “sellic þing,” or a close variation thereof, through such phrases as “Ic eom wunderlicu wiht” (EXE 18.1, EXE 20.1, EXE 24.1, EXE 25.1), “Ic seah sellic þing” (EXE 29.3, with “sellic ic seah” in EXE 30.3 following), or the couplet “Ic þa wiht geseah on weg feran; Seo wæs wreætic wundrum gegierwed.” (I saw a creature travel on her way; she was marvellously adorned with wonders.) (EXE 36.1-2, EXE 68.1-2 (with “heo”). Even the mysterious Latin riddle EXE 88 begins,
“Mirum videtur mihi” (“A wonder appeared to me” EXE 88.1) and continues, “Dum starem et mirarem” (“while I would stand and wonder”; EXE 88.3). In total there are over fifty words and compounds involving wundor, wundorlic, wrætlic, sellic and searolic in the Exeter Book riddles, whether included as a part of the introductory phrase, in the general description, or in the closing formula.92 Several riddles go beyond merely mentioning the wondrousness of their subject, and remark on the intellectual challenge posed by the creature,93 the riddler’s evaluation of the wondrousness of the phenomenon,94 or the nature of wonder itself.95

92 As a reference for others examining Old English wonder-vocabulary, here are my counts examining 53 instances of explicit vocabulary based on “wundor,” including nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and compound nouns.

There are 27 uses of adjectives (wundorlic, wrætlic, sellic) meaning ‘wondrous’. These include 10 variants of ‘wundorlic’, cf. “Ic eom wundorlicu wiht” at EXE 47.2 (Bookworm): “Me þæt puhte / 2 wællicu wyrd, þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn”; EXE 51.1 (Pen and fingers) “Ic seah wrætlice wiht, / wrætlice gewefen / 104 ful wundorlicran”; EXE 60.11 “on sefan searolic ðam þe swylc ne conn”; EXE 88.19 “is min innað… wundorlic” There are also 13 variants of “wrætlic,” including EXE 23.2 (Bow) ’Ic eom wrætlic wiht’; EXE 28.14 (Bible/Codex) “wrætlic weorc smiþa”; EXE 31.18 (bagpipes?) “wrætic me þinceð” EXE 33.1 (Iceberg?) “Wiht cwom æfter wege wrætlicu liu”; EXE 39.24 (Death? Creature Death? speech?) “wrætlice me æt is wrætlicu wundne loccas.”; EXE 67.2 (Gospel Book) “Ic on sefan searolic ne conn”. There are 4 uses of ‘sellic’ as an adjective:

There are 13 (“Micel is to hycganne / wisfæstum menn, hwæt seo wiht sy”). There are 2 references to wundor gefrægn: EXE 50.1, EXE 60.10 “wundres dæl”; EXE 67.5 “wundor me þæt”; EXE 68.2 “wrætlice wundrum gegierwed”; EXE 68–9.3 “wundor wearð”; EXE 83.10 “(hæbe) wundra fela” (but the MS says “wunda fela”); EXE 84.1 “… wundrum acenned”. EXE 84.22 “wundrum bewre ðed”; EXE 84.35 “mengo wundra”; EXE 28.12 “wrætlice æt frymne”.

There are also 2 compound nouns with wonder as a component: EXE 90.3 “dum starem et mirarem”; EXE 80.42 “ðæt wafiað weras ofer eorðan”.

There are 27 uses of adjectives (wundorlic, wrætlic, sellic) meaning ‘wondrous’. These include 10 variants of ‘wundorlic’, cf. “Ic eom wundorlicu wiht” at EXE 18.1, EXE 20.1, EXE 24.1, EXE 25.1; EXE 90.3 “dum starem et mirarem”; EXE 80.42 ”Mirum videtur mihi”. Several riddles go beyond merely mentioning the wondrousness of their subject, and remark on the intellectual challenge posed by the creature, the riddler’s evaluation of the wondrousness of the phenomenon, or the nature of wonder itself.
Anglo-Saxonists have puzzled for decades over the function that wonder-language serves in the collection. In his discussion of the double entendre EXE 44 (the Lock and Key), which describes a “wrætlic”\(^{96}\) (wondrous something) that hangs by a man’s thigh, ready to enter a familiar hole it has often filled before, D. K. suggests that the riddler’s use of wrætlic leaves the door open for further inquiry when the solution seems obvious. As Smith argues, “Its indeterminacy destabilizes the meaning that, on first reading, may have seemed so firmly anchored in the bodily imagery.”\(^{97}\) Smith proposes more broadly that wonder-language in the Riddles serves to estrange the riddles’ subjects:

[If] all these wrætlic objects are to some degree wondrous—whatever that may mean—what ties these different senses of wondrousness together is their strangeness. In the riddles particularly, this evocation is used not just to describe the objects but to hide them, to estrange them from our understanding. . . . The description hides as much as its shows.\(^{98}\)

Brian McFadden, on the other hand, argues that wonder-language in the Riddles sets into motion a thought process that ends in greater—but wonderless—clarity, as the riddles are solved:

The riddler uses the ambiguity of wiht and the actions depicted in the small fragmented narratives of the riddles to mislead the solver into making a simple object into a strange and powerful creature that acts in wonderful ways. However, for the correct solver, the wonder of the being is stripped away; rather than taking the traits of the object as inherent to that object, the solver sees them as metaphorically shared with simple objects and thus evades the verbal trap, maintaining control over one's understanding of the riddled creature. The correct solver strips away false comparisons and reads the riddle with a clearer sense of the object described.\(^{99}\)

\(^{95}\) See EXE 69.1 “wiht is wrætlic þam þe hyre wisan ne conn”. (A creature is strange to the one who knows not its ways.)


\(^{97}\) Smith, “Humor in Hiding,” 92.

\(^{98}\) Ibid.

Each of these positions contains a foreshadowing of Dailey’s argument, that wonder and wonder-language act as a ‘lure’ for engaging the processes of riddle-solving and thereby exposing (and training) the responses of the would-be solver.\(^{100}\) However, I do not agree with McFadden that ‘wonder’ here is the fulcrum for redirecting from false wonder to control and accuracy, and I find Smith’s interpretation of ‘wrætlic’ as concealment or estrangement to be of limited usefulness vis-a-vis the collection as a whole. In these final pages, I will argue that as for Symphosius, Aldhelm, and Alcuin, wonder-language is a place where the riddles articulate their positions on riddling and the everyday. In particular, shared wonder-language cultivates comparisons between riddles that expand the horizons of the collection, and that thereby generate wonder at wonder itself.

Scholars of the Symphosian tradition now recognize that connections and implicit contrasts between adjacent riddles (whether between the solutions or the propositions or both) can be observed at work in Symphosius, in Alcuin’s *Disputatio Pippini*, in *SolSatII*, and in many other collections, including, as Salvador-Bello’s most recent monograph describes, at least some of the Exeter Book Riddles.\(^{101}\) For example, Orchard and Dailey have argued persuasively for a reading of EXE 43 (on the Cock and Hen) and 44 (on the Soul and Body) as a pair of this type, contrasting different forms of learning, riddling style, and knowledge.\(^{102}\)

Despite the obvious wondrousness of riddles such as EXE 4 and EXE 7, explicit wonder-language is missing from the first seventeen riddles in the Exeter Book collection.\(^{103}\) When wonder vocabulary and wonder-formulas arrive in the collection, however, they do so in a way that swiftly, and perhaps paradoxically, establishes their familiarity—EXE 18, 20, 23, 24, and 25

\(^{100}\) Dailey, “Riddles, wonder and responsiveness,” 468–469.


\(^{102}\) Orchard, “Enigma Variations,” 287–288; Dailey, “Riddles, wonder and responsiveness,” 457–459. As Orchard observes, intriguingly there is no scribal marker separating these two riddles, which probably indicates that they were paired in their source, but also felicitously suggests that the true riddle lies in their pairing. (288)

\(^{103}\) For example, words such as *wundor, wraetlic, wundorlic, sellic,* and formulas such as *wraetlic wiht.* Nor does *wiht* occur referring to a riddle subject, although as I’ve mentioned previously it occurs in this way some forty-two times in the collection overall. The first seventeen riddles are some 288 lines of Old English poetry, amounting to about a fifth of the riddles’ overall length (1351 lines), so the absence of wonder-language in these riddles is perplexing. ‘Wiht’ does occur three times in these earlier riddles, but as part of expressions meaning ‘in no/any way’ or ‘to no/any extent’ (as in our modern ‘not a whit.’) See EXE 4.11, EXE 11.5, EXE 15.22.
begin in nearly identical ways, as the speaker declares his or herself to be a wondrous creature (“Ic eom wunderlicu wiht”) in the opening line. When not paired with unusual propositions, swiftly, wonder-references threaten to become boring—a sign that the riddler is not attempting anything fancy. The pattern of opening with first-person wonder-formulas in EXE 18-25 also causes the riddles that break the pattern to stand out immediately; these non-“wondrous creature” riddles (EXE 19, 21, and 22) are also sites for other innovations, as EXE 19 is an ‘I saw’ riddle describing a scene with runic substitutions for the riddle subjects, EXE 21 is a splendid plough riddle introducing wonder-play of a different kind (it is the first to say that it “hæbbe wundra fela,” ‘ha[s] many wonders’), and EXE 22 is an unusual third-person description of a party mysteriously attempting to cross a river (possibly describing stars in the Milky Way).

Soon, though, it becomes clear that wonder-language can draw attention to small-scale connections and contrasts between riddles. When EXE 24 and 25, two adjacent riddles of nearly the same length, both begin “Ic eom wunderlicu wiht,” or EXE 30 and 31 both begin with an identical two-line refrain about the varied adornments of the world, a narrator’s announcement that he saw something “sellic,” and a concluding invitation to the wise to identify “hwæt sio wiht sie” (EXE 30.24, 31.14), these formal, framing similarities between adjacent riddles become invitations to compare the riddles more closely.

The two riddles that come immediately before the famous Bible riddle (EXE 26) provide a good example of the way wonder-language focusses comparison between riddles, as they feature the same wonder-formula to introduce vastly different propositions:

EXE 24:
Ic eom wunderlicu wiht,  wræsne mine stefne,
hwilum beorce swa hund,  hwilum blæte swa gat,
hwilum græde swa gos,  hwilum gielle swa hafoc,

104 Of course, it is very possible that this opening wonder-formula would be immediately recognizable as traditional riddling to any Anglo-Saxon reader/listener, but the transition would still be noticeable, if only in the form of ‘oh, look, the opening line has abruptly become more traditional’. Although the text is incomplete, the wondrousness of EXE 18 is somewhat disappointing so far: that it cannot speak to men, although it has a mouth and wide womb/belly, and it was on a ship with others like it (suspected solution: a type of jar). The previous riddle, EXE 17, by contrast, is highly enigmatic and still unsolved, although Patrick Murphy has argued that it may be a masterful rendition of Samson’s riddle of the honeycomb in the mouth of the lion. On EXE 17 see Murphy, Unriddling, 153–174.

105 See Bitterli, Say What I Am Called, 57–67. We may note that if this is about the courses of the stars, then this is one of the subjects identified as wondrous in the Old English translation of Boethius’s Metre 28—see above.
hwilum ic onhyrge þone haswan earn,
5  guðfugles hleoþor,  hwilum glidan reorde
muþe gemæne,  hwilum mæwes song,
þær ic glado sitte.  . X. mec nemnað,
swylce . Þ. ond . R. .  . Þ. füllestæð,
. Ñ. ond . I.  Nu ic haten eom
10  swa þa siæ stafas  sweotule bescæþ.

EXE 25:
Ic eom wunderlicu wiht,  wifum on hyhte,
neahbuendum nyt;  nængum sceþpe
burgsittendra,  nympþe bonan anum.
Staþol min is steapheah,  stonde ic on bedde,
5  neþpan ruh nathwaer.  Neþeð hwilum
ful cyrtenu  ceorles dohtor,
modwlone meowle,  þæt heo on mec gripeð,
ræseð mec on reodne,  reafæð min heafod,
fegeð mec on fæsten.  Fæleþ sona
10  mines gemotes, seo þæ mec nearwað.106
wif wundenlocc.  Wæt bið þæt eage.

EXE 24:
I am a wondrous creature:  I warp my voice—
At whiles I bark like a dog,  at whiles bleat like a goat,
sometimes honk like a goose,  sometimes scream like a hawk,
at whiles I match the tawny eagle—
5  the warbird’s frequency.  Sometimes the kite’s speech
I say with my mouth,  sometimes the gull’s song,
where I sit cheerfully.  . G. names me,
likelihood . Æ. and . R . . O. helps out,
H . and . I,  Now I am named
10  as these six letters  spell out clearly.

EXE 25:
I am a wondrous creature: I’m women’s hope,107

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106 Murphy notes that this ‘seo’ is an emendation from the manuscript’s ‘se’, rendering it ambiguous whether the ‘wif wundenlocc’ refers at last to the earlier human or to the onion itself (thereby playing on a different tradition of vegetable riddles); another interpretation of this line says ‘Straightaway, [someone] feels my contact, the one who confines me, a woman with braided hair.’ (Murphy transl.) See Murphy, Unriddling, 230–233.

107 for sexual fulfillment; for pregnancy and children; for a well-flavoured meal. ‘hyhte’ is often translated by modern editors as ‘want’ or ‘desire’, but the first meaning for hyht in the DOE is ‘I. feeling or state of hope, expectation; hopeful trust, confidence; A.1. hope, expectation; aspiration’, and it often translates Latin ‘spes’, one of the three theological virtues (see DOE meaning A.1.a.). It is possible that this riddle is slightly more thoughtful about what even the sexual interpretation of its subject might mean for women than has been usually acknowledged. See ‘hyht’, Noun, m., cl. 3, in Dictionary of Old English: A to H online, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2016).
help to neighbours, scathe to none
of the city-dwellers, except my destroyer.
My base is tall and erect, I stand in bed,
shaggy below (not so sure where). Sometimes she’s brave enough
—that really gorgeous churl’s daughter,
that maid proud in mind—that she grabs me,
assaults ruddy me, plunders my head,
fixes me in fast. Now she feels
our meeting, the one who cramps me,
the woman with braided hair. That eye is wet.

The speaker of EXE 24 unfolds its wondrousness immediately, in its marvellous ability to
‘wresne mine stefne’ (alter my voice). Unusually for the Exeter Book Riddles, the speaker—a
jay—names himself, amusingly showing his facility even with the signifiers of human writing by
spelling out his identity in six runes, which can be unscrambled to form the solution ᚻᛁᚷᚱᚫ HIGORÆ (jay, or perhaps magpie). This riddle’s main focus relates to the attention it gives to
the various onomatopoeic verbs for the different animal noises, which are at first reminiscent of
the lists of animal sounds which may be found in Latin and vernacular manuscripts from an early
period. The jay has himself become a miniature encyclopedia of the ways that animals express
themselves, while also revealing his potential as a poet to exceed those forms of expression, as
he breaks his half-line pattern to provide more elaborate descriptions of his last three imitations.
In essence, the living jay can be imagined not only as a recorder but as an animal riddler, who
playfully disguises itself in the likeness of other creatures in the world around it—which
resemblance a clever listener can both identify (this is supposed to be a hawk) and understand the
source of (this is not a hawk but a jay’s impression of a hawk; ceci n’est pas un pipe). It is no
semantic stretch to describe the jay’s mimicry as marvellous, though; it’s unclear how or why
some birds have such extensive skills not just in song but in mimicry, and it seems unlikely or

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108 lit. ‘in a secure place/fastness’ or perhaps, ‘in a clamp’.
109 See Jonathan Hsy, “Between Species: Animal-Human Bilingualism and Medieval Texts,” in Catherine Batt and
Renée Tixier, eds., Booldly bot meekly: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages in
Honour of Roger Ellis (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2016); Robert Stanton, “Mimicry, Subjectivity, and the
Embodied Voice in Anglo-Saxon Bird Riddles,” in Irit Ruth Kleiman, ed., Voice and Voicelessness in Medieval
110 For an impressive example of a bluejay imitating a red-tailed hawk, see “A Young Blue Jay Mimicking the Call
of a Red-tailed Hawk,” YouTube video, 0:19, posted by “RaptorEducationalGroup,” April 5, 2012,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWcWW65I8qM. For a magpie imitating human speech, see Caters Clips,
“Talking Magpie Becomes Online Sensation,” YouTube video, 1:09, posted by “Caters Clips,” October 14, 2015,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5YbWHnjrjg.
even impossible unless one witnesses it in person. Though a local creature rather than a far-off one, the jay’s self-description as ‘wundorlicu’ is thus in a similar vein to Aldhelm’s riddle on the peacock, or the flying fish: it aptly describes a wonder in the natural world.

By contrast, the ‘wonder’ of the onion in EXE 25—as articulated not only in the initial tag, but in language such as “nathwær”—is squarely imaginative, as it is conferred by means of an elaborate double entendre, suggesting a sexual solution for which there seems very little doubt, and a mundane solution that eludes the mind. Like EXE 4, EXE 25 showcases how changing the terms on which one perceives creates wonder in the familiar, in what one may see every day. Deeper contemplation of the proposition of EXE 25 reveals further embedded wonders in its poetic craft, such as a Symphosian echo in 25.2–3 and the miniature riddles of the garden ‘bed’ and the “neahbuendum,” “dwellers-nearby,” who although in a list of human wives and citizens are nonetheless most likely to be the nearby plants in the garden where the onion grows. The proposition’s evocative description of the daughter’s encounter also shows a range of poetic skill. “Wæt bið þæt eage” (25.11) is somatic, affective, misleading, while describing tears in the eye of an onion-cutter. It contrasts strikingly with EXE 24’s abstractly informative “Nu ic haten eom / swa þa siex stafas sweotule becnāþ.” (24.9-10) Paired together, EXE 24’s repetitive phrase structures and air of knowledgeable certainty serve as an effective counterpoint for EXE 25’s masterful employments of ambiguity and affectively laden phrasing—even while the jay’s ability to sound like another creature without being that creature anticipates the onion’s playful masquerade. Yet what is the relationship between the wonder at a jay, and the wonder at a suggestive onion? What is a “wunderlicu wiht” if both of these creatures qualify?

111 Scholars including Orchard and Murphy have explored the relationship of this Exeter Book ‘onion’ to SYM 45 ‘de cepa’ (on the onion). The opening lines’ point that the speaker is harmful to none except a harmer is probably inspired by, and might be enough to evoke, Symphosius’s famous clue of reciprocal aggression, mordeo mordentem (SYM 45.1), and thereby tip off the listener or reader to the riddle’s solution. However, without Symphosius’s alliterative wordplay and close juxtaposition of the two words (a central feature of other variations upon this riddle by Tatwine and in the Exeter Book itself), I am inclined to agree with Murphy that this connection would not immediately come to mind. Indeed, the riddle hides its roots both literally and figuratively, burying its Symphosian connections by failing to reproduce the earlier riddles’ formal features, just as its subject’s hairlike tendrils are buried nathwær (I-don’t-know-where). See Orchard, “Enigma Variations,” 295–297; Murphy, Unriddling, 221–234.

112 EXE 24’s hwilum adverbial phrases do find an odd echo in EXE 25’s list of ‘people’ (and plants) in the dative to whom its adjectives apply (wifum on hyhte / neahbuendum nyt, nængum sceþþe’, EXE 25.1–2).
What is a wonder? The Exeter Book Riddles include several riddles that open this question explicitly, while pairing their remarks with riddling examples. EXE 31 and 32, two adjacent riddles describing (probably) a musical instrument and a ship or wheelbarrow, begin with a refrain that has sometimes been taken by critics as a motto of the collection as a whole:

EXE 31:
Is þes middangeard missenlicum
wisum gewlītegad, wrættum gefrætwad.
Ic seah sellic þing singan on ræcede;
wiht wæs nowe werum on gemonge
sio hæfde wæstum wundorlicran….

This Middle-Earth is beautified in a variety of ways, adorned with clever things.\(^\text{113}\)
I saw a special thing sing in a hall, [\textit{never}] was there a creature among men who had a more wondrous form….

EXE 32:
Is þes middangeard missenlicum
wisum gewlītegad, wrættum gefrætwad.
Siþum sellic ic seah searo hweorfan,
gridan wið greote, giellende faran….

This Middle-Earth is beautified in a variety of ways, adorned with clever things.
Sometimes I’ve seen a strange device turn, grind against grit, go along shrieking. . .\(^\text{114}\)

The basic pattern of these openings is clear: the riddles illustrate the principle articulated in the opening couple, serving as examples of the world’s variegated adornments—and perhaps, in the strange patterning of their propositions, acting as microcosms for the ways that riddle-wonder renders the world more beautiful in its various ways. “Wræt” is ‘a work of art’, ‘a jewel’, ‘an ornament’; however, it is the base noun from which “wrætlic” (‘wondrous, curious’) is formed, so it semantically recalls these qualities of wonder while ‘gewlītegad’ and ‘gefrætwad’ affirm its base meaning of adornment. Wonders, then, are what adorn the world by showing off its

\(^{113}\) See McFadden, “The word \textit{wrætt} includes both the idea of artistry as well as the hint of strangeness; the implication of artificially created wonder suggests the verbal manipulations that have elevated an ordinary object into something strange and unfamiliar,” “Raiding, Reform, and Reaction,” 336.

\(^{114}\) Some possible solutions include ‘ship’, especially ‘ceap-scip’ (merchant ship); wheelbarrow; millstone. See Niles, \textit{Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts}, 141.
‘missenlic’ (variegated, various) and ‘wrætlic’ (strange, adorned, curious) qualities. Riddles adorn the objects of the world in just the same way, as in EXE 31 and 32 which draw hauntingly beautiful portraits of a creature who can’t speak but sings through her foot (bagpipes?) and her horrific doppelganger, a one-footed screaming creature put to men’s service (a ship or wheelbarrow?) respectively. Indeed these descriptions draw out the variety and the curiosity of things to be found in the world, a world that contains both music and suffering evoked in complex feats of human technology.

EXE 70, an incomplete riddle describing the body of what is perhaps another musical instrument, proposes an alternate understanding of wonder. It explains,

Wiht is wrætlic þam þe hyre wisan ne conn. (EXE 70.1)
A creature is wondrous to the one who doesn’t know its ways.

This effectively offers a definition of the ‘wrætlic wiht’ seen in so many Exeter Riddle openings—and shares with EXE 31.2 an emphasis on the importance of wisan (‘ways’) with the missenlicum wisum of EXE 31–32.1–2. However, EXE 70’s formulation aligns wonder with the curiosity initially evoked by perception of a mystery, and implies that better knowledge may dissipate wonder (a wiht is not wrætlic to the one who does know its ways; a riddle is not wondrous once solved). This is thus a different position to that suggested by EXE 31–32, where the riddling propounding of a sellic þing is a form of adornment, beautifying the world by deepening our perspective on its variety and strangeness. EXE 70’s definition, however, connects back to Solomon and Saturn II, in Saturn’s initial description of his curiosity—the fyrwet which is the opening condition for a search for wisdom in Metre 28. Just before the transition to riddles and everyday wonders in that poem, Saturn explains his curiosity to Solomon and receives a strange reply, saying:

Saturnus cwæð:

260 An wise is on woroldrice
ymb ða me fyrwet bræc L wintra
dæges and niehtes ðurh deop gesceafa;
geomrende gast deø nu gena swa,
ærðon me geunne ece dryhten
δæt me geseme snoterra monn.

Solomon cwæð:

Soð is δæt ðu sagast; seme ic ðe recene
ymb ða wrætlican wiht. Wilt ðu δæt ic ðe secgge? (SolSatII.260–268)
Saturn said:

There is a way (or situation) in the worldly kingdom
Concerning which my curiosity has urged me fifty winters,
Days and nights, through deep destiny;
A mourning spirit; so it does even now,
Until the eternal lord consents

That a wiser man satisfy me.

Solomon said:
It’s true what you say: I will satisfy you immediately
about that wondrous creature. Do you want me to tell you?

Solomon’s phrase ‘wrætlican wiht’ is effectively a compressed restatement of the relationship Saturn describes between himself and the object of his curiosity, just as EXE 70 describes a riddling creature as one whose ways are unknown. In essence, this exchange has the format of a riddle proposition and solution, with Saturn describing his curiosity-driven experience and Solomon identifying, ‘this is the condition of a wonder/riddle’. Solomon then goes on to describe the Vasa Mortis, a mysterious four-headed exotic chained sorrowing bird, in one of the most peculiar passages to survive in Old English literature. Solomon’s description of the creature’s ways is unlikely to relieve anyone from curiosity in the near future. The fact that Saturn (unusually) has no reply and immediately turns to ask his riddle about the wundor of Old Age instead, perhaps suggests the unproductiveness of that exotic subject for a text teaching wisdom. At any rate, although as in Metre 28 Saturn’s curiosity (fyrwet, or Metre 28’s fyrwetgeorn) is what pushes him to seek out Solomon, this is not the condition in which he ends the poem: in SolSatFrag, probably the last lines of SolSatII, when Saturn goes home

Hwæðre was on sælum se ðe of siðe cwom
feorran gefered. Næfre ær his ferhð ahlog. (SolSatFrag.8–9)

But he was happy, he who had come from the journey,
had travelled far. His spirit had never laughed before.

In SolSatII, a wise perspective produces joy and laughter. Laughter, though, is often a reaction to a pleasurable upheaval of expectations, to experiencing something incongruous: laughter is an

115 See Anlezark, The Old English Dialogues, 123–5, who connects this to a giant sorrowing allegorical bird in Irish esoterica, also found in the Collectanea of Pseudo-Bede.
expression of wonder.\textsuperscript{116}

A wise perspective, then, is a wondering one. EXE 70’s definition that \textit{wreætic} describes only what is unknown, is itself modified by other riddles in the collection. Dailey discusses the wonder of EXE 60, on the reed pen, which expresses its amazement that it is used by fingers and the mind’s intention to produce silent communication between two people.\textsuperscript{117} The speaker concludes,

\begin{verbatim}
Lyt ic wende
þæt ic ær ðƿhe sidæ 
æfre sceolde
ofe meodubence 
mudæleas sprecan,
wordum wrixlan. 
þæt is wundres dæl,
on sefan searolic 
þam þe swylc ne conn,
hu mec seaxes ord 
ond seo swiþre hond,
eorles ingeþonc 
ond ord somod,
þingum geþydan… (EXE 60.7b-14a)
\end{verbatim}

Little did I think
that ever, before or after, I should
speak, mouthless, over a meed-bench,
exchange words. That is a share of wonder,
curious to the mind who doesn’t know such things,
how the knife’s tip and the stronger hand,
the \textit{eorl’s} inner thought and the point together,
join me to this matter…


The chaumpiouns þat put sowen;
\textit{Shuldreden he ile oper} and *lowen.  *laughed
Wolden he nomore to putting gange,
But seyde, “[W]e dwellen her to longe!”
þis selkouth mithe nthouc ben hyd
Ful sone it was ful loude kid
Of Hauelok, hw he warp þe ston […](Havelok 1056–62, my emphases).


\textsuperscript{117} Dailey, “Riddles, wonder and responsiveness,” 462–464.
Although the riddle qualifies that this situation is wondrous “þam þe swylc ne conn” (“to the one who doesn’t know such”, EXE 60.11), the riddle troubles this qualification, for who can say that they do not find writing amazing when it is considered? As Dailey argues, “the reed pen requires the framing of the riddle to highlight a mystery that is not manifest at first glance but requires language to narrate and understand its fabulous nature. Thus, even when ‘solved’, the riddles sustain or generate new mystery…”.

The riddle’s function here is to make that mystery perceptible, to draw attention to wonder “that is not manifest at first glance”.

I’d like to conclude by examining one last perspective on everyday wonder, in another riddle given prominent attention by critics. EXE 47 meditates,

Moððe word fræt—me þæt þuhte
wretlicu wyrd þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,
þæt se wyrm forswealg wera gied sumes,
þeof in þystro, þrymþæstne cwide
5 ond þæs strangan stæþol. Stælgiest ne wæs
wihte þy gleawra þe he þam wordum swealg. (EXE 47.1–6)

A moth ate words. I thought it
A funny fate, when I learned of that wonder,
that the worm munched up someone’s poem,
a thief in the dark—that majestic saying
5 and its strong support. The thieving visitor wasn’t
a bit(e) the wiser, though he took in those words.

Many scholars, including Fred C. Robinson, Craig Williamson, and Dieter Bitterli have offered influential readings of the subtleties of this poem based on Symphosius’s SYM 16, Tinea (Bookworm/Bookmoth). Robinson notes the poem’s “pattern of puns” on “the simultaneous reality and insubstantiality of language” in its use of ambiguous terms and verbs, as for example swealg that can mean either ‘ate’ or ‘absorbed/understood.’ As Williamson and others have

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118 Dailey, “Riddles, wonder and responsiveness,” 469.
121 Robinson, “Artful Ambiguities,” 362. We might think of a similar pun to do with sapiens—the tasting one, the wise one.
noted, the poem’s central paradox reflects on the relationship between speech and writing: poetic words, in a written setting, are vulnerable to the worm’s tactics of oral reception. In turn, many scholars have found implicit commentary in this riddle, whether on the relationship between oral and written traditions of poetry, an ironic reversal of the book-riddles as once again Word becomes Flesh, or on playful Old English vernacular appropriation of written Latin sources. In considering the poem’s representation of wonder, though, I would like to address another of its formal features.

Bitterli observes that in its gradual renaming from moððe to wyrm to peof and stælgiest, “[f]rom the literal and concrete, the poem thus gradually moves to the metaphorical and abstract.” In other words, the poem inverts the usual ordering from proposition to (supposed) solution in the Exeter Book Riddles, as it renders its subject first plainly, and then in an increasingly dilated, creatively adorned manner. This is a classic example of something ordinary (even annoying) ——becoming wondrous (even funny) the more it is considered: not because new information comes to light or any part of the circumstance is concealed, but because the situation unfolds itself to the contemplative mind. “Me þæt þuhte / wrætlicu wyrd þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn” is the judgment in this poem of someone who is among the wise, by Metre 28’s terms. It is a declaration of a riddle-writer in action, someone who, given a phenomenon, finds the wonder (the nature of written communication, fragile physical object and powerful speech artefact); the enigma (the hidden connection between insects and hungry darkness-loving burglars); and the imaginative play (the possibility of a bookmoth’s education or perceptiveness) within it.

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123 See Williamson, The Old English Riddles, 286.

124 Bitterli, Say What I Am Called, 192; Bitterli finds thematic parallels between the two ‘guest’ inhabitants of their media (of transformed Symphosian riddles), the fish in the river and the worm in the book (192–93).

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.
Moreover, as an artful response to Symphosius’s *Tinea* riddle, this poem offers a model of reception for the tradition as a whole. Symphosius, we may remember, began with a drunken party at which his riddles contributed to “nescio quas … nugas” (trifles, I don’t know what). ‘Tinea’ focuses on a similar instance of non-productive reception:

**SYM 16: Tinea**
littera me pavit, nec quid sit littera novi.
in libris vixi, nec sum studiosior inde.
exedi Musas, nec adhuc tamen ipsa profeci.

16. Bookmoth/Bookworm
The letter has fed me, but I have not come to know what a letter might be.
I have lived in books, yet I’m not the more studious thereby.
I have absorbed the Muses, but I myself haven’t yet accomplished anything.

SYM 16 describes an ironic conceit: an avid devourer of literature in the late Roman world who has not received the improvements in character or career that such a course of reading might promise. The wonder that the Exeter Book poet finds in the ‘Moððe’ situation—the moth’s ability to destroy good words—is not the same as the irony Symphosius points out. But the idea of the activity of reading is also different. Preserving Symphosius’s *dilettante* worm only in its final line, the poem shifts the potential benefit of reading from the virtues associated with *studiosior* (more diligent) and *profeci* (effective), to *gleawra* (keener, wiser, more perceptive). It creates implicit juxtaposition between Symphosius’s hapless *tinea* (and the enterprising Anglo-Saxon moth) with the new poet-narrator, who finds his own wonder, making new and different connections using the material he has received—accomplishing a great deal, even as the imagined originary poem is lost.

The Exeter Book Riddles do not emerge with a consensus about the role of wonder in the riddling collection, but such a consensus would be antithetical to the kind of learning they facilitate. Nor do they provide sheer incoherence on the subject. Instead, what they provide is very riddle-like: an assertion of its importance, and a set of related starting-points, showing wonder—and ‘wonder’-vocabulary—operating in a variety of ways (*missenlicum wisum*) and adorned with strangeness, like other aspects of the everyday. In so doing they beautify the wonder they seek to excite.
2.4 Conclusion

“I will propose you some other wonders,” said Alcuin—“see if you can figure them out on your own.”

Everyday wonder is indexical and phenomenological: better explained or justified in example than prescription, and confirmed or redefined in each new encounter with it. The weaknesses of this indeterminacy for a critical term of study are obvious. The great strengths of it are attested by the high value on it placed by Anglo-Saxon enigmatic poets—from the educational aspirations of Aldhelm’s *Creatura*, and Alcuin’s surprising, punning *mira*, to the everyday wonders hailed by the Alfredian translator and versifier of Boethius’s *Consolatio*. In this sense the connection between everyday wonder and rhetorical *enigma*, made explicit by Alcuin and articulated anew in such texts as *Solomon and Saturn II* and the Exeter Book Riddles is a major intellectual breakthrough of that cultural moment. The everyday wonders of this branch of Anglo-Saxon poetry energized a shared lexis and allowed new poetic tools and approaches to emerge for understanding the imaginative world shared by the *wundra* of Christ and his saints, the *syllic* Rood, the *wreatlic* bodies of monsters, treasures of human hands, and the ethical challenges posed by suffering and enmity. The wisdom poems *Metre 28* and *The Order of the World* assert the value of wondrous everyday sights and enigmatic structures for cultivating a wise mind. *Solomon and Saturn II* and the Exeter Book Riddles demonstrate this in action, showing that riddles and everyday wonders help to teach analogizing, lateral thinking and descriptive framing, skills that enable Solomon and Saturn to address themselves to challenges of philosophy and ethics, and the Exeter Riddles to confront the marvel of wonder itself, exploring the limits of human perception. “The everyday escapes,” Blanchot says, yet Anglo-Saxon riddle-writers taught to pay attention to the everyday in wonder, considering it like an enigmatic reflection in water.127 Giving wonder an enigmatic structure, and using riddle-poems to provoke and examine wonder rhetorically, argues for the sufficiency of human imaginative methods to broaden the horizons of experience. My next chapters develop this concept of everyday wonder’s enigmatic structures in another cultural milieu, the mid-to-late fourteenth century in which Geoffrey Chaucer was writing his dream vision poems.

Chapter 3

Wonderful Werkynge: Late Medieval Riddles and Chaucer’s Enigmatic Structures in The Book of the Duchess and The Parliament of Fowls

The first chapters of this project have traced a particular turn towards wonder at the everyday in Anglo-Saxon riddling. I have argued that the riddles of the Symphosian tradition develop a technology of wondering, one where a growing palette of enigmatic structures and riddling techniques can be deployed by a reader to cultivate a wiser understanding of the world. Crucially, the openness of the Symphosia tradition is one of its strengths for dealing with wonder: by the time of the Exeter Book’s compilation, the areas where there is lack of consensus between (or within) collections about what a riddle should do, what kind of authority it should have, what distorting or revelatory tactics it should employ, or what the nature of the everyday is, place riddling itself in a productive space of wonder that allows for a wider number of perspectives to be brought to bear. Texts can encode mentalities or philosophies of everyday wonder into their writing: Solomon and Saturn II experiments with moving beyond riddles to other forms of philosophic and moral inquiry, while the Exeter Book riddles demonstrate a variegated approach to wonder as a part of their own search for newness or meaning across the collection.

In the following two chapters I expand this project to consider the relationship between everyday wonders and the enigmatic structures of riddles in some texts of the later medieval period. As my test case, I focus on the relationship between everyday wonder and riddling in the dream visions of Geoffrey Chaucer, which engage many of the same questions about wonder as do the early medieval riddling texts previously discussed.¹ As my introduction stated, most recent work on late medieval riddles in late medieval English literary culture (by Andrew Galloway and Curtis Gruenler) has had William Langland’s The Vision of Piers Plowman as its reference.² In this growing field, there is more work to do on the relationship between riddling,

¹ All references to Chaucer’s poetry in the next two chapters are to the editions in Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., The Riverside Chaucer, Third Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). My notes will indicate the poem and line number.

wonder, and literary culture in late medieval England; by choosing Chaucer, Langland’s near contemporary, as my interlocutor I hope to advance that process.

There are also some specific reasons to consider Chaucer’s relationship to riddling, and to everyday wonder. Chaucer’s occasional deployments of riddling terms are fairly well known, and scholars have talked about possible moments of *roman à clef* in his works, in particular in *The Book of the Duchess*, for decades. Chaucer was obviously familiar with many texts that engage with riddles and riddling ideas, from Donatus’s *Ars maior* and *minor* to Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova*; the love-debates and *demandes d’amours* of French courtly poetry; the vision texts of Macrobius and Boethius; and the enigmatic moments in the writings of Boccaccio and Dante. Yet while many scholars have identified an “enigmatic quality” in Chaucer’s poetry—in particular, Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*—few have examined the possibility that these poems participate in an enigmatic tradition or considered the ways that medieval *enigmata* may offer an additional perspective on these works. This territory is worth exploring.

Yet Chaucer also demonstrates a persistent interest in wonder—and in what can be described as everyday wonders. Each of the three major dream poems refers to the narrator’s

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3 Cf. Diomedes’ speech in *Troilus and Criseyde* V.897–900: “And but if Calkas lede us with ambages, / That is to seyn, with double wordes slye, / Swich as men clepe a ‘word with two visages,’ / Ye shall wel knowen that I nought ne lye …” (TC V.897–900, my emphases.)

4 See for example the *Book of the Duchess* discussions of the “long castel with walles whyte, /Be seynt Johan! on a riche hil,” (*BD* 1318–19) and its relationship with John of Gaunt and Blanche, and the large body of work evaluating *Parliament of Fowls* and *House of Fame* as occasional poems.

5 Michael R. Kelley, “Antithesis as the Principle of Design in the *Parlement of Foules*,” *The Chaucer Review* 14.1 (1979): 61. See also, e.g., A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 90: “the poem itself is deliberately enigmatic; it holds back from direct statements and conceptual formulations, and prefers to explore and order experience in the way dreams actually do, through images. Perhaps it would be better to say, through symbols….” (90). Although framed as a dream vision, *The Legend of Good Women* is not particularly interested in wonder in comparison to *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Parliament of Fowls* and I leave it out of this study. I quite like Suzanne Akbari’s reading of its *Prologue*’s treatment of allegory and received knowledge in *Seeing Through the Veil*, 182 and following.
wonder within the opening lines. Wonder remains a recurrent touchpoint of the poems, whether motivating the composition of The Book of the Duchess as “so queynt a sweven” that the narrator will recast it as a poem (BD 1330–1334), or underlying Geffrey’s confession in The House of Fame that “Thoo gan y wexen in a were … For more cleer entendement / Nas me never yit ysent.” (HF 979, 983–984). The everyday also populates these poems, whether in the form of the wandering puppy that the dreamer of The Book of the Duchess encounters in the wood, or the unnamed familiar voice that the Eagle resembles when it calls to Geffrey in The House of Fame. These elusive and passing brushes with the everyday have been considered to supply some of the enigmatic character of Chaucer’s dream poems.

By drawing on comparisons with an expanded range of enigmatic texts, including previously unpublished late medieval riddles, in these two chapters I seek to arrive at a more satisfactory account of Chaucer’s engagement with wonder in his dream poems. My overarching claims are two. First, that the intellectual and affective puzzles of actual riddles manifest themselves in related structures in narrative genres in late medieval literature, such that in Chaucer’s dream poetry, wonder itself is often marked by an enigmatic structure. Second, that for Chaucer, riddles provide a way of exploring the unknowable and open qualities of the everyday. In Chaucer’s poetry this often takes the form of wondering how the everyday can provide a context for failures of authoritative knowing, and can help puzzle out the relationship between imaginative encounters with books, and other forms of experience. Thus, for Chaucer, as for the Anglo-Saxon poets I have previously discussed, wonder, the everyday, and riddles are deeply intertwined, to the extent that it can make sense to think of Chaucer as a contributor in a longstanding cultural questioning of the relationship between riddles and everyday wonder.

In the next two chapters I put forward a reading of the enigmatic and wondrous structures of Chaucer’s dream vision poems, focussing on The Parliament of Fowls and The House of Fame respectively. I consider these poems alongside a tradition of late medieval riddles and enigmatically oriented texts such as the Secretum philosophorum, also taking into account recent criticism on affect, aesthetics, and form in medieval dream visions and dream theory. By reading

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6 Cf. BD 1–2 “I have gret wonder, be this lyght, / how that I live”; HF 1–3 “God turne us every drem to goode! / For hyt is wonder, be the roode, To my wyt, what causeth swevenes”; PF 4–7 “Al this mene I by Love, that my felynge / Astonyeth with his wonderful werkynge / So sore…” (PF 4–6).
these dream vision poems in the light of late medieval riddles, these chapters begin to evaluate a hitherto unacknowledged dimension of Chaucer’s poetics. I also seek to open the way for further research into the interrelation between enigmatic writing and literary culture in late medieval England, and to lay the groundwork for future conversations about the everyday in medieval literature.

This present chapter begins with background on late medieval riddle writing, and on how riddles and enigma feature in genres such as prophecy, disputation, romance narrative, and dream theory. I introduce the question of the interrelation between everyday wonders and enigmatic structures in Chaucer’s poetry with a brief discussion of *The Book of the Duchess*. My reading of *The Parliament of Fowls* uses late medieval riddles as a lens into oblique and enigmatic passages in the beginning of *The Parliament of Fowls*: passages that play a key role in constructing desire and uncertainty within the text. All these are leading to a more sustained reading of a partly unpublished riddle-text—Book 2 of the *Secretum philosophorum*—alongside Chaucer’s enigmatic and wondrous structure, the House of Rumour, in Chapter 4.

### 3.1 Riddles in Late Medieval England

After the Norman Conquest we lose much written evidence for the Symphosian tradition in England, but riddling did not cease. Patrick Murphy has detected many of the tropes from Exeter Book Riddles in early modern riddle collections, and the recent work of scholars such as Eleanor Cook, Andrew Galloway, Curtis Gruenler, and Erin Sebo is laying the groundwork for a better understanding of the role of riddles in late medieval literary culture. Riddles were widespread across late medieval Europe, and riddling remained an important activity in England specifically. A good emblem of the place of riddles in late medieval literature is provided by

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Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s immensely popular *Poetria Nova*. Riddles do not feature in this compositional textbook, and yet his dedication to Pope Innocent III begins in a characteristically riddling mode:

Papa stupor mundi, si dixero, Papa Nocenti,  
Acephalum nomen tribuam; sed, si caput addam,  
Hostis erit metri. Nomen tibi vult similari:  
Nec nomen metro, nec vult tua maxima virtus  
Claudi mensura. Nihil est quo metiar illam:  
Transit mensuras hominum. Sed divide nomen,  
Divide sic nomen: “In” prefer, et adde “nocenti,”  
Efficiturque comes metri. Sic et tua virtus  
pluribus aequatur divisa, sed integra nulli.9

Holy Father, wonder of the world, if I say Pope Nocent I shall give you a name without a head; but if I add the head, your name will be at odds with the metre. That name seeks to resemble you; it will not more be confined by metre than your great virtue by the shackles of measure. There is no standard by which I may measure your virtue; it transcends the measures of men. But divide the name—divide the name thus: set down first “In,” then add “nocenti” and it will be in friendly accord with the metre. In the same way your excellence, if it is divided up, is equalled by many, but taken in its wholeness it is equalled by none.10

Geoffrey’s wordplay, coming as it does at the very beginning of his popular treatise on rhetoric, provides an indication of the casual pervasiveness of riddles in late medieval literary culture. If Geoffrey can be presumed to aspire to his own rhetorical standards, then his wordplay must be taken to be a catchy beginning to his treatise—or at least, one that he can hope will not be entirely displeasing to his dedicatee and secondary readers. Although riddles do not play a significant role in the *Poetria Nova*, Geoffrey here displays a knowledge of them: in particular, a playful awareness of logogryphic conventions, by which words resemble human and animal bodies—with ‘head’ and sometimes ‘belly,’ ‘feet,’ or ‘tail’ represented by their prefixes and component syllables. Geoffrey also exploits a playful suggestion that words may bear more than

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an arbitrary resemblance to their referents: the word “Innocent,” like Pope Innocent, “transcends the measures of men” (*transit mensuras hominum*, l. 6), whether metrical or virtuous.11 ‘Innocent’ may thus offer a better way of representing Innocent’s qualities than his name written in a straightforward manner, even though headless ‘Nocent’ draws attention to the offensive and harmful component of the pope’s name.

Late medieval riddles have not been much discussed by scholars, partly through a lack of edited material and perhaps partly because—as here in Geoffrey Vinsauf’s dedication to *Poetria Nova*—such riddling sometimes appears pedestrian to modern tastes.12 Nonetheless, riddles have much to contribute to our understandings of late medieval literature and metaphorical and imaginative writing. In the following pages, I will briefly survey the landscape of riddles in late medieval Britain. This landscape includes Latin scholastic riddles and logogryphs, including the so-called “Oxford riddles”;13 enigmatic political prophecies, such as the *Prophecies of John of Bridlington*;14 and Middle English riddles, such as the riddle-songs in British Library’s MS Sloane 2593,15 the early modern ‘Holme’ riddles, and others extant in the margins of various Middle English manuscripts.16 It also includes riddles embedded in disputations and riddling wisdom-contests, such as the *Solomon and Marcolfus* tradition in its vernacular and Latin

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11 This idea of a connection between word and referent goes back to Donatus’s *Ars maior* and *Ars minor*, in the basic pairing of *verbum* and *res*, and his discussion of *enigma* amongst the tropes; see Introduction. Geoffrey’s point about exceeding “the measures of men” may evoke Boethius’s Lady Philosophy, who similarly “nunc … ad communem ses e hominum mensuram cohibebat, nunc uero pulsare caelum summi uerticis cacumine uidebatur” (seems now to restrain herself to the common measure of men, but now to strike the limits of heaven with the top of her head); see *CP*1pr1.2, and above, in Introduction.

12 Emily Thornbury is working currently on a project on the concept of Old English ‘light verse’, characterized among other things by an emphasis on metrical play; her work on light verse might be usefully applied in future to late medieval riddling like Geoffrey’s. For a fuller discussion of Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s semantic play in this passage see Alexandre Leupin, “Absolute Reflexivity: Geoffroi de Vinsauf,” in Laurie Finke and Martin Schichitan, eds., *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 135–136.

13 For Oxford Riddle texts, see the appendix to Galloway’s “The Rhetoric of Riddling,” 98–105; Galloway’s single-manuscript edition of the relevant section of the *Secretum Philosophorum* is in the same article at 74–77. More witnesses from Oxford MS Bodley 851 can be found in Charlotte Brewer and George Rigg, eds., *A Facsimile of the Z-Text in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Bodley 851* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994).


incarnations, and in romance. We must also bear in mind the continued circulation of late antique and early medieval riddles, whether in their original collections or embedded in narrative texts such as the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyrii.*

In this survey, as in my early chapters, I will draw attention to the ways that these riddles reference or cultivate wonder, particularly wonder at everyday objects. This survey is crucial for grounding any consideration of Chaucer’s engagement with wonder and *enigma* in his dream poems.

**Scholastic Riddles**

The riddling awareness Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s passage demonstrates is that of Latin scholastic riddles. A common form of riddling in the late medieval period, scholastic riddles tend to be pithy two- to three-line Latin hexameter poems, generally rhyming. Some riddles use objects or words from other languages to spell out letters or syllables: for example, the *Secretum philosophorum* instructs the reader how to use coded writing in what Galloway calls a ‘graphic’ tradition of riddling, where a full moon represents the letter ‘o’, *pars quarta rotae* (a quarter of a wheel) is the letter ‘r’, and so forth. Many scholastic riddles are logogryphs, which depend for their success on the transformations of their subject when letters are removed or added. An example of this type is the popular *Muscatum* enigma found in London, British Library, MS Harley 3362, fol. 33r Enigma 13, in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 851 fol. 2r, and in other witnesses, including the manuscripts of the *Secretum philosophorum*:

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20 Logogryphs are found in early medieval riddling as well; for instance, as I discussed in Chapter 1, Alcuin’s letters include several logogryphic riddles. Indeed, Alcuin’s and Alcuin’s pillow riddles (where the mysterious object rises up when you remove the head) gain part of their fun from the fact that ‘removing a head’ is a standard logogryphic instruction, but refers instead to the literal head of the sleeper.

21 London, British Library, MS Harley 3362, fol. 33r Enigma 13 (reappearing as Enigma 22 in the same manuscript). Text Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling,” 100; the riddle is also in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 851 (the *Z* text of *Piers Plowman*, at the beginning of a set of flyleaves Guest and Rigg identify as the scribe Dodsthorp’s hand) and I have also found it in London, British Library, MS Arundel 292 (fol. 112v). See Charlotte Brewer and A.
Si caput est currit, ventrem sibi iunge volabit;
Adde pedem comede, sed sine ventre bibe. muscatum aut notmegth

If there’s a head it runs; join up a belly and it will fly.
Add a foot, and eat; but without a tummy, drink. muscatum or nutmeg. (components: mus (mouse), musca (fly), muscatum (nutmeg), mustum (wine))

Logogryph riddles make hay from the progressive adding and removing of body parts, and—as here—the imaginative play of a head running, a head and stomach flying, drinking without a stomach, and so on. The ‘payoff’ here, when (as in some, but not all, manuscripts) the solution is given, is a different way of considering the word ‘muscatum,’ as the name contains within it syllables that may mix and match and only the head, stomach, and feet put together make up the word ‘muscatum’—when obviously nutmeg has neither head nor stomach nor feet in its material form.

Having a spice as the solution to the riddle is fitting on a different level. Several scholastic riddles are about food, playing upon the idea of a frivolous puzzle as a verbal treat designed to allow for savouring the different solutions, but which, tasting thereof, may also lead to an increase in wisdom. For example, Enigma 7 in the same manuscript is about a nut:

Ligneus est lectus nulla tamen arbore sectus;
Solve qui poterit solvat et eius erit.22

A wooden thing is gathered [or a tough thing is read], but cut off no tree;
Crack it who can [or solve it who can], and his it will be.
(Solution: nut; alternate solution: riddle)

This nut riddle plays upon the idea of riddle as integumen—a tough outer covering and an inner object of value that is had when the shell is penetrated.23 Eating and consumption are recurrent motifs in the propositions of late medieval scholastic riddles, where they appear alongside the conventional head/foot/belly language of dismemberment and the mysterious transformations


23 On integumental writing and seeds, see Akbari, Seeing Through the Veil, 17 and 57–59.
whereby the reader is invited to imagine something happening to the object rather than the word.  

Logogryphic and cipher-based riddling techniques not only appear in dedications like Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s; they can also be discerned in political and prophetic writing. To writers and readers of political prophecy, late medieval scholastic riddles offer useful techniques alongside other methods (such as the substitution of animals and birds for people) for disguising meaning and encoding potentially dangerous truths. For example, John Ergome’s commentary on the Prophecy of John of Bridlington demonstrates clear knowledge of scholastic riddling codes and techniques in the course of its list of the ten types of ‘occultatio’ by which Bridlington’s Prophecy encrypts its meaning. To illustrate, Ergome’s commentary notes that

Septima occultatio consistit in nominis diversa acceptatione; nam aliquando tenetur materialiter, aliquando significative, sicut in isto versu:
“Si quis habet taurum, caput amputat, inde fit aurum.”
Ibi iste terminus, taurum, non accipitur pro animali, sed tantum pro isto termino, aurum, quasi diceret deponere primam literam hujus dictionis, taurum, et remanet tunc ista dictio, aurum. et ista occultatione multotiens utitur in ista prophetia.  

The seventh form of concealment consists in the diverse reception of a word, for sometimes it is held materially, sometimes as signification, as in this verse:
*If someone has a bull, he lops off the head, and then gold is made.*

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24 Cf. British Library, Harley 3362, fol. 33r Enigma 4, where the proposition imagines slaughtering a bull and a pig; the crumb riddle in British Library, MS Arundel 292, f. 113v and Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Lat. 7563 fol. 159v, which imagines decapitating and eating an ant. See for example also Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling,” 83–84, on Richard Dove’s riddles in the early 15th-century manuscript British Library, MS Sloane 513, including a teasing diagram of a wheel of letters with a wineskin drawn in the middle and the instructions, “Quid notat ista rota mihi dic et post eius poca, / Vel properante pede sine potu surge recede” (“tell me what this wheel means and then its pouch, or else hastily rise and depart without drink”).” (84, Galloway’s translation.) From the early medieval period we can also consider the egg riddles of Symphosius, Alcuin, and others as a participating in the idea of nutritious integumental riddles.


26 Galloway (“The Rhetoric of Riddling,” 78) has been able to show that Ergome was in possession of, and used direct knowledge of, a copy of the Secretum philosophorum in the Commentary. The Prophecies and Commentary, which includes Latin-English codes as well as the logogryphs quoted below, can be found Ed. Thomas Wright, *Political Poems and Songs*., (London: Rolls Series, 1859), 1:123–215, with relevant commentary on the types of concealment at 126–127; there is also a critical edition, Michael J. Curley, “Versus Propheciales, Prophecia Johannis Bridlingoniensis: An Edition,” Ph.D. diss. (Chicago, 1973).

There the term, taurum, is not understood as the animal, but only for this term, aurum, as if it said to take off the first letter of this word, taurum, and then this word remains, aurum. And this form of concealment is used very often in this prophecy.

What of the wonder of these riddling techniques? Whether in riddle or prophecy, their ability to generate wonder to some extent depends on context. Logogryphic riddles vary greatly in difficulty, with some of them providing the base word (e.g. taurum) or transformed word (e.g. aurum) and others supposedly requiring the reader to discover that word based on clues or to ponder the transformations with the solution given (e.g. the muscatum enigma). Some playful wonder might linger further in the imagined transformations, as in a riddle found in London, British Library, MS Arundel 292, f. 113v:

Manducare potes formicam si capud aufers. —— mica
You can eat an ant, if you cut off its head. —— crumb

As is clear from these examples, many of the solutions to late medieval logogryphs are familiar, more-or-less mundane objects and concepts (ant, crumb, bull, nutmeg, gold, death). In some riddles, rhetorical techniques such as the second-person ‘potes manducare’ (you can eat it) in the crumb riddle above, invite a kind of imaginative participation that may cultivate new or playful ways of understanding crumbs and headless ants, or of considering the relationship between word and referent. In other cases, these word/imagined object transformations are probably puzzling rather than wondrous, after the manner (perhaps) of a cryptic crossword clue. The

28 CF. Harley 3362, fol. 33r, Enigma 4: “Nil tauro melius is tollatur caput eius; nil porco peius si tollatur caput eius” (Nothing is better than a bull if its head is cut off; nothing worse than a pig if its head is cut off. solutions aurum (gold) and orcus (death)). Text Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling,” 98.

29 My trans. Tupper and Galloway do not refer to this riddle, and Arundel 292, so far as I can tell, has not yet come to the attention of riddle-scholars, although I looked at it because it contains the riddling Latin romance Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri (as well as material in French and Middle English). In Arundel 292, this crumb-riddle occurs alongside some Oxford riddles; it also seems to be in several manuscripts currently in the BnF, where it occurs as an example to illustrate iff writing. See for example Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Latins 7563, fol. 159v (with an explanation illustrating its solution as a logogryph, and occurs alongside Latin material by English scholastic authors) or BnF MS Lat. 8175, f. 33, with a discussion of the ways of chopping up a word, noting on this riddle that “Dicimus quod magis videtur brevis, quam longa, considerata vera ipsius significacione et compositione. Nec ullus nobilis autor fuit ausus ponere, quia credo quod dubitabant omnes. Et ideo tuitus est ut sequamur usum, quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi. [Horace, De arte poet. 72].” ( Notices et Extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Impériale et autres bibliothèques publiés par l’Institut Impériale de France, Faisant Suite: Aux notices et extraits lus au comité établi dans l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 32 (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1868), 431); for MS. Lat. 7563 see Histoire Littéraire de la France, ouvrage commencé par des religieux Bénédictins de la Congrégation de Saint-Maur et continué par des membres de l’Institut (Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres), XXXI: Quatorzième Siècle (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1893), 16. Further research is needed on how widely late medieval scholastic riddles are distributed.
logogryphic riddles that I have seen do not often employ wonder vocabulary to draw attention to their wonder.

While logograps are common among scholastic Latin riddles, they travel alongside a variety of riddles with closer ties to the wonder-oriented early medieval riddles. Donatus’s *mater me genuit* is often copied in scholastic riddle collections, as is a flea/lice riddle, an analogue to Symphosius’s SYM 30, discussed below in relation to *The Parliament of Fowls*. Some of the scholastic riddles also engage with wonder-vocabulary or cultivate wonder around ordinary objects, in ways that may have some continuity with Symphosian riddling. For example, Enigma 6 from Harley 3362 reads:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Floribus et lignis } & \text{ quoddam mirabile vas fit} \\
\text{Quod cum sit plenum nil plus tunc ponderat ipsum.}
\end{align*}
\]

*A certain vase is marvellously made;*  
When it’s full of flowers and staves,  
it doesn’t weigh the more for it.

This riddle, for which Galloway believes the solution is wax ‘writing tablet(s)’, plays on a collapse of the distinction between writing and reality which is different from that which occurs in logogryphic writing. The flowers and twigs that might render the strange vase heavier are instead rhetorical, literary *flores* and staves of text. This riddle invites us to perceive a hidden connection, as a flat writing surface is actually a container like a vase, and the enigma that allows us to perceive this reality is itself among the *floribus et lignis* that the book before us contains. In turn, the concept of writing as a wondrous, weightless burden is a very old and popular riddle conceit—it exists in the seventh-century Bern riddles, for example.\(^3\)

Riddles can also be structured around a series of paradoxical, improbable, or ironic conditions, sometimes with a further moral meaning; this type of riddle seems to be an area of crossover between Latin and vernacular riddling. One such example is London, British Library, MS Harley 3362 Enigma 9 (fol. 33r):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Do quod non habeo; qui fert mea dona laborat;}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^3\) Harley 3362 Enigma 6 (fol. 33r). Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling,” 99 and see n. 102 on solution. Trans. mine.  
Qui dat qui recipit est et uterque minor.
Sic des ut possis iterum dare ne quasi cos sis,
Que cum profuerit pluribus inde perit.\(^{32}\)

I give what I don’t have; the person labours who carries my gifts;
Who gives is who receives, and each is the lesser.
Thus, give such as you are able to give again, lest you be like the whetstone,
Which when it has been useful to many, thereupon dies.

The solution to this riddle is thought to be a whetstone (\textit{cos}), which, when operated by a human agent, grinds down both knife and itself as it gives the blade an edge; the riddle names its solution (and the life advice therein) in its third line. This riddle does not rely on a playful equivalence between word and reality, but rather on irony and what Patrick Murphy calls ‘slim chances,’ features that are common amongst some Symphosian riddles.\(^{33}\) Its moral explanation suggests a further crossover, from riddles into pithy pieces of advice and devotional wisdom, which deserves further research.\(^ {34}\)

There is even a ‘wondrous creature’ to be found amongst the known scholastic riddles, in a very easy single-entendre riddle:

\begin{quote}
Sloane 513 Enigma 3 (fol. 57v):
Mira creatura cum barba manet prope crura:
Mentula pectus apud, caudaque pone capud.
\end{quote}

A wondrous creature with a beard hangs out \([\text{lit: stays}]\) near the legs:
Penis by the breast, and add a head to the tail.\(^ {35}\)

\(^{32}\) Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling” 99; see Archer Taylor, \textit{English Riddles from Oral Tradition} (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1951), discussion of riddles #1589–1590: “The notion of giving away what one does not have occurs in several riddles. Although no longer very freely used, it has a history covering most of Western Europe and extending back to the Renaissance.” (645), and see different examples with solutions ‘baptism, husband’, etc, as well as ‘whetstone’ pp. 645–647 with whetstone as a variant on p. 647; see also Taylor’s Riddle #1699, which is Riddle 10 from \textit{The Booke of Meery Riddles: Together with proper questions, and witty proverbs to make pleasant pastime. No lesse usefull then behoouefull for any yong man or child, to know if he be quick-witted, or no.} (London: Printed by T[homas] C[otes] for Michael Sparke, dwelling in Greene-Arbor, at the signe of the blue Bible, 1629; accessed on Early English Books Online): “What is it the more ye lay on, the faster it wasteth?—That is a whetstone, for the more ye whet, the lesse is the whetstone.” See also A. Taylor, \textit{English Riddles}, 676.

\(^{33}\) Patrick Murphy, \textit{Unriddling the Exeter Riddles} (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2011), 18–21, 35–37, and see my Introduction.

\(^{34}\) For instance, both Middle English and Latin religious riddles seem to survive, as e.g. DIMEV 5138, Cambridge, Pembroke College MS 32 fol. 153r, “Pat ich et et hat ich hadde / Pat ich gaf hat ich habbe / Pat ich ay held hat i habbe” and its Latin relative in Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.14.39, 87v; on which see more below in my discussion of \textit{Parliament of Fowls}.

\(^{35}\) Text Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling,” 101; trans. mine. Michael Camille mentions this riddle in relation to the playful phallus-related illuminations of the Ormesby and Luttrell Psalters in Michael Camille, \textit{Mirror in}
Perhaps this was originally a one-line riddle, to which an explanation has been added, but it does demonstrate a certain delight in imagining the penis as a lively and monstrous animal.  

Sloane 513’s next riddle echoes the indeterminacy of the ‘mira creatura’ in its subject, a mysterious ‘res’ whose identity is revealed in another accumulating set of conditions:

Sloane 513 Enigma 4 (fol. 57v):
Res venit in villam, collaudat venditor illam;
Emptor non gaudet utens neque flet neque plaudet.  

Something comes into a village, its seller praises it highly;
The buyer doesn’t rejoice, and the user neither weeps nor applauds.

I think we can solve this as ‘coffin’ fairly confidently: it is similar in technique and phrasing to a widespread oral ‘coffin’ riddle, with an early attestation in Tupper, Holme Riddles 9:

Q. ther was a man bespoke a thing which when the owner [MS: oner] it home [MS: whon] did bring he that made [MS: mad] it did refuse it, he that bought it did not use it & he that had it did not know whether he had it, yea or noe

A. a coffin bought by another for a dead man.

To summarize, then: Latin scholastic riddling is often characterized by a brief proposition, a logogryphic or wordplay focus, and an emphasis on puzzle rather than wonder; however, this is only a loose formula. A second type of Latin scholastic riddle relies on an accumulating set of

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36 Several Middle English and early modern sexual riddles survive, for which this Latin riddle is an interesting comparator; see Murphy, “5. Innuendo and Oral Tradition,” Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 175–220.

37 See MS Sloane 513, riddle 4 (fol. 57v); text Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling,” 104. Galloway lists the solution as ‘unknown’ (Note 128).


For further examples of the coffin riddle, see Archer Taylor, Riddles 1728–1737 English Riddles from Oral Tradition (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1951), 685–686. A version of this riddle is still popular on the internet today, as, “The person who buys me doesn’t need me, the person who makes me doesn’t want me, and the person who uses me can’t appreciate me.” “Riddle #38” GoodRiddlesNow.com (Difficulty Level: Easy, 3.5 stars, correct answers from 32/52 website users.)
improbable or ironic conditions, expressed in brief, parallel phrases, and sometimes accompanied by wonder-language; these riddles also draw attention to the wondrous in the world, whether the sexual bearded penis, the wondrous flat vase of weightless writing, the self-sacrificing whetstone, or the economics of death in the ambivalent coffin. This second type also seems to have stronger connections with Middle English marginal and oral riddling, although further work is needed in this area.

**Middle English Riddles**

Like late medieval Latin riddles, Middle English riddles tend to be neglected in current scholarship, or even unrecognized despite the close interrelation between riddle and lyric. Several of the most elaborate extant Middle English riddle-poems are found in the British Library’s MS Sloane 2593, a unique manuscript containing seventy-three carols and lyrics of the early fifteenth century. Riddle-songs and devotional lyrics appear interspersed with one another, as the spread of fols. 10v–11r, shown on Image 3.1, exemplifies: MS Sloane 2593 contains on fols. 10v–11r the sacred Marian lyric “I syng of a mayden þat is makeles,” the double-entendre riddle-song “I haue a gentil cok,” a further riddling begging song “Omnes gentes plaudite,” the unique text of the much-anthologized “Adam lay i-bownden,” and a further riddle song, “I have a yong suster,” in immediate succession. Another sexual double-entendre riddle-song, “I haue a newe gardyn,” closely follows on fol. 11v.

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MS Sloane 2593’s grouping of riddle songs side by side with religious lyrics suggests several things, perhaps most interesting of which is the possibility that the compiler identified a guiding similarity or had another aesthetic reason to group these poems together. The riddling lyrics of “I haue a gentil cok” and “I haue a yong suster” rely on the resolution of apparent impossibility (in the “I haue a yong suster” riddles) or the reformulation of realities under incongruous

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The lyrical texts preserved on fols. 10v–11 differ greatly in subject, tone, and voice, but still preserve a uniform literary excellence. For instance, one of the most powerful religious lyrics . . . “I syng of a mayde’ . . . is followed by one of the most bawdy,”I haue a gentil cok’ . . . The facing folio preserves only a slightly less dramatic contrast, with the witty and joyous”Adam lay i-bowndyn’ . . . followed by the gentle allusive,”I haue a yong suster’ . . . the contrasts may or may not have been intended. (111)
guises. These things may have commonalities with the techniques of sacred substitution in “Adam lay i-bownden” and “I syng of a mayden.” In addition to their structural similarities—a quatrains format with three to seven stanzas in each song—it is clear that “I haue a gentil cok,” “I haue a yong suster,” “Adam lay i-bowndyn,” and “I syng of a mayden that is makeles” share a common thread of oblique and enigmatic language that crosses the boundaries of their specific content, although even “I haue a gentil cok” long escaped discussion as a double-entendre riddle, until Louise O. Vasvári’s 1998 work called for a re-evaluation of its enigmatic aspects.

Riddle-songs such as “I haue a gentil cok” and “I haue a yong suster” work against the assumption that late medieval vernacular riddles lack the sophistication and subtlety of the elaborate riddles of the Exeter Book. This is particularly evident in the riddle-songs’ treatments of wonder and the everyday. “I haue a yong suster” features a narrative in which the aforementioned young sister sends three riddles across the sea to the female narrator, culminating in the advice, “Sche bad me love my lemman / Wythoute longgyng” (11-12); the narrator spends another two stanzas pondering the riddles before the final two stanzas provide the solutions. These riddles rely on the repeated challenge of how to separate things that seem to be inseparable from their tough, bitter elements: how should any cherry be without a pit, a dove without bones, or a briar without thorn? “How xuld y love myn lemman / Without longyng?” (19-20). Where the first three riddles must be solved by returning to origins, though (flower, egg, seedling), love can exist without longing only in a state of satisfaction: “Quan the maydyn haȝt that che lovit /

42 It is worth noting that this feature marks a major stylistic difference between surviving Middle English riddles (including these, but also overall) from the Latin scholastic riddle tradition: none of the riddle-songs relies on substitution between the verbal and the phenomenal worlds the way that the logogryphic riddles do.

43 Another Middle English devotional poem, William of Shoreham’s The Seven Sacraments, at ll. 633–637 explains the mystical understanding of the Eucharist by analogy with riddle:

Bote wanne þer hys o þyng yked  *But when there is one thing given,  
An oþer to onder-stone þer-inne;  *To understand another therein:
Hy þat aredeþ þyse redes  *He that solves riddles  
Wercheþ by þilke gynne. (633–637)  *Works by this same method.


Che is without longyng,” the poem explains.\textsuperscript{46}

Perhaps the most interesting feature in this song is the implied resemblance between its questions. The three nature-based riddles the young sister sends are a prelude to her relationship advice, suggesting an educational or even philosophic function for the earlier riddles: if apparently impossible phenomena are part of the everyday world, perhaps the narrator’s love is capable of existing in a painless incarnation, if a temporary one. In its narrative frame and compilation of multiple riddles in need of solutions, “I haue a yong suster” evokes earlier works such as \textit{Solomon and Saturn II} as well as more obvious counterparts in Middle English narrative and romance, such as John Gower’s “Tale of the Three Questions” in the \textit{Confessio Amantis}.\textsuperscript{47}

At the same time, its riddles also are all wonders in the outer world, directing attention to how metamorphoses occur in bird or briar rather than dressing those subjects in metaphoric disguise.

Where “I haue a yong suster” can be compared to the meaningful compilations of riddles in the collections of the Symphosian tradition, “I haue a gentil cok” evokes the virtuosic sustained attention to \textit{double entendre} in the long riddles of the Exeter Book, while showing that chickens remain riddle subjects of enduring amusement in the late medieval period:

\begin{verbatim}
1 I haue a gentil cok,  
Crowyt me day.  
He doth me rysyn erly,  
My matyins for to say.

5 I haue a gentil cok,  
Comyn he is of gret.  
His comb is of reed corel,  
\textit{His tayil is of get.}

10 I haue a gentyl cok,  
\textit{His comb is of red scorel,}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{46} XXIX, p. 33–34; IMEV no. 1303. See also Child Ballad 1, Child Ballad 46. This song has survived into the modern day in more-or-less continuous transmission in the form of “The Riddle Song,” a traditional English song brought to the United States, and now surviving in new media. It is referenced in the Simpsons episode, “Marge vs the Monorail” (original airdate January 14, 1993), where Homer sings to Marge, “‘I gave my love a chicken, it had no bone.’ Mmm… chicken.” See “I Gave My Love A Chicken | The Simpsons [HD],” YouTube video, 0:27, from Episode 4.12, “Marge vs. the Monorail,” airdate January 14, 1993, posted by Random YouTube Videos, December 5, 2015. \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZ6Bbo1EZUM}.

\textsuperscript{47} On this latter point see Curtis Gruenler, “How to Read Like A Fool,” 596–597.
His tayl is of Inde.

His legges ben of asor,
So geintil and so smale.

15 His spores arn of syluer qwyt,
In to the worte wale.

His cynyn arn of cristal,
Lokyn al in aumbyr,
And euery nyght he perchit hym
20 In myn ladyis chaumbyr.48

The gentil cok would be a neutral enough double entendre substitute for the riddle’s true subject, were it not that the song goes to some lengths not only to describe the cock’s morning and nighttime activities, concluding with its unusual perching in “my lady’s chamber,” but also to portray the cock in exotic and jewel-like terms. The cock’s magnificently red comb, jet tail, and shining crystalline eyes assert the cock’s fantastic, metaphoric beauty in ways that paradoxically deepen the impression that the song describes a proud chicken. In turn, it is clear that the anonymous composer is drawing on some kind of conventional repertoire for describing chickens. Let us compare Chaucer’s description of Chaunticleer in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale (in some respects another of Chaucer’s dream vision poems)—the italics indicate shared imagery with “I haue a gentil cok”:

    His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,
2860 And batailled as it were a castel wal;
    His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;
    Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;
    His nayles whitter than the lylye flour,
    And lyk the burned gold was his colour.    (VII.2859–2864)

Chickens are one of the wonders of everyday life—in addition to their peculiar egg-laying, their sexual dimorphism makes them creatures of unlikely and considerable beauty, as the British Library, MS Harley 3244 image on f. 57r, from a Latin bestiary, shows (Figure 5 below)—the illustrator has taken pains to colour the individual streaks in the rooster’s tail.

While a virile rooster’s tail and behaviour suggest amusing similarities with human anatomy which make it a useful subject for the double-entendre song, odd incongruities start to occur when, for example, the iridescent brilliancy of the rooster’s feathers get taken into the comparison. Both “I haue a gentil cok” and Chaucer exploit this slippage between chicken and human, and Chaucer employs a similar amusing wondrous incongruency later by applying tropes of feminine beauty to Dame Pertilote’s scarlet eyes.

As examples of more elaborate Middle English riddling, “I haue a yong suster” and “I haue a gentil cok” also demonstrate that this genre, like Old English riddling, employs a variety of ways of treating the everyday. The riddles of “I haue a yong suster,” imagining a dove without bones, or a cherry without a stone, play upon non-obvious, wondrous features of these phenomena, and link these to the human problems of love. The gentil cok exploits a spurious resemblance between cock, rooster, and treasure-object, exploiting wondrous distortion in the imagination and create humour in the cock’s daily and nightly activities.

Riddles Embedded in Other Genres

In addition to these forms of riddling in late medieval England, there are two more that need brief discussion here: riddles in dialogue, as in the Solomon and Marcolfus tradition, and riddles embedded in narrative such as romance, as in the Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri. These are
important to mention, both because they provide lines of continuity between early and late medieval riddling in England, and because they model a thematic role for riddles in the overlap between actual riddles and enigmatic structures in narrative or dialogue.

The disputation or wisdom dialogue has received substantial scholarly attention. The genre includes texts such as the Enfant Sage tradition from Alrecatii Hadriani et Epicteti Philosophi (second or third century and frequently recopied), to Adrian and Ritheus (twelfth century), and Ypotis (mentioned in The Tale of Sir Thopas), as well as Solomonic disputes including the Solomon and Marcolfus texts and lesser-known cousins such as The Maister of Oxenford and his Clerke.49 Donald Beecher, Nancy Mason Bradbury, Curtis Gruenler, Jan Ziolkowski, and many others have worked on the later medieval tradition of Solomon and Marcolfus dialogues, which incorporate riddles alongside other forms of witty exchange between King Solomon and his opponent, a hilariously irreverent peasant named Marcolf.50 The riddling style here tends to deal in insufficient information and apparent impossibility rather than word-play or metaphoric substitution, as for example:


Than Salomon demaunded of Marcolphus what they were that clymen up and fallyn downe. Marcolph answeryd and sayde: “They are the benys boyllyng in the pott.”51


51 For the riddle-contest part of the dialogue, see sections 6–8 (B Pars 2) in Nancy Mason Bradbury and Scott Bradbury, eds., The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf: A Dual-Language Edition from Latin and Middle English Printed Editions (Kalmazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2012), and their comment: n. to 6–8[B2.1–3]

Solomon’s lack of success in solving Marcolf’s riddles presumably arises from his lack of experiential knowledge. The solutions involve basic realities of peasant life: preparing food, raising crops, fighting off vermin, preparing a body for burial, and conceiving a child. Bakhtin observes that riddles can transform life’s most terrifying mysteries into a “gay and carefree” game (Rabelais, p. 233). (Bradbury and Bradbury, n. to 6–8[B2.1–3]
The *Solomon and Saturn* materials in Old English, which I have considered above in Chapter 2, are the earliest vernacular witnesses to what was obviously a widespread and enduring European tradition. Furthermore, while there is not direct textual continuity between the Old English *Solomon and Saturn* material and the *Solomon and Marcolfus* dialogues, such continuity is manifested in another text: the Old English prose *Solomon and Saturn* dialogue has nearly a verbatim counterpart in a Middle English dialogue, the eccentric “Questiones by-twene the Maister of Oxenford and his Clerke,” which survives in two manuscripts and is undoubtedly the Old English text’s very close relative. As in the early medieval wisdom dialogues, riddles in these disputations generally provide training-grounds for wisdom as well as venues for the interlocutors to demonstrate their wit, humour, or wisdom. As it is tangential to this project I leave discussion of this dialogue tradition to others; here, it is sufficient to observe that the genre of *disputatio*, as well as some specific texts, provided one direct avenue of continuity between early and late medieval culture.

In turn, medieval narratives such as saints’ lives and romances display a broad interest in the narrative and thematic potential of riddle and enigma. Romance quests and Otherworld narratives often pose difficult questions or mysteries as challenges for the protagonists to solve. These include *demande*-style challenges such as discovering “whate wemen love best in feld and town”; suspiciously easy tasks which come with unexpected difficulties; more obviously

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impossible tasks;\textsuperscript{57} as well as riddle-like marvels and mysterious apparitions with explanations either material or spiritual.\textsuperscript{58} Amongst many examples, one romance in particular, certainly known to Chaucer (at least in some form), contains a number of riddles taken directly from the collection of Symphosius: it thus provides one of the points of direct continuity between early and late medieval riddling. This is the \textit{Historia Apollonii Regis Tyrii}, a romance of late antiquity which was popular throughout the medieval period, surviving in many copies of the original text as well as in Latin and vernacular adaptations.\textsuperscript{59}

The \textit{Historia Apollonii} features riddles at two key points in its plot. In the beginning, when King Antiochus undertakes an incestuous relationship with his daughter, he poses a riddle describing the incest for her suitors to attempt to solve.\textsuperscript{60} Unsuccessful suitors are decapitated and their heads displayed over the gate; successful solvers are lied to about their success and given the same treatment. At the end of the romance, Apollonius’s long-lost daughter Tharsia is reunited with her father when she is hired to draw him out of a state of abject grief as he lurks in the belly of a ship. She poses for him a series of riddles with the agreement that if he fails to solve them, he will come up on deck. The riddles (taken from the collection of Symphosius) relate to Apollonius’s adventures or to the process of consolation Apollonius needs to undergo (for example, a bath-riddle and a ladder-riddle).\textsuperscript{61} He solves each of them easily, until Tharsia gives up in frustration, the two of them come to blows, and the mystery of their respective

\textsuperscript{56} For example, to build a tower that doesn’t fall down overnight (the Vortigern story in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s \textit{Historia Regis Britanniae} and others), to fill a magical bag with food (\textit{Pwyll Pendu dic Dyuett}), or to trade decapitating blows with a stranger (\textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}; \textit{Sir Gawain and the Turk}; \textit{The Grene Knight}).

\textsuperscript{57} Such as the challenge to remove all the grisly rokkess in \textit{The Franklin’s Tale}.

\textsuperscript{58} On the material side: for example, the mysterious resurrecting army of Havelok the Dane (a series of bodies propped up on sticks); the forest on the ocean and mysterious moving mountain of \textit{Branwen uerch Llyr} (the giant Bendigeidfran and his navy). On the spiritual, for example, consider the apparitions seen on the Holy Grail quests of \textit{La Queste del saint Graal}, Malory, and others; the dream visions seen by Arthur and romance protagonists more broadly.


\textsuperscript{60} See \textit{Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri} RA and RB Chapters 1–5; text Kortekaas, \textit{The Story of King Apollonius}, 104–113.

\textsuperscript{61} See Archibald, \textit{Apollonius of Tyre}, 25: “The series of riddles in HA cc.42–4 is presented as if they are so difficult that only Apollonius is clever enough to find answers for them, and only Tarsia is clever enough to ask them.” (25)
identities is revealed to one another. As these episodes demonstrate, one feature of the *Historia Apollonii*’s riddling worth emphasizing is its way of using riddles to reflect on other forms of communication and mystery. The final riddles lead to the prospect of consolation or identity-revelation; the text’s early chapters link riddling with revealing what is unspeakable. Antiochus’s incest-riddle does this directly, but Antiochus’s daughter, when pressed by her nurse repeatedly for what has happened, likewise responds in indirect and enigmatic language which her interlocutor is initially unable to penetrate. In the *Historia Apollonii*, riddles are both a distinct genre where a well-educated intelligent person can demonstrate excellence, and a way of bodying forth the psychic drama of the characters. The *Historia Apollonii* was well-known in England from an early period—it survives partially in an Old English translation—and Elizabeth Archibald observes of the romance’s reception that “the riddles may have contributed to the popularity of the story in many countries; at least some riddles occur in almost every version.”

In addition to the Old English translation of the story, there are also Middle English versions, including most prominently an episode in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* Book VIII. Gower’s version of the story is based primarily on Godfrey of Viterbo’s retelling in his world history *Pantheon*, and includes the riddle-scene at the end but not the specific riddles. At least one version of the story was known to Chaucer: Chaucer’s *Man of Law* reacts with horror to a vivid yet misremembered version of the story in his *Prologue* (*CT* II (B¹) 80–85) and gives it as an example of a tale Chaucer would never tell.

62 For an excerpt of this repeated questioning and indirect response, see Kortekaas’s *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyrii* RA Chapter 2:


The girl said: “My dear nurse, just now two noble names perished in this chamber.” The nurse, not knowing, said, “My lady, why do you say this?” The girl said: “You see me violated in a savage crime, before the legitimate day of my wedding.” The nurse … shuddered and said, “Who was so emboldened [lit. trusted in such audacity] that he defiled the bed of a royal virgin? The girl said: “Impiety committed the crime.” The nurse said: “Why do you not tell your father?” The girl said: “And where is my father?” And said, “Dear nurse, if you understand what’s been done: the name of ‘father’ has died in me. . . .” (my transl.)

(Historia Apollonii Regis Tyrii RA 2.3–10; text Kortekaas, *The Story of King Apollonius*, 106.)


More work remains to be done in the field of late medieval riddle studies, but this brief survey should give a sense of the variety of forms and strategies at play in late medieval riddling. These forms all possess the capacity to generate wonder through the imaginative transformations of words (logogryphic riddles), the slim chances and conditions of everyday objects and phenomena (other scholastic and Middle English riddles), or the links between ordinary wonders and human desires.

3.2 Chaucer’s Enigmatic Structures in *The Book of the Duchess*

I now turn to consider the ways that everyday wonder becomes paired with enigmatic structures in Chaucer’s dream vision poems. In this section I will use the everyday wonders in *The Book of the Duchess* to re-introduce the concept of the enigmatic structure. I return to late medieval riddles to examine how they inflect particular enigmatic lines in *The Parliament of Fowls*. In the interests of space I will not offer overarching readings of *The Book of the Duchess* or *The Parliament of Fowls* here; what I am interested in investigating is the way that enigmatic structures inflect and respond to particular local moments of wonder within these poems.

Chaucer had been investigating wonder and its poetic effects since at least *The Book of the Duchess*, from the Man in Black’s repeated assertions that “Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest; / I have lost more than thow wenest”65 (*BD* 743–44), to the poem’s conclusion, where the Narrator ends the poem by reporting his own evaluation of the mysterious dream as “so queynt a sweven” that he was motivated to render it in verse (*BD* 1330). *The Book of the Duchess* conspicuously and repeatedly cultivates indeterminacy and inconclusiveness in various forms, it puzzles especially at the everyday—and, as the Anglo-Saxon riddles had done, it employs wonder-language (terms such as “wonder” and “queynt”) to draw attention to its engagement with these concepts, rendering wonder itself a category under puzzled strain in the poem.


Some aspects of *The Book of the Duchess*’s use of puzzles to engage its readers have already been well examined—for instance, the poem’s inclusion of simple ciphers in the poem’s closing references to a “long castel” (Lancaster) and “ryche hil” (Richmond).\(^6^7\) Other puzzles are less explicitly presented as puzzles: what is the significance of the mysterious friendly whelp, given such an attractive and detailed description, that runs away over the grass before the Dreamer finds the Man in Black?\(^6^8\) The passage where the puppy and other animals appear concludes with another iteration that it would be impossible to “rekene even / The wondres me mette in my sweven” (*BD* 441-442)—but what precisely is the wondrousness of these animals? How do they relate to the wider concerns of the poem, such as the great enigma of missing Good Fair White, or the mysterious psychic troubles of the protagonists? These puzzling moments invite a fuller consideration of the interrelationship between affective wonder, *enigma*, and the everyday in Chaucer’s poetics.

One prominent feature of wonder, for Chaucer, seems to be its interactivity, what Patricia Dailey would call responsiveness.\(^6^9\) Within *The Book of the Duchess*, the narrator’s report that the Man in Black has accused him of misjudging the situation draws attention to the fact that readers are not passive recipients of the story, but may part company from the narrator in order to form independent judgments of the knight’s condition. In Chaucer’s French sources for *The Book of the Duchess*, this interactivity is given a focus in the *demande d’amour*, as, for example, in the open-ended debate-question of whether a bereaved or betrayed lover is most unhappy in Machaut’s *Jugement du roi de Behaigne*.\(^7^0\) While Chaucer’s dream poems show an awareness of


\(^6^8\) See *BD* 387–399 and wider passage to 445.


the *demande d’amour* trope (for example, the question of which tercel eagle the formel eagle should marry in *The Parliament of Fowls*), in *The Book of the Duchess* a more pervasive focus for interactivity is *enigma* and wonder. At the beginning of the dream in *The Book of the Duchess*, the Narrator frames the dream with a riddling challenge as he declares the impossibility of interpreting the dream’s meaning because it is “so ynly swete … So wonderful”:

275 Y fil aslepe, and therwith even  
Me mette so ynly swete a sweven,  
So wonderful that never yit  
Y trowe no man had the wyt  
To konne wel my sweven rede;  
280 No, not Joseph, withoute drede,  
Of Egipte, he that redde so  
The kinges metynge Pharao,  
No more than koude the lest of us;  
Ne nat skarsly Macrobeus  
285 (He that wrot al th’avysyoun  
That he mette, kyng Scipioun,  
The noble man, the Affrikan —  
Such marvayles fortuned than),  
I trowe, arede my dremes even.  
290 Loo, thus hyt was; thys was my sweven. *(BD 275–290, my emphases)*

The narrator’s claim that the dream defeats understanding, acts as a challenge to reader responsiveness, inviting us to wonder what about this dream makes it so difficult. Such wondering quickly produces many more puzzles: what does it mean to say that this dream is “ynly swete,” and how does intense sweetness defeat a reader’s “wyt to konne wel”? How are sweetness and wonder connected in Chaucer’s poetics? Examining the poem for other language of sweetness and wonder reveals on the one hand, instances of deadened senses and expressions: the narrator’s insomnia, Seys and Alcyone, and the knight’s description of White and the wonder of her sweetness and her absence. These exist in the poem set alongside clusters of sweet and wondrous sensory experiences of the everyday—warm sunbeams, sweetly singing birds, “wonder” loud horncalls, the sounds of footsteps of passersby, and most of all the whelp:

    I was go walked fro my tree,  
    And as I wente, ther cam by me  
    A whelp, that fauned me as I stood,  
390 That hadde yfolowed and koude no good.  
    Hyt com and crepte to me as lowe  
    Ryght as hyt hadde me yknowe,  
    Helde doun hys hed and joyned hys eres,  
    And leyde al smothe doun hys heres.
I wolde have kaught hyt, and anoon
Hyt flede and was fro me goon;
And I hym folwed, and hyt forth wente
Doun by a floury grene wente
Ful thikke of gras, ful softe and swete. (*BD* 387–399)

This ordinary encounter fulfills the poem’s promise to contain what is so sweet and so wondrous that it defies interpretation. What is the relationship between this intimate, vividly described encounter and the poem’s wider concerns? Attempts to account for the puppy symbolically have met with mixed results, as the whelp has been made at different times to represent marital fidelity, Cerberus, flattery, the priesthood, lycanthropic melancholy, and dialectical reason, amongst others. Yet there is a clear affective connection between this everyday moment and the rest of the poem. When the dreamer encounters the lost puppy in the woods, he describes its appearance and behaviour in ways that trigger an experience of sweetness in the reader. When the whelp runs away, it engenders an experience of loss without words, bereavement felt outside the performative registers of grief. The puppy’s sweet presence turns into a point of entropy and diffusion, of absence that is wondrous, as the puppy’s “fro me goon” is echoed in Blanche’s absence, Blanche who is “fro me deed and is agoon.”

*The Book of the Duchess* thus puts vividly described sights and sounds, birds and animals, in an enigmatic relation with the poem’s other concerns. Echoing the passage that introduces the dream, the narrator concludes a long description of forest animals by remarking that no one could count “The wondres me mette in my sweven” (*BD* 442), affirming that these birds and animals are indeed a part of the poem’s wondrousness as the poem constructs it. However, these are only one element of the poem’s many-layered engagement with *enigma*, including the dialogue of the narrator and the Man in Black, the missing element of White, and smaller details such as the coded names for “long castel” and “ryche hil” in the closing lines (*BD* 1315–1318). All of these features are subsumed in the closing passage’s explanation that the

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72 *BD* 396, cf. *BD* 479.
poem is wondrous, that this is “so queynt a sweven / That I wol, be processe of tyme / Fonde to putte this sweven in ryme” (BD 1329-1331). What I’d like to propose here is that this poem demonstrates early experimentation with understanding everyday wonders as having enigmatic structure.

As I described it in my general introduction, an enigmatic structure is a brief passage in a narrative work of heightened uncertainty, often appealing to riddling conventions such as *enigma*, a riddle challenge, paradox, antithesis, and language of wonder. We encountered some enigmatic structures in the dialogue of Solomon and Saturn II, when Saturn and Solomon move on from asking riddles directly, to asking philosophic questions (why does snow fall?) while conspicuously deploying the riddling language and descriptive proposition style that characterized the riddles just previous. The passage in *The Book of the Duchess* that advertises the dream’s ability to surpass efforts of dream-interpreters to understand its wonder is another such moment. It rouses reader responsiveness by inviting readers to address the poem’s strangeness as a set of interpretive puzzles, by analogy with the enigmas of dream-interpretation.

Macrobius’s *Commentarius in Somnium Scipionis*, an interpretation of the concluding episode in Cicero’s *De Republica*, includes two different categories of everyday dreams which are particularly important for Chaucer’s enigmatic structures in *The Book of the Duchess* and subsequent poems. The *somnium*, Macrobius explains, is a common form of true dream that requires interpretation to be understood:

> somnium proprie uocatur quod tegit figuris et uelat ambagibus non nisi interpretatione intellegendam significacionem rei quae demonstratur, quod quale sit non a nobis exponendum est cum hoc unus quisque ex usu quid sit agnoscat. 73

By an enigmatic dream [*somnium*] we mean one that conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation of its meaning. We need not explain further the nature of this dream since everyone knows from experience what it is.

As Stahl’s translation of “enigmatic dream” for *somnium* emphasizes, Macrobius employs enigmatic language to explain how the *somnium* makes meaning: the *somnium* presents meaningful information that is not expressed plainly, but rather concealed (*tegit, velat*) in figures

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and mysteries (figuris, ambagibus). But if that meaning is concealed, how to tell whether it is indeed meaningful? Critically, Macrobius also includes another common category of dream, the insomnium, which is meaningless and merely arises from one’s condition during the day.\textsuperscript{74} Macrobius’s categories thus provide a bridge between the concepts of everyday wonder and enigma. Macrobius categorizes somnia as everyday, naturally occurring riddles, which have a meaningful enigmatic structure. However, approaching any given dream in this way can introduce a second-order enigma and source of wonder: is this enigmatic, or is it wondrous in a way that is meaningless? This is a question Chaucer will return to in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale; in his early dream poems, the question usefully frames the wonders of the everyday.

I have just suggested that Chaucer demonstrates a category of everyday wonders at work in The Book of the Duchess, and that these everyday wonders attach to enigmatic structures in the poem that recommend approaching its wonders as puzzles by analogy with dream-interpretation. In late medieval England, enigmatic structures can also emerge from late medieval riddles directly. I now turn to examine the enigmatic structures near the beginning of Chaucer’s The Parliament of Fowls.

### 3.3 Enigmatic Structures in The Parliament of Fowls

In the opening hundred and fifty lines of The Parliament of Fowls, there are many puzzling moments which have attracted the attention of scholars; indeed, one or more of the oblique lines clustered near the beginning of the poem have often been felt to be key to the poem’s unfolding of its subject and thesis. These moments include the opening stanza on Love (PF 1-7), the narrator’s ambiguous statement that he was reading “a certeyn thing to lerne” (PF 19), his further explanation that he was dissatisfied “For bothe I hadde thing which that I nolde, / And eek I ne hadde that thing that I wolde.” (PF 91–92), and the gate with a double inscription, one threatening, one inviting, (PF 127–152), which leads to the garden containing Venus’s temple and the Parliament of Fowls. My claim here is that these moments have demonstrable similarities with late medieval riddles, and that by building upon such riddling forms, Chaucer introduces into The Parliament of Fowls a set of enigmatic structures through which readers are invited to

\textsuperscript{74} See Macrobius, Commentarius, 3.
consider puzzling aspects of the interrelation between desire, knowledge, wonder, and everyday experience.

**Wonderful Werkyng: the Opening Stanza**

The very opening stanza of *The Parliament of Fowls* is structured as a riddle on love, which introduces a complex treatment of wonder and poetic composition:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,
Th’assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge,
The dredful joy alwey that slit so yerne:
Al this mene I by Love, that my felinge

5 Astonyeth with his wonderful werkyng
So sore, ywis, that when I on him thynke
Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or sinke. (*PF* I–7)

‘The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,’ is of course an English translation of the first two in a famous set of aphorisms attributed to Hippocrates in a phrase applying to medicine. ‘Life (is) short, craft (is) long’ or (reversed) *ars longa vita brevis* is a commonplace quotation in the Middle Ages, referring to the difficulty of completing or mastering a skill within the limits of a lifetime. Its usage in this stanza, though, is perplexing, and scholars have found much to comment upon it. Is this opening the narrator’s opening position on Love? An indirect commentary about the relationship between love and poetry? In fact not about love at all?

Chaucer’s stanza apparently moves from direct quotation to new material after the opening line, suggesting the kind of ‘old fields, new grain’ experience that he describes later as new matter emerges from old sources. However, there are some reasons to consider Chaucer’s

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75 Cf. Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, “The narrator of the poem has already revealed what might be a socially defined attitude toward duration in love. He declares from the outset that he fears the long apprenticeship that Love requires, within so short a life[.]](126)


> The book is no way to know love. Love is not the”’craft’” described in the first line of the poem, because that line is not about love; it is Chaucer’s translation of Hippocrates’ famous proverb about medical science, *ars longa, vita brevis*. Love is instead”’felynge,’” and the author lacks it because it is precisely his feeling that the only kind of love he knows, the love he has read about in books, has”’astonyeth’” (stupefied) (*PF*, II. 1–19). (177)

77 Cf. Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil*, 196–97,

In this poem, … Chaucer indicates that change is introduced by the writer in each instance of the cycle of translation. This endless cycle of literary reproduction is evident in the structure of the *Parlement of Fowls*,
interaction with Hippocrates as continuing beyond his initial direct quotation. The longer quotation (in its Latin version) runs as follows:

\[ \text{Vita brevis, ars longa, occasio praeceps, experimentum periculosum, iudicium difficile.}^{78} \]

Life is brief; art is long; chance is sudden; trial dangerous; judgment difficult.

As his subsequent description of a physician’s duties clarifies, Hippocrates’ parallel-constructed phrases lay out a set of conditions that underlie the uncertainty of the medical science and difficulty of applying and advancing it. By their placement at the beginning of the aphorisms, they create a striking opening that motivates the medical advice to follow: by implication, life as a physician is difficult enough, and Hippocrates’ advice may make the task easier. At first encounter, though, Hippocrates’ opening lines are also a roundabout, experiential definition or riddle of medicine itself.

Chaucer’s opening to The Parliament of Fowls draws out the enigmatic potential latent in the accumulative structure of Hippocrates’ text. The phrase, “Al this mene I by Love” retroactively turns the first three lines into a riddling proposition: a set of dense, oblique, and awkward definitions, beginning in quotation, culminating in paradoxical enigmatic description (‘The dredful joy alwey that slit so yerne’), and finally reaching explanation when the speaker describes his confusion about love’s “wonderful werkynge.”^{79} A bivalve riddling structure is thus introduced into the stanza, with chiasmus revolving around the central word “Love” to

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78 Hippocrates, ed. and transl. W. H. S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1931), 99. Jones’ translation reads: ‘Life is short, the Art long, opportunity fleeting, experience treacherous, judgement difficult. The physician must be ready, not only to do his duty himself, but also to secure the co-operation of the patient, of the attendants, and of externals.’ (99)

79 See MED s.v. ‘menen’ (V1), definitions 1 a–c, 3 especially, and ‘bi’ (prep) meaning 9a. ‘menen’s first overarching sense is ‘to mean’, ‘to signify’, and only secondarily the more casual ‘to say’, ‘to speak about’. For ‘bi’, definition 9 (of reference’, see 9(c): “menen bi, understonden ~, give an interpretation with regard to or of (sth.), mean by.”) A reader could resolve some of the tensions in this passage by arriving at the understanding that Chaucer’s line means something like, “with all this, I am discussing Love”—but more properly, the previous clauses are objects rather than subjects: “by ‘Love’ I mean all this”. Further riddling aspects are suggested. The speaker crams in analogies with art, war, and water-going; the paradoxical enigmatic line “The dredful joy alwey that slit so yerne,” could nearly stand alone as its own riddle, but also connects to the yearnful reading in a subsequent stanza.
emphasize the twist from proposition to solution and explanation. \(^80\) By beginning in close adherence to Hippocrates’ text and then outgrowing it, the stanza exemplifies a process of generative reading, as reading one somewhat enigmatic text prompts the composition of a new, more enigmatic one. \(^81\)

The opening stanza’s bivalve structure also raises a number of questions about the relationship between mentality and poetic composition. The conceit here is that inner wonder—the narrator’s unresolved puzzlement at love—is being represented, or perhaps worked through, in the enigmatic language of the opening stanza. The opening phrases create formal difficulties of interpretation that are part of the “fit” of the proposition and solution: the riddling difficulty corresponds in some way with the wonder the narrator expresses at Love, which “my felyng astonyeth with his wonderful werking / so sore …”. \(^82\) While pairing the speaker’s wonder with his enigmatic language so closely, though, the two halves of the opening stanza cultivate other juxtapositions. The stanza expresses a relationship between decorated and direct language, between generalizations and personal statements, between misdirection (where \textit{vita brevis ars longa} is expected to refer to composition, medicine, or other art forms; where “conqueringe” implies a martial subject) and analogizing (Love is like dreadful joy that slides away swiftly; love is like a learned craft, like medicine; Love is like a riddle). The differences between the two halves of the stanza might seem like extended play on antithesis, as has been seen at work elsewhere in the poem. \(^83\) However, the contribution that riddling makes to analysis of this stanza is in perceiving that these paired representations are actually equivalent. The earlier phrases are

\(^80\) Riddle contests in literature such as the \textit{Historia Apollonii, Solomon and Marcolfus}, or the Old Testament (as well as texts such as the Old English \textit{Solomon and Saturn}), often depend on the competitors’ ability not only to perceive the solution but to explain it—sometimes in further riddling terms.

\(^81\) Hippocrates’ additional phrases find some ongoing echoes in Chaucer’s continuing set of juxtapositions, even as the texts diverge. “Th’ assay so hard” evokes \textit{experimentum periculosum}, while “so sharp the conquering,” an expression of abrupt or intense victory, would be an intriguing love-oriented reformulation of \textit{occasio praeceps} or ‘chance is sudden’.) In turn, \textit{iudicium difficile} is a culminating state of uncertainty intrinsic to both medicine and love, which is given new imagery in Chaucer’s later phrase, “whan I on him thinke / Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or sinke” (\textit{PF} 6–7). “Flete or sinke” combines with “slit so yerne” and the later weir to generate an undercurrent of imagery in this poem associating love with swift-flowing, disorienting water. Of course, if the lover is a kind of fish, as suggested by the gate later, then floating is a bad sign.

\(^82\) \textit{Parliament of Fowls} ll. 4–6.

prompted by (or contained within) the speaker’s feelings of “sore” astonishment, while the speaker’s personal experience (in which “so sore” is then shown as an element in an equation of cause and effect) is a shattered form of the more compelling hanging intensifiers of the opening lines.

Chaucer’s opening stanza lays out a reciprocal process of wonder and composition, modelling the growth of new riddling, wondrous poetic material from both wondering experience (of love) and interpretive reading (of Hippocrates), while laying down implicit contrasts between different rhetorical modes for expressing that material. In the poem, this elaborate opening riddle on Love is followed by two enigmatic lines for expressing desire.

A Certeyn Thing? Desiring Knowledge in PF 20–21 and 91–92

Early in the poem, the Dreamer describes his habit of reading (“what for lust and what for lore” (PF 15)) and relates that

And therupon, a certeyn thing to lerne
The longe day ful faste I redde and yerne. (PF 20–21)

As Wolfgang Clemen and Dieter Mehl long ago discussed, the phrase “a certeyn thing” is ambiguous; it could mean either “a particular thing” or “a sure thing.”

This “certeyn thing” is an example of what Chaucer’s Diomedes termed “ambages … Swich as men clepe a ‘word with two visages,’” (TC 899). Rather than simply a deceitful Janus-word, though, this line neatly encapsulates one of the central conundra of the poem. Functionally, the phrase “a certeyn thing to lerne” is not very different from the “mira creatura” or the particular “res” to be hunted out in Sloane 513, or from the hidden wondrous objects of the Exeter Book. By making the certain thing also an unknown particular thing—and thus doubly an object of desire, both for the dreamer inside the poem as he eagerly reads, and as a riddle-object for readers trying to figure out what the line refers to—the line neatly slides between “luste” and “lore.” The rhyme of yerne/lerne and echo of “yerne” back to the opening riddle in PF 3 affirm the sense that riddling wonder-desire is an important factor here.

84 See Wolfgang Clemen, Chaucer’s Early Poetry trans. C.A.M. Sym (London: Methuen, 1963) 136, n. 2; Dieter Mehl, Geoffrey Chaucer: an Introduction to his Narrative Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 39: “It has often been assumed that the poet is looking for some particular point in connection with his general theme; ‘a certeyn thing’, however, could also mean something constant and authoritative, some really reliable piece of information.” (39)
The conceit of a hidden desired object recurs in another enigmatic stanza:

The day gan faylen, and the derke nyght
That reveth bestes from here besynesse,
Berafte me my booke for lak of lyght,
And to my bed I gan me for to dresse,
Fulfyld of thought and besy heynesse;
For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde,
And ek I ne hadde that thyng that I wolde. (PF 85–92)

Reminiscent in its early lines of the beginning of Dante’s *Inferno*, the stanza closes with a couplet that presents readers with a mystery. Chaucer’s oblique phrasing has prompted much speculation about the meaning of these lines, especially because this couplet establishes a note of discontent and unsatisfied desire in response to reading, which seems to have a crucial framing function for the rest of the poem.85 Scholarly interpretations of this stanza’s closing couplet have been inflected especially by comparison between this passage and its closest analogues in Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae* and late medieval love poetry. I will propose that this passage employs a structure evocative of late medieval riddles dealing with desire, lack, and frustration, which offer another perspective on the dreamer’s plight.

Many commentators have argued that this couplet emerges from a conversational exchange in Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae* Book 3, prose 3, which several other of Chaucer’s poems also echo at various points.86 However, comparison of the two passages reveals that they have subtly, yet radically different rhetorical valences. This is the Boethian passage (in Chaucer’s *Boece* translation), in which Lady Philosophy outlines two sources for discontent as

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85 For example, Michael Kelley argues that this pair “appears to signal the central importance of the antithetical design” in the poem, hinting that “Chaucer provides an early clue that oppositions on more than one level at once are functionally important in the *Parlement of Foules.*” Michael Kelley, “Antithesis in the *Parlement of Foules,*” 63; Suzanne Akbari argues that the couplet alludes to the narrator’s problems as a matter of will—“[t]he narrator’s inability to choose”—which finds fuller expression later in his paralyzed indecision when interpreting the double-inscription on the Gate, and recurs in another form in the formel eagle’s refusal to choose between her suitors – Seeing Through the Veil, 197. A. C. Spearing proposes several options for this line, before concluding that “[i]n its immediate context the statement is mysterious, used to express a state in which the mind is dissatisfied for an undefinable cause . . . but still seeking for a truth that will answer its longings.” (*Medieval Dream-Poetry*, 91.)

86 Indeed, the *Riverside Chaucer* makes this connection without suggesting any further points of comparison, except to speculate that the dreamer is expressing his lack of the “certeyn thing to lerne” he specified as his goal in ll. 20–21. See Charles Muscatine, *Riverside Chaucer* n. to ll. 90–91, p. 996; Muscatine references three related passages, in *The Complaint Unto Pity* 99–104, *A Complaint to His Lady* 43–45, and *Troilus and Criseyde* 3.445.
she proves that wealth cannot provide the self-sufficiency it promises. Interrogating Boethius’s unhappiness, she asks,

“And was nat that,” quod sche, “for that the lakkide somewhat that thow noldest nat han
lakkid, or elles thou haddest that thow noldest nat han had?”
“Ryght so is it,” quod I.
“Than desiredest thow the presence of the toon and the absence of the tothir?”
“I graunte wel,” quod I.
“Forsothe,” quod sche, “thanne nedeth ther somewhat that every man desireth?”
“Yee, ther nedeth,” quod I. 87 (Boece III Prosa 3.32–43)

Lady Philosophy’s formula here is an either-or proposition, to do with any general state of lack or undesired surplus; her questioning proceeds in this moment by the blunt instrument of logical binary, sorting human experience into general categories and single motivations. 88 In Boece “somewhat” refers not to a particular thing but to any thing. Chaucer’s Complaint Unto Pity evokes this passage at CP 99–105, and maintains the generalized sense of dissatisfaction from the Boece passage. 89 By contrast, the couplet in Parliament is tantalizingly particular, using

87Boece III Prosa 3, 32–43; for Boethius’s Latin and (my) English, see below:
“Nonne quia vel aberat quod abesse non velles vel aderat quod adesse noluisses?” “Ita est,” inquam.
“Illius igitur praesentiam huius absentiam desiderabas?”

Isn’t it [the reason for your discontent] because either something was missing that you didn’t want to be missing, or was present what you didn’t want to have present?” “It’s so,” I said. “So you desired the presence of the one, the absence of the other?” “I confess it.” I said. “And if anybody desires something, does he (necessarily) lack it?” “He does lack it,” I said.


88For recent treatments of Philosophy’s argumentative and rhetorical strategies, see Antonio Donato, Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy as a Product of Late Antiquity (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), especially 68–73; Eleanor Johnson, Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

89See Complaint Unto Pity 99–100 and 102–104:

My peyne is this, that what so I desire
That have I not, ne nothing lyk thereto; (99–100)

Eke on that other syde where so I goo,
What maner thing that may encrese my woo,
That have I redy, unsoght, everywhere[.] (102–104)
'thing' to generate curiosity and to indicate the existence of one or more specific, guessable objects rather than to broaden experience.

J. A. W. Bennett identifies a number of other similar instances of this dissatisfaction formula in the poetry of Chaucer and others, arguing that it is characteristic of love-poetry and thereby indicates that it is information about love that the narrator of Parliament is lacking. Bennett identifies several other iterations of this type of Boethian phrasing for desire, observing:

Chaucer himself makes it in his Compleynt to Pite ('What so I desire . . . that have I not'; ll. 99–100), in Troilus (iii. 445), in Anelida and Arcite ('what he may not gete, that wolde he have': l. 203); Gower, characteristically, makes the 'thing' explicit: 'He which hath of love his make . . . He hath that he wolde have'; and earlier romances, French and English, provide such precedents as

Il ha dolur de ce qu’il a [He is aggrieved about what he has]
E plus se deut de ce qu’il n’a [and even more about what he lacks. (my trans.)]

in Thomas’s Tristan. But it is the contexts of these formulas, rather than the formulas themselves, that are of interest. For they all occur in love-poetry; an indication that it is love-doctrine which Chaucer has sought and not found.90

Of the examples Bennett identifies, Tristan’s state of double-discontent probably comes closest to the Parliament-Dreamer’s special difficulty, and Bennett argues that the context of these lines make it clear that in this instance, too, Chaucer’s lack and surplus refer to love’s longing, perhaps with a Boethian context.91 However, while Bennett’s analysis offers a possible solution to the puzzle in the lines in Parliament (that he wants information on love), it does not explain the mystery of these lines: in these other instances, the objects that the human might have or lack are not a secret.

I argue that as in the opening stanza, the dreamer of The Parliament of Fowls employs an enigmatic structure to express his state of discontent in a way that generates wonder, and creates a textual situation where desire, wonder, and riddling lead into each other. An additional perspective can be gained on this couplet, then, by comparing it with the late medieval riddles we have examined. In its formula,

90 J. A. W. Bennett, Parlement of Foules, 44–45.
91 This is also an interpretation offered (amongst others) by Spearing; some of these textual parallels are also listed in D. S. Brewer, ed. The Parlement of Foulis (London, 1960), 103.
For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde,
And ek I ne hadde that thyng that I wolde. \((PF\, 91–92)\)

Chaucer’s couplet features a first-person speaker, two unknown guessable objects, and also what I have called above ‘accumulating conditions,’ where a series of (usually rhymed) clauses increases the specificity, but also the unlikelihood, of the riddle situation. In these structural components, Chaucer’s lines differ from Bennett’s examples given above. These structural components Chaucer’s couplet shares with a body of medieval riddles to do with situations of having, desiring, and lacking. I do not want to go so far as to argue for direct borrowing or parallels with a particular riddle. Nonetheless, I do wish to argue that Chaucer and his early readers may have understood this couplet as *riddling*, and thus partaking of a larger discourse in which riddling tools are used to engage the everyday problems of human desire, discomfort, and love.

One of the accumulating-condition riddles to survive from very early antiquity into the later period is the riddle of fleas or lice, commemorated in the story of the death of Homer, who dies of frustration when he is unable to solve the riddle (or *gryphos*, fishing-net) of some fishing boys who tell him, “We have what we did not find; what we did find we left behind.”\(^{92}\) A late medieval variant of this popular riddle is amongst the Oxford Riddles in London, British Library, MS Harley 3362, fol. 36r, Enigma 5:

\begin{quote}
Ad silvam pergo venatum bis cane quino,
Quod capio perdo, quod fugit hoc habeo.\(^{93}\)
\end{quote}

I go to the wood with twice five dogs
I lose what I catch; I have what fle(a)s.

At least two more lice or flea-riddles relying on this conceit (one with the animal imagery, one focussing on the finding/lacking) are extant in English from the Holme Riddles in the early modern period; another early modern Riddle from the *Meery Riddles* is similar, with ‘thorn’ as

\(^{92}\) See Daniel Levine, “Poetic Justice: Homer’s Death in the Ancient Biographical Tradition,” *The Classical Journal* 98.2 (2002–2003): 141–160, translation at 141; Filippo Andrei, “The Motto and the Enigma: Rhetoric and Knowledge in the Sixth Day of the *Decameron.*** Heliotropia* 10 (2013): 17–45. The relationship between riddling and fishing will become important in Chapter 4. An analogue of this common riddle is SYM 30 of Symphosius’s collection (Solution “Pediculus” or Louse, and transferred to a forest setting) but many further variants may be found in later medieval and early modern sources.

its unwelcome solution. Broadly speaking, what these riddles have in common is a certain thematic symmetry between the experience of hunting, frustrated, for the riddle’s solution, and hunting for the pests that are the riddle’s subject—and this they have in common with Chaucer’s couplet, which generates a similar itch in the reader to discover what the narrator is lacking, and what is oppressing him. The effect this has in The Parliament of Fowls, is to model a certain experience of desire as simultaneously an experience of missing knowledge.

Further accumulating conditions to do with having and lacking are found across the riddles I have examined that aspire to greater educational applicability. In addition to the didactic whetstone discussed above (London, British Library, MS Harley 3362, Enigma 9), a three-part Middle English riddle found in Cambridge, Pembroke College MS 32, fol. 153r runs

\begin{verbatim}
Þat ich et þat ich hadde
Þat ich gaf þat ich habbe
Þat ich ay held þat i nabbe
\end{verbatim}

The solutions to this riddle are missing, but the object of it seems to be to represent devotional wisdom in riddling terms. In turn, the value of such riddling paradoxes of lack and possession for approaching the Boethian question of desire is particularly suggested in the riddle-song “I have a yong suster,” where boneless doves and thornless briars help one to consider the paradox of love without longing.

In Chaucer’s couplet “For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde, /And ek I ne hadde that thyng that I wolde” (PF 91–92), the accumulative pattern of Chaucer’s lines, especially when used in combination with the first-person speaker and the hidden enigmatic objects, evokes

\begin{verbatim}
94 cf. Holme Riddle 4, 12: 4 Q. “W’ is that that having taken wee have lost & having not taken we have kept / A. A vermine that is taken & cast away & that al[ll] they do not take thee[y] keepe about them.” See Frederick Tupper Jr. “The Holme Riddle. Text,” 220, 21. See also The Booke of Meery Riddles, Riddle 2.

95 Opening two lines: “Do quod non habeo; qui fert mea dona laborat; /Qui dat qui recipit est et uterque minor.” [I give what I don’t have; the person labours who carries my gifts; Who gives is who receives, and each is the lesser.] For Latin text see Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling.”

96 DIMEV 5138. Evidently a translation from Latin, “Sunt mea si qua dedi, fuerant mea si qua comedi, / Si qua remanserunt nescio cujus erunt.” (but compare other versions of that verse, e.g. fol. 87v, Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.14.39 (thirteenth cent.) See Selrach, “Fly-leaf Scribblings,” Notes and Queries 2nd S. VII. (June 25. 1859), 510. DIMEV suggests this is gnomic wisdom about possessions (there is a variant on a tomb), but I think this is missing the point. This is obviously a riddle, or a set of riddles; for a possible secular analogue to the last line, see The Booke of Meery Riddles Riddle 19: “I am without it and yet I haue it, Tell me what it is, and pray God saue it. Solution: It is my heart, for I am without it, seeing that it is within me, for ye may not understand by the riddle that I lacke it.”
\end{verbatim}
similar features in riddles dealing with desire and distaste, both in Latin and Middle English. In turn, riddle-songs such as “I haue a yong suster” provide riddling treatments of the same thematic types of concerns as Parliament’s investigation of love’s “wonderful werkynge”: how should I love my leman without longing?

Chaucer’s Doors as Enigmatic Structure

These enigmatic structures in the opening part of Parliament culminate in perhaps the poem’s most riddling object, the doubly inscribed gate. When the dreamer goes to bed mysteriously dissatisfied, African shows up to reward him for his diligence in reading his book, by ushering him into the mysterious garden containing the allegorical figures of Venus’s court as well as Nature with her parliament of birds. The gate to this garden is fitted with a double description in golden and black letters:

“Thorgh me men gon into that blysful place
Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure;
Thorgh me men gon unto the welle of grace,
There grene and lusty May shal evere endure.
This is the wey to al good aventure.
Be glad, thow redere, and thy sorwe of-caste,
Al open am I—passe in, and sped thee faste!”

“Thorgh me men gon,” than spak that other side,
‘Unto the mortal strokes of the spere
Of which Disdayn and Daunger is the gyde,
Ther nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere.
This strem yow ledeth to the sorwefull were,
Ther as the fish in prysoun is al drye;
Th’eschewing is only the remedye!’”

These vers of gold and blak iwriten were,
Of whiche I gan astoned to beholde,
For with that oon encresede ay my fere
And with that other gan myn herte bolde;
That oon me hette, that other did me colde;
No wit hadde I, for errour, for to chese
To entre or flen, or me to save or lese.

———

97 Thereafter the dream transitions into other forms of integumental writing (the allegorical descriptions of the figures in the garden), and a few more pieces of dream-logic (the birds are so noisy that the dreamer can scarcely have space to stand).
Right as bitwixen adamauntes two
Of evene myght, a pece of yren set
Ne hath no myght to meve to ne fro—
For what that on may hale, that other let—
Ferde I; that nyste whether me was bet...

Although not an enigma or riddle in a traditional sense, this is in some ways the most explicitly puzzling structure in the poem: as a speaking object “of ful gret difference” (125), it throws the dreamer-reader into a state of perplexity and raises urgent questions for actual readers about its relevance both to the material just past, and to the tableaux that follow. The counterpart archway leading into the Inferno in Dante’s *Commedia* offered a stern Trinitarian explanation of the hell to come, addressing the damned to proclaim relentless divine sanction of their upcoming situation. Chaucer’s doubled gate seems to equivocate instead, affirming a paralyzing contradiction by announcing the upcoming setting to be both paradise and trap. Helen Cooper argues about the relation of Chaucer’s gate to Dante’s that

In the *Parliament*, by contrast, love can lead to heaven or hell. There is only one gate, but it carries two inscriptions, and hell and heaven are states of the mind or heart rather than infernal subterranean caverns or circles of planets. . . . [Chaucer’s passage is] refiguring the definitive and the eternal as the relative and temporal, the univocal as the explicitly ambiguous—a single Dantean absolute becoming a Chaucerian duality.

Cooper’s analysis draws implicit attention to the contrast between Dante’s gate and Chaucer’s in how they relate to the settings to follow: Dante’s marks the entrance to a literal underworld, while neither the description of “blisful place” nor desolation fully matches the dreamer’s experience of the walled garden, temple, or Parliament. Cooper’s interpretation that Chaucer’s locations are “states of the mind or heart” further suggests an explanation, I’d argue, for the disjunction between Chaucer’s gate and subsequent poem. Chaucer’s gate resembles Dante’s in

98 I will discuss further the significance of the weir imagery in Chapter 4; in closing here, I’d like to consider the function of this structure more broadly.

99 On the way that this passage defeats the will of the dreamer, and its connection to contemporary philosophical concerns see Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil*, 197–201; see also Gillespie, “Manuscript,” 180–181, for a fantastic reading of this gate as book, and its contradiction as the means by which the dreamer can let go of the “certeyn” knowledge he’s believed he’s gained from books to thereby approach a space of literature.


that both (apparently) address the ‘wrong’ readers: the Dante pilgrim is a living exception to the “lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate” (Inferno III.9), and Affrican similarly assures Chaucer’s dreamer that “this writyn gys nothyng ment bi the, / Ne by non but he Loves servaunt be” (PF. 158–159). Dante’s concept of an observer-loophole, where the privileged pilgrim can enter the levels of the Inferno without their torments falling upon him, nonetheless plays out differently from Chaucer’s in suggestive ways: Chaucer’s dreamer is brought to a standstill by misunderstanding the doubled inscription. This is not an either-or proposition, but rather another set of accumulating conditions.

If the speaker, “me,” is understood as Love itself rather than the gate, then Chaucer’s two inscriptions are not signposts describing a subsequent setting at all. Rather, the inscriptions, and the dreamer’s tortured experience of the gate itself, are riddling expressions of Love, just as the opening stanza had been. This structure would then suggest that love is a portal to two anticipated states, neither of which may come to pass, both imagined as implicit (and vaguely blasphemous) equivalents to the destinations of divine cosmology mapped in Dante’s Commedia. The ‘certeyn thing’ and the ‘wolde/nolde’ couplet, earlier, represent desire by cueing it with missing knowledge (‘a certeyn thing’), and with hidden connection. Like the opening stanza, this riddle-gate represents love as an impossible combination, a full, expressive, contradictory knowledge that produces wonder.

What, then, is the significance of the enigmatic structures in The Parliament of Fowls? One of the ongoing problems articulated within Parliament is the tendency of like to produce like, as the Macrobian insomnia experienced by most people are dreams that merely match what they did or thought of during the day:

The very hunter, slepinge in his bed,
To wode ayein his minde goth anoon;
The juge dremeth how his plees ben sped;
The carter dremeth how his cartes goon;
The riche, of gold; the knight fight with his foon;
The seke met he drinketh of the tonne;
The lover met he hath his lady wonne. (PF 99–105)

102 Perhaps in Chaucer and in Dante we have a distant echo of Christ’s enigmatic description of himself/love of God in John 14:12, “Dicit ei Jesus: Ego sum via, et veritas, et vita. Nemo venit ad Patrem, nisi per me.”
The worldview implied by this list is similar to that of the other three lists of beings in the poem—of the trees, listed by their identifying uses in human engineering; the allegorical figures of Venus’s garden and temple, performing their set tasks; and the birds, ranked and distinguished with their distinctive characteristics or behaviours. In each of these lists, worldly variety exists in diversity, not in malleability. How, then, can it become possible to ‘fare the bet,’ as the dreamer hopes to do in his closing lines? The distinction Parliament’s narrator makes in his discussion of these Macrobean insomnias, is what happens when someone who has been reading a difficult text dreams in a way that responds to that experience of reading: the dream, like the reading, becomes populated with generative confusions and enigmatic structures.

Kelley proposes that antithetical patterns and structures in Parliament “would have been governed in part by the poet’s desire to display virtuosity as an arranger of the unlikely and consequent master of aesthetic surprise.” While I agree with Kelley that ‘aesthetic surprise’ is a key element in Parliament, I do not believe that antithesis in general necessarily produces such surprise. Rather, I suggest, what Kelley observes as antithesis is more specifically Chaucer’s engagement with enigma as a generic mode (alongside debate/dilemma and roundel) for dealing with his subject of love and its “wonderful werkynge.” Parliament is governed and punctuated by riddles of love, constructed in the dreamlike transformation of Chaucer’s sources, modelled after recognizable late medieval riddle structures, and framed by Macrobius’s category of the enigmatic dream and his perplexed response to Cicero’s De Re Publica. The function of these riddles is to provide new registers and ways of thinking, and to model a process by which dreaming, reading, and loving lead to new ideas.

Late medieval riddling and literary culture in many respects represents a break from the Symphosian material I explored in my first two chapters. However, an interest in wonder, and in the utility of riddles to explore the affective puzzles of the everyday, is present in Chaucer’s works and late medieval riddle-writers as it was for Anglo-Saxon poets, even as ideas of what that project looks like have shifted. In my final chapter I offer an exploration of perhaps Chaucer’s fullest engagement with riddles and everyday wonders, in a reading of The House of Fame.

103 Kelley, “Antithesis,” 71. Kelley earlier notes that “medieval literature and art do display a fondness for weaving the unexpected and the unrelated together.” (69)
Chapter 4
Al the Wondermost Was This: the Great Weir in The House of Fame

In Chapter 3, I began to apply the framework of this dissertation—its interest in the interrelations between everyday wonders and enigmatic structures—to a late medieval test-case: the dream poems of Geoffrey Chaucer. There, I offered an introductory overview of late medieval riddles and argued that Chaucer’s dream poems The Book of the Duchess and The Parliament of Fowls employ enigmatic structures to address issues of wonder in the everyday.

This chapter deepens this inquiry into Chaucer’s engagement with wonder through enigmatic form. My methodology emerges from a growing body of scholarship on late medieval English poets’ engagement with enigmatic modes in their narrative writing. This approach seeks not merely to identify, contextualize, and ‘solve’ riddles in narrative works, but to examine their implications for the modes of knowledge put forward in the surrounding text. Gruenler proposes, “[R]iddles […] form community around a means of knowing that yields not just a coded solution but a way of looking at (and being in) the world.”

In this chapter, the ‘riddle’ at stake is the extended passage describing the so-called House of Rumour, a “queynte hous” shaped like a whirling wicker cage, for which Rebecca Davis has recently proposed an “elegant material source” in the eel traps referred to obliquely in the poem’s closing lines. Davis identifies the “queynte hous” as a symbolic response to the issue of “fugitive poetics” at stake in the poem. My reading builds on Davis’s interpretation of the eel traps to analyze the role of the enigmatic in the House of Rumour, a part of the poem which has often posed a riddle for Chaucer scholars. My chapter will propose a new intertext for Chaucer’s description of the House in the Secretum philosophorum, a playful Latin treatise on the Liberal Arts that has been almost entirely overlooked by recent scholars. The Secretum uses a riddle of a fish caught in a net or basket weir to explain the necessity of wonder, while in

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459 Ibid., 105, 121, etc.
Chaucer’s poems, the image of a fish caught in a weir is a recurrent and powerful figure for thinking about enigma and the wonders of everyday life. I will argue that the “queynte hous,” called by critics the “House of Rumour,” is a were, a homophone in Middle English which can mean either ‘weir/fish trap’ or a situation of uncertainty, and that details of its construction and description evoke the propositions of late medieval riddles. Chaucer situates the end of his poem in were, in a state of doubt which is also represented by a riddling, riddled structure evoking a fish weir. In this chapter I will also pursue the thematic significance of this decision by investigating how wonder operates in the Secretum philosophorum and in The House of Fame itself.

Critics have often discussed the challenge posed by the House of Rumour to what Suzanne Akbari describes as “the possibility of conveying truth through language.” Inside the House of Rumour, when tidings spread, they grow through addition as well as multiplication, challenging the identity of the grown tiding with the original one. Further, these tidings, as they depart the house, are revealed to be capable of grafting together to defeat any possibility of winnowing truth from falsehood. If we cannot understand the tidings that emerge from the House of Rumour in terms of truth or falsehood, then what we need is a radically different way of understanding how “reality” is implicated within communication. I will suggest that the riddles of the Secretum philosophorum offer a technology for understanding the “way of looking at (and being in) the world” (in Gruenler’s words) that I believe Chaucer is engaged in constructing in the final moments of The House of Fame.

For Chaucer, as for the Anglo-Saxon riddle-writers and many late medieval collectors of riddles, the entry point for this perspective is wonder. Strikingly, both in the very beginning of the poem, and in scenes such as the flight with the Eagle, Geffrey and other characters imply that truth-value may not always matter for the ability of phenomena such as tidings or dreams to benefit the recipient. In each case wonder emerges soon after to provide a double kind of logic for this position: the nature and therefore the authenticity of a communication is a matter of wonder and uncertainty—but on the other hand, wonder can be a valuable experience in itself.

460 Suzanne Akbari, Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 205; see also Piero Boitani, Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984), 189, etc.
This thesis plays out in the poem’s very opening lines, as Geffrey’s introductory discourse on the difficulty of determining what causes dreams begins and ends with a prayer that every dream be beneficial, with wonder providing a rationale:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{God turne us every drem to goode!} \\
&\text{For hyt is wonder, be the roode,} \\
&\text{To my wyt, what causeth swevenes (HF.1–3, my emphases);} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{… the holy roode} \\
&\text{Turne us every drem to goode!} \\
&\text{For never sith that I was born,} \\
&\text{Ne no man elles me beforne,} \\
&\text{Mette, I trowe stedfastly,} \\
&\text{So wonderful a drem as I} \\
&\text{The tenthe day now of Decembre (HF.55–63, my emphases).}
\end{align*}
\]

Geffrey does not know what the origins are of given dreams and of his dream of December 10th in particular; Geffrey does know that his dream is wonderful and hopes that God will “turn us every drem to goode.” Geffrey does not know what the origins of tidings are; Geffrey wants to hear wonderful tidings and hopes to benefit from them. Especially if we bear in mind the close relationship that Chaucer has already established between dreams and written works in The Book of the Duchess and The Parliament of Fowls, a number of questions thus present themselves to do with wonder in The House of Fame. Why would wonder (whether intellectual difficulty, a wonderful dream, or a wonderful tiding) lead to a hope in the power of every dream (or tiding?) to “turn … to goode”? More generally, why does a poem supposedly about Fame spend so much time talking about wonder\(^{461}\)—and why does wonder cause so many conversations in this poem? Why, especially, does the poem end with a turn towards the enigmatic, in the fantastically noisy and moving “queynte hous” that strains living tidings out of a wash of sound? Such questions

\(^{461}\) For a very crude metric, here is a comparison of wonder-vocabulary-frequency in Chaucer’s long poems excluding Canterbury Tales, Boece, and Romaunt of the Rose (number indicates on mean average, how many times in a hundred lines a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb based on ‘wonder’ occurs in the poem): \textit{BD}: 1.27; \textit{PF}: 0.57; \textit{HF}: 1.20; \textit{TC}: 0.52 (\textit{TC1}: 0.73; \textit{TC2}: 0.63; \textit{TC3}: 0.44; \textit{TC4}: 0.29; \textit{TC5}: 0.59), \textit{LGW}: 0.29 (Pro: 0.35; Leg: 0.28); \textit{CT GenPro}: 0.47. In hard numbers: vocabulary based on ‘wonder’ occurs twenty-six times in House of Fame’s 2158 lines, plus five instances of “queynt(e),” one of “strange,” two of “uncouth,” and one of “unknown”; this is a similar frequency to BD’s 17 (+3 “queynt(e),” no “strange”) over 1334 lines, but compare Parliament of Fowls (4/699, +1 “strange” not meaning wondrous), and Troilus and Criseyde Book 1 (8/1092 lines), Book 2 (11/1 nice) + 3 (“strange” with connotations of wonder) /1757), Book 3 (8/1820), Book 4 (5+2 “queynt(e)” + 1 “strange” (meaning wondrous)/1701), Book 5 (11 (+4 of 6 “strange” with connotations of wonder)/1871); Legends of Good Women has 2 (prologue) + 6 (legends) across 2723 lines; the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales has 4/858.
begin to suggest what is at stake in the enigmatic structures of this poem.

The first stage of the present investigation will introduce a concept of wonder articulated in the late-thirteenth or early fourteenth-century riddling text, the *Secretum philosophorum*, including a close reading of some unedited and hitherto overlooked passages from that treatise as well as a close reading of the riddle that I am connecting with the passage from the House of Rumour. From there I will take up the discussion of the House of Rumour passage, considering the House in relation to historical fish weirs with a brief examination of other weirs in Chaucer’s poetry and the significance of the phrase *in were* as an idiom in Middle English. I then examine the House in relation to medieval riddles. Finally, examining the wonder of the *Secretum* will provide the basis for my reading of Chaucer’s wonder in *The House of Fame*.

### 4.1 “It seems impossible but … it’s necessary”: Augmented Reality in the *Secretum philosophorum*

As I stated in my introduction, scholars such as Nicholas Watson, Suzanne Akbari, and Michelle Karnes, are now turning productive focus to the role of the imagination in the medieval marvel—and, in turn, on the role of the marvelous in offering insights into medieval constructions of imagination as well as other aspects of the mind. This turn towards medieval psychological models for wonder challenges the failure of some earlier approaches to accommodate such things as marvels perceived in dreams, or even wonder found in imaginative fictional texts, by showing that a medieval marvel’s wondrous existence depends in part on the faculty of the imagination. As Karnes argues,

> By troubling the crucial boundary between things that exist objectively within the soul and those in the world outside, [the imagination] helped to explain how marvels could mean more than the events that constitute them.\(^{462}\)

Late medieval models of the faculty of the imagination disagreed with one another in several respects, but generally concurred that the imagination mediates between the outer senses and the

inner senses, while presenting its findings to the other two faculties of judgment and memory. Moreover, the imagination is also able to form vivid inward images that have never been perceived by the outer senses. This second ability of the imagination is particularly prominent while dreaming, such that, in Watson’s terms,

In the intricate mental space of the “higher” imagination of the *fantasie* in particular, images rise up thickly from the storehouse of the memory or are admitted anew by way of the senses. There, they mysteriously combine and recombine to form previously unknown objects—marvels, inventions, novelties, monsters, engines, and all manner of other constructs, “thingis whiche . . . maken not oon thing in kinde,” as Pecock put it— with or without the effectual aid of the reason. Watson connects these marvellous phantasms explicitly to the *tidinges* of Chaucer’s House of Rumour, which he reads powerfully as an allegorical portrayal of the *cellula imaginativa*. In turn, Karnes does much to pave the way for a renewed analysis of literary wonders as she points out that

In the medieval sources cited above, [imaginary phenomena] lack reality in the sense that they remain within the soul—recall that “real” derives from *res*, or “thing.” That does not mean they are without reality in the modern sense of the word. We might equate physicality with existence, but medieval writers typically do not.

While Karnes focuses on the relationship between marvels and the medieval imagination as articulated in magical texts, I believe as much or more can be learned about wonder from riddling ones. *Pace* Daston and Park, enigmatic models tend towards rhetorical and even grammatical explanations for wonder, finding wonder not in the ‘breached boundary’ as much as in the Aristotelian ‘impossible combination,’ or the Donatan ‘hidden connection’. This is one of the things that renders it a powerful rhetorical trope (*videmus nunc per speculum in enigmat*),

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and that makes riddles a particularly useful genre for staging questions about the relationship between res and sensus, matter and sign. Patrick Murphy defines the riddle as a bivalve structure where the proposition and solution are understood to be equivalent, with the solution a more direct way of expressing the concept enigmatically indicated in the proposition. The premised equivalence of the proposition and solution complicates the relationship between res and sensus, by drawing attention to the ways that responses to an object are shaped by language and rhetoric acting upon the imagination.

One of the texts to address most explicitly how riddles evoke wonder through the imagination is the Secretum philosophorum, a book of experiments, riddles, tricks, and practical jokes composed in England in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. Indeed, given how explicitly this book is able to shed light on the above-described scholarly conversations relating to wonder, it is surprising how thoroughly it has been overlooked. The Secretum not only contains riddles, but also discusses those riddles and situates them within the realm of rhetoric. As such, the Secretum philosophorum provide a useful point of comparison for the issues of pleasurable or valuable wonder, and the challenge of imaginatively negotiating reality, which will ultimately be at stake in my discussion of The House of Fame.

Surviving in at least twenty-six manuscript witnesses from the early fourteenth to sixteenth centuries but never yet edited in its entirety, the Secretum philosophorum describes

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468 Patrick Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 35.
470 For the most recent count of manuscripts see Mark Clarke, “Writing recipes for non-specialists c.1300,” 51, which includes a list of 25 manuscripts (s.xiv and s.xv). In addition to those on Clarke’s list, there is at least one more partial witness: ‘Records of the Corporation of Bridport’ (1887) describes “a large folio of about 38 leaves of paper ... in former times ... known as the “Red Book,” and sometimes as the “Doom Book,” “Dome Book,” or “Doomsday Book,”” which on page 6 switches into text that I’ve identified as the second half of Book 2 of the Secretum, apparently with fragments of Book 4 on mutilated leaves present either as part of the same book or elsewhere in the collection. The collection is now housed at the Dorset Historical Centre. See “Records of the
itself as a book of secrets, borrowing from the rhetoric of contemporary collections of magic and experiments. It announces its intention to tell important secrets of each of the seven liberal arts, which ‘to common thinking are impossible, but among philosophers, secret and necessary’:

Iste liber quem pre manibus habemus vocatur secretum philosophorum, et intulatur isto nomine quod in eo continentur quedam secretae que reputacione vulgari sunt impossibilia, apud philosophos secretae et necessaria. Continentur in isto libro quedam secretae omnium artium.471

This book which we have in our hands is called the Secretum philosophorum, and it’s titled by this name because in it are contained certain secrets which to common thinking [reputacione vulgari] are impossible, yet among philosophers, secret and necessary [secretae et necessaria]. Contained in this book are certain secrets of all the arts.

Rather than provide essential information about the liberal arts, however, this treatise playfully reimagines them. As the art of Grammar is the art of speaking and writing correctly, Book 1 opens with instructions on how to construct a pen and various forms of ink. Book 3, on Dialectic, investigates the art of telling truth from falsehood, a task liberally interpreted as the book contains such charming oddities as a practical joke on how to make cooked meat appear to writhe with worms; instructions on how to make images dance in something like a very early kaleidoscope (apparently the compiler’s own invention); and even a recipe for how to make a golden sphere appear and fly through the air (or, in other words, how to blow a soap bubble).472 Book 4, on Arithmetic, is indeed concerned with mathematics, but contains a long collection of highly imaginative word problems, including a problem where a sick lion needs his doctor, a tortoise, to make a long and slow journey to bring him medicine.473


473 This has not yet been edited; see London, British Library, MS Harley 866 fol. 4r–7v; the lion and tortoise problem is the first new question on fol. 4v. There are of course many medieval precedents for playful mathematical word puzzles and problems, including a collection by Alcuin ‘ad acuendos iuuenes’ (to sharpen the young), containing a division problem without a solution. The question of what these collections of imaginative math problems might have to say about the limit-cases of medieval imaginative narrative, is best saved for a future
Most importantly for my present purposes, Book 2, on Rhetoric, is concerned with ornate speech, and the most ornate speech is a way of speaking that makes the ordinary seem marvellous: in this category it includes descriptive riddles and logogryphs, riddles involving coded writing, and the ‘cautela verbalis,’ or verbal trick. Of Book 2, the only partial edition is a single-text edition by Andrew Galloway of roughly the first half, which contains discussions of logogryphs and riddles with coded writing, and may be a possible source for some of the riddles in Langland’s Piers Plowman. The verbal tricks of the second half of Book 2 have never yet been edited or (it would seem) discussed in modern scholarship. However, as I hope to show preliminarily in this chapter, they allow for a broader understanding of both the possibilities and the implications of scholastic medieval riddling. What is more, the introductory riddle in Book 2 alludes portentously to a strange “house” that cannot be trusted, and the attempted escape through the windows of this house is identified as a pivotal moment for explaining how riddles work. A similar moment of attempting to escape through windows is the pivotal conclusion to “al the wondermost” moment in The House of Fame. In this section I will propose that Book 2’s opening illustration of impossibility in a riddle, together with the fuller perspective on Book 2 offered by the cautelae verbales, brings to light within the Secretum a coherent if implicit attitude toward imaginative wonder.

Book 2 begins:

Rethorica docet ornate loqui. In multis autem prevaelet ornatus modus loquendi quia aliquando proferuntur verba ornate que propter eorum variam et ornatam prolacionem apparent mirabilia, que si expresse proferentur reputantur truffe, ut sunt divinaciones. Verbi gratia: [1] Inimici mei venerunt ad domum meam et domus mea exivit per foramina et ego solus remansi inter inimicos meos. Istud videretur impossible, quod domus exiret per foramina; si tamen exprimatur necessarium est, cuius expositio est de pisce capto in reti. Nam recia que sunt inimici eius venerunt ad aquam que est domus eius, et domus, id est aqua, exivit per fenestras, id est foramina retis; et tunc piscis remansit in reti. [2] Propterea queritur quis fuerit natus ante patrem et genitus ante matrem et habuit virginitatem sue socri et ad eius humacionem erant omnes homines et mulieres exceptis duobus. Hoc videretur im-possible set tamen non est, nam Abel, filius

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Ade, fuit natus ante patrem.\textsuperscript{475}

Rhetoric teaches a person to speak ornately. But in many respects one adorned way of speaking is outstanding, in that sometimes subjects proposed in ornate words seem like wonders on account of their diverse and elaborate propounding, that would be considered trifles (as divinations are), if proposed directly. For example: “My enemies came to my home. My house left through the windows, and I alone remained amongst my enemies.”

\textit{It would seem impossible that the house could leave through the windows, but if it is explained it is necessary, for its exposition is about a fish caught in a net.} For the nets which are his enemies came to the water which is his home, and his house—that is, the water—left through the windows, that is, the gaps in the net; and then the fish remained in the net. And so it’s asked, “who was born before his father and begotten before his mother, and took the virginity of his ancestor, and every man and woman was at his burial except for two?” This might seem impossible but it’s not: for Abel, the son of Adam, was born before his father.

This discussion, one of the very few instances of a late medieval author ‘unpacking’ a riddle reading experience, contains a number of features of interest. The \textit{Secretum Philosophorum} characterizes riddling in terms of a set of binary pairs: adorned and dilated ways of speaking have the ability to create marvels that direct and compressed speech would make seem silly. Still more striking is the author’s phrase, “que … apparent mirabilia … que reputarentur truffe” (“what appear to be marvels; what would be thought to be trifles”). Rhetorically, the subjects (“que… que”) are not firmly identified one way or another as either wondrous or trifling. Each is shown to be a matter of perspective—much like the \textit{secreta philosophorum} themselves, those things “que reputacione vulgari sunt impossibilia, apud philosophos secreta et necessaria” (“which to common thinking are impossibilities; among philosophers, secret and necessary”).

This passage evokes Book 1’s opening discussion of necessary philosophic secrets more strongly in its very next lines, as the author illustrates his point about ornate rhetoric producing marvels by leaping into a close reading of the riddle of the fish in the net: “It would seem \textit{impossible} that the house could leave through the windows, but if it is explained it is \textit{necessary}, for its exposition is about a fish caught in a net [\textit{or trap}.” (“\textit{Istud videretur impossibile, quod domus exiret per foramina; si tamen exprimatur \textit{necessarium est}, cuius expositio est de pisce capto in reti.”)

Why, we might wonder, is it ‘necessary’ that the house leave through the windows? The

\textsuperscript{475} \textit{SP} Introduction–Book 2; text ed. in Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling.” 74. Transl. mine.
medieval author may be articulating an idea of generic necessity for the riddle, similar to Patrick Murphy’s discussion of ‘slim chances’: the house leaving through the windows introduces apparent impossibility into the imagined narrative, impossibility that is essential for alerting the reader that the imagined speaker isn’t human, and that this imagined story is a riddle. But there seems to be more going on here, since ‘necessary’ is one of the key words introduced by the author in the opening to the Secretum, to describe the book’s contents as a whole. An alternate hypothesis is that the book teaches the reader how not to be fooled by trifles, but this too seems to miss the mark: the Secretum as a whole teaches how to construct apparent marvels and marvelous perspectives, as the detailed instructions on how to create a flying ‘golden sphere’ and a kaleidoscope in Book 3 suggest.476 The author’s positive term, that this particular ornate mode of speech ‘prevalet’ over all forms of rhetoric, also suggests a positive connotation to the imaginative work of this riddle.

I propose that by highlighting the impossible, wondrous clue as ‘necessary,’ the author is identifying the work of this riddle with the aim of the Secretum as a whole: to cultivate wonder as an imaginative response within the ordinary world. Book 2’s cultivation of wonder emerges further in the way the ordering of material in this passage models a reading experience. First, the marvellous proposition illustrates the “ornatus modus loquendi” by which “apparent mirabilia.” A sentence highlighting the unusualness and necessity of one of the clues intensifies that marvellousness, then delivers the riddle’s solution. Finally, a third sentence presents a kind of dual vision overlaying the marvellous story onto its attendant situation in the everyday world, as we are asked to imagine each element of the riddle-story and the fishy story side-by-side.477 The final impression is not one of impossibility, but an enlarged sense of possibility, as we experience the fish as an imagined speaker and victim, and perhaps give a chuckle at the cleverness of the riddle for drawing the marvellous out of (or into) the mundane.478


477 This move is comparable to Alcuin’s tendency to playfully imagine wonders in familiar specific objects and locations in the real world: his gift comb, his reflection, and his version of the pillow riddle are all similarly interactive. See Chapter 1.

478 How does this enlarged sense of possibility relate to the next example, of the Abel riddle? Once again, the play seems to come from taking a familiar circumstance and rendering it strange. “This might seem impossible, but it’s not,” the author reiterates: “Hoc videretur impossibile set tamen non est, nam Abel, filius Ade, fuit natus ante patrem.” The Abel riddle draws out the peculiarity of the Genesis narrative; it also, perhaps, produces a lingering sense of wonder at human beings by drawing attention to the paradoxes at humanity’s origin.
The unpublished “verbal trick” riddles of the Secretum Book 2 add a new dimension to the collection’s play with impossibility. Galloway’s edition ends at the logogryphs and code-based riddles that take up the first half of Book 2. Examining the whole of Book 2 reveals that the author returns to the idea of marvellous rhetoric with which he began, in a new category called “verbal tricks” (“cautelae verbales”), and offers a much more capacious collection and discussion of riddling play than is apparent from Galloway’s edition. Although in some respects the cautelae verbales go against every variety we have hitherto known of for late medieval riddles, I want to emphasize that the Secretum philosophorum has some twenty-six extant manuscripts; they may have been a common form of riddling play. The cautelae have a similar proposition and solution format to other riddles and appear to be considered by the author a subcategory of riddle, along with the other subcategories implicitly represented by the elaborate descriptions of the fish and Abel, the logogryphs, and the coded propositions. The unedited passages begin:

De cautelis verbalibus:


Item docebo tibi illud quod nescis nec ego scio nec alius animus in mundo nec alius animus sciet illud postquam docuero tibi. [solutio:] accipiam vnum stramen in area domus et mensurabo quot polllices habebit in longitudine et hoc et quid tibi docebo cum autem tibi docuero frangam stramen.479

Concerning verbal tricks:

There are also verbal tricks [or ‘pitfalls,’ or ‘cautions’] which proceed from an ornate way of speaking, and they are so called because they are cautions concerning taking things literally [verboten], since as far as their proposition in words goes, they appear

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479 Transcribed and translated from a digitized partial manuscript of the Secretum philosophorum: London, British Library, MS Harley 866 (c 1390–c 1410) fol. 1v. Underlining emphasis is mine. See “Harley 866” on the British Library manuscript viewer, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ms_866_f001r. The De Cautele Verbalibus section includes eleven teasing puzzles, at 1v line 9 to 2r line 12.
to be subtle magistralia [or ‘masterful subtleties’], but they themselves are trifles. For example:

I will make you make a cross, and I won’t do you any harm, yet nonetheless you won’t have any power to leave your house unless you break the cross. This seems, as far as words go, truly amazing, and yet it’s a trifle, for I will make you embrace a post in your home, making a cross with your hands. Then it’s certain that you can’t leave your home unless you take your hands from one another and then the cross you’ve made is broken. ¶

Verbal trick:

Likewise I’ll teach you something that you don’t know, that I don’t know, that no other soul in the world knows, and nor will any soul know it after I’ve taught you. [The solution]: I will take a straw from the floor of the house and I will measure out how many thumbs it is in length, and I will teach you what it is—but when I’ve taught you, I will break the straw.

This author’s collection of “verbal tricks” expose a host of details in the ‘ornatus modus loquendi’ by which they attempt to cultivate wonder in their readers. In one way or another, each of these riddles creates a doubtful or wondrous scenario that turns out to be possible after all within the mundane world. Indeed, these everyday wonders are created from the most quotidian and familiar objects: a post in your home, a straw on the ground. These instances create wonder through different ways of imagining situations not just in the everyday, but in the here and now.

You will notice that you and I have already become characters in this set of riddles; the everyday and the hypothetical start to meld even further in the next examples:

Item supposito quod hic sit arbor gerens . 20 poma . et quod super quidlibet pomum sedeat vna ausi qua qualiter acciperem . prima poma deorsum . absque fugacione avium . solutio attendens usque auues euolauerunt per se. ¶ Item alia cautela

Item pirus ferebat omnem fructum quam potuit pirus gerere et tamen non gerebat pira. solutio gessit tamen vnum pirum. ¶ alia cautela

Item supposito quod hic esset vnus /fons\ profunditatis unius lente et fuisset vnum pomum in fundo et fuisset fons ita strictus quod vix posset pomum intrare . qua qualiter velles extrahere pomum absque lesionem solutio adimplebis fontem aqua et semper pomum super natablet aquam et sic extrahes .

Suppose that here is a tree bearing twenty apples and that on top of every apple a bird is sitting. How exactly [qua qualiter] could I have plucked the first apples down without [causing] the flight of the birds? Solution: waiting until the birds have flown away on their own. ¶ Again another trick

480 BL MS Harley 866 f.1v, trans. mine.
Suppose that a pear tree was bearing all the fruit that a pear tree could bear, and yet it was not bearing pears. Solution: It bore only one pear. ¶ Another trick

Suppose that here should have been a well of a single sluggish depth and that there had been an apple at the bottom, and that the well was so tight that the apple could scarcely fit in. How exactly do you want to draw the apple out of the well without hurting it? The solution: you will fill the well with water and the apple will always float on top of the water, and thus you will get it out.

In these examples, the reader is being invited to construct an imaginative world and then manipulate it, testing actions imaginatively to find the solution. As in the Anglo-Saxon collections of Alcuin and Solomon and Saturn II, the Secretum’s succession of cautelae teaches the skills needed to solve the puzzles—in this case, lateral thinking and the search for simple solutions to an imagined scenario. Yet this collection of puzzles also blends the real world with the imaginary, in the characters (I and you) and the settings (here; your house; a tree; a well).

Book 2 closes with its most marvellous trick: the narrator announces that he will make it seem that a stick is hovering horizontally out from his hand unaffected by gravity, and then up the ante by hanging a knife (and then two) from the end of that stick. This might seem impossible, the narrator says, but then he provides a detailed explanation of how this sleight of hand can be enacted in real life. In British Library, MS Harley 866, the scribe provides a diagram so that we can imagine the effect of the trick more easily for ourselves:

![Figure 5 The knife trick.](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ms_866_f002r)
This final cautela is a fascinating contributor in Book 2’s collection of Rhetorica. Even knowing that the ‘solution’ involving hidden cords (and in some respect this is a mechanical problem similar to that of retrieving the apple), does not wholly diminish the wonder of the trick, because its purpose is to create the visual experience (or the imagined visual experience) of the impossible in real life. It is not necessary to believe that the impossible is actually taking place; the trick only needs to allow the viewer to be able to entertain the idea in the present. This is particularly suggested by the diagram in Harley 866, which labels finger, stick, and knife, and provides a visual aid for the look of the trick, but does not diagram the cords’ arrangement that makes the trick possible. The knife trick fits with the other forms of riddle in Book 2—the fish in the net, Abel’s life and death, logogryphs such as muscatum, coded writing, and the verbal tricks of the previous cautalae—because each allows for an adornment of reality.

For the author of the Secretum, riddling seems ultimately to do several things, each of which can inform our understanding of how imaginative wonder operates. For one, the Secretum’s riddles adorn reality with the unexpected, such as the fish in the net, to give readers a doubled sense of the extraordinary in the mundane. This adorned perspective can be temporary or lasting, depending upon whether the riddle is treated playfully, used as a learning tool, or searched for deeper insights. Yet critically, mirabilia and truffe are the same situations, depending on how they are described.

Second: the Secretum invites readers to test the reality of its riddles, to make imaginative leaps, ask how things are possible—but in doing so it draws readers into the reality of those imagined worlds, and imaginatively merges those worlds into this one. The riddles about the fish, the pear tree, or the tree full of birds, reveal simple and believable solutions to what might seem challenging problems, but it is worth noting that the plainly described fish, the apple retrieved from the well, or the single-peared tree have no more outward existence than their seemingly impossible counterparts, although working through the problem might make it seem otherwise. This suggests that in the Middle Ages, as now, we confer reality to things by engaging with them
in our thoughts, expectations, and feelings.\textsuperscript{481} A riddling puzzle—a wonder—can thus draw a reader out of a narrative, or pull a reader into it more intensely.\textsuperscript{482} Mikhael Epstein’s theorization of the category of the Interesting, although designed for scientific discourse rather than narrative, may be helpful here. He writes:

\begin{quote}
[T]he category of the interesting emerges as the measure of tension between wonder and understanding, or, in other words, between the alterity of the subject and reason’s capacity to integrate it. On the one hand, an object offering a proliferation of wonders without any reasonable explanation diminishes its potential to be interesting because we give up all hope of rationally integrating such a phenomenon. On the other hand, the evacuation of wonder that guarantees an easy triumph for reason undermines our interest as well.\textsuperscript{483}
\end{quote}

Epstein’s situation of the ‘interesting’ in the tension between “the alterity of the subject and the reason’s capacity to integrate it,” is close to my category of ‘wonder,’ or to the Secretum’s “what seems impossible, but if it is explained, it is necessary.” Wonder is an affect of possibility, not a rejection of impossibility. Finally, a shared wonder told from one person to another, can engage them in a social relation: wonders, and discussing them, are the means by which you and I interact in the Secretum.

These elements are important to bear in mind for the construction of wondrous communications in The House of Fame which is my closing concern in this chapter. I now turn to consider the description of the House of Rumour more closely, by way of its predecessor in Ovid’s Metamorphoses.

\section{4.2 The House of Rumour and the Great Weir}

When the Eagle explains to a kidnapped Geoffrey that he is taking him where he will hear an astounding number of “wonder thinges,” of “tydynges / Both soth-sawes and lesinges” (HF


his announcement results in an exchange that would not be out of place in the *Secretum philosophorum*:

> Unnethe maistow trowen this?"
> Quod he. ‘Noo, helpe me God so wys,“
> Quod I. “Noo? why?” quod he. “For hyt
> Were impossible, to my wit,
> Though that Fame hadde alle the pies
> In al a realme, and al the spies,
> How that yet she shulde here al this,
> Or they espie hyt.” “O yis, yis!” (HF 699–706)

In this exchange, the Eagle has just described a place with an infinite number of tidings to cheer Geffrey up and reconnect him with his fellow men. Geffrey has failed to come up with a way that such a place could be possible, and with the Eagle’s help the subject thus becomes what Mikhael Epstein might call ‘interesting’: it relates something very improbable in a way that the Eagle will assert to be true. The Eagle’s enthusiastic “O yis, yis!” articulates a response similar to the “necessary’ impossibility described in the *Secretum philosophorum*, as the Eagle takes pleasure in anticipating an explanation that will enhance Geffrey’s sense of possibility in the world. This topic associates the Eagle and his companion as the Eagle enters into his long discourse, partly mythological and partly scientific, on the natural inclination of speech to travel through multiplication to the House of Fame. The Eagle’s explanation, though, does little to explain the strangeness of the two buildings that Geffrey encounters at their destination. I would like to examine one of those structures in depth: the “queynte hous” called by critics the House of Rumour. As a prelude to that discussion, it is worth grounding ourselves briefly in some context: the passage from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that is its main source, with a brief glance at the Palace of Fame for contrast.

As is well known, much of the inspiration for the buildings in Book 3 of Chaucer’s *The House of Fame* comes from Ovid’s description of the House of Fame in *Metamorphoses* Book 12.39–63. At the centre of the world between earth, water, and sky,

> Fama tenet summaque domum sibi legit in arce,
> Innumerousque aditus ac mille foramina tectis
> addidit et nullis inclusit limina portis:

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nocte dieque patet. Tota est ex aere sonanti,
tota fremit vocesque refert iteratque quod audit.
Nulla quies intus nullaque silentia parte,
nec tamen est clamor, sed parvae murmura vocis,

50 qualia de pelagi, siquis procul audiat, undis
esse solent, qualemve sonum, cum Iuppiter atras
increpuit nubes, extrema tonitrua reddunt.
atria turba tenet: veniunt, leve vulgus, eunteque
mixtaque cum veris passim commenta vagantur

55 milia rumorum confusaque verba volutant;
e quibus hi vacua inplent sermonibus aures,
hí narrata ferunt alio, mensuraque ficti
crescit, et auditis aliquid novus adicit auctor.
illic Credulitas, illic temerarius Error

60 vanaque Laetitia est consternatique Timores
Seditioque repens dubioque auctore Susurri;
ipsa, quid in caelo rerum pelagoque geratur
et tellure, videt totumque inquirit in orbem.

Fama holds a home she gathered [or chose or read] for herself on the top of a peak,
Innumerable inlets and a thousand openings in the roof

45 She added, and enclosed the thresholds with no gates;
Night and day, they lie open. It’s all of resounding bronze [or air],
it groans and reverberates with everything, carrying back voices, and repeats what it
hears.
There is no quiet within and no silence in any part;
Neither is there clamour, but a murmur of low voice,

50 Just as the waves of the sea are accustomed to sound
if someone hears them far off,
or like the sound when Jupiter cracks the black clouds,
and the final peals of thunder echo back.
A crowd keeps the halls. A flighty people, they come and go,
they wander everywhere with inventions mixed with truths,
they talk over a thousand rumours and confused words;
of which these folks fill empty ears with speech,
these carry tales to another; the measure of the fiction
grows, and each new author adds something to what is heard.
Here is Credulity, there rash Error,

55 Empty Pleasure and the frantic Fears,
Creeping Sedition, and Whispers, authored by Doubt [or of uncertain origin];
As for Herself: she sees what goes on in heaven, sea
and earth, and inquires about everything in the world.

Ovid’s House of Fame begins by emphasizing its almost voracious openness alongside an
accumulative quality: Fama “legit” her house (‘chose,’ but also ‘gathered’), and the opening
lines of this description also reflect the house’s thousand entrances visually in the “ad-” and “in-”
prefixes throughout these lines; the passage moves into the awe-inspiring in its epic similes, then concludes with an allegorical description of her work in the world, performed within her crowded halls. When Chaucer adapts this description for the Houses of Fame and Rumour, his division between the two structures elaborates on Ovid’s mythology of *fama* by isolating and elaborating on different representations for how news, earthly reputation, and historical record are generated in the world. Interestingly, each building also is distinctive for the ways that it is closed and open to Geffrey’s understanding. Fame’s ornamented beryl castle is a magnificent, wondrous ‘woon’ that defies imitation. The following passage introduces its nature, such

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That al the men that ben on lyve
Ne han the kunnynge to descrive
The beaute of that ylke place,
Ne coude casten no compace
Swich another for to make,
That myght of beaute ben hys make,
Ne so wonderlych ywrought;
That hit astonyeth yit my thought,
1170 And maketh al my wyt to swynke,
On this castel to bethynke,
So that the grete craft, beaute,
The cast, the curiosite
Ne kan I not to yow devyse;
1180 My wit ne may me not suffise.
But natheles al the substance
I have yit in my remembrance;  (HF 1167–1182)
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While the *scale* of the Palace’s size and intricacy is wondrous, framed in terms of defeated analysis and communication (“the kunnynge to descrive”; “casten no compace / Swich another for to make”), nonetheless it’s important to note that the terms of the Palace’s *potential* analysis are clear. Geffrey refers immediately to aesthetic and architectural concepts—the “craft,” “beautee,” “cast,” and “curiositee” of the castle’s architectural features—and each architectural feature in turn is recognizable; the wider passage is rife with technical vocabulary (*HF* 1184–1200). This imaginative legibility persists throughout the scene. Fame’s palace features statue-like figures trapped in place on plinths, and holding up pillars of their subjects’ fame. Unlike the Man of Gret Authoritee at the end of the poem, the identity or occupation of each figure is immediately recognizable to Geffrey, who supplies their names (although, in the cases of Lollius and Englishh Gauffrey, not always in a way that is helpful to readers). Finally, almost all of the
Palace’s inhabitants and their actions are almost instantly, perhaps deceptively, recognizable and familiar to Geffrey. Although there is much to analyze in the Palace of Fame, Geffrey concludes his experience of it by deciding that this place is too familiar to be his goal:

1890 For certeynly, he that me made
   To comen hyder, seyde me,
   Y shulde bothe here and se
   In this place wonder thynges;
   But these be no suche tydynges
1895 As I mene of.” “Noo?” quod he. (HF 1890–1895)

For all its intricacies, Fame’s wondrous palace is imaginable in a pointedly straightforward sense; “there I saw a magnificent beryl castle with many pillars, and on each pillar a poet was standing” is not much more difficult than the Secretum philosophorum’s proposition, “Imagine that here is a tree with twenty apples, and on each apple a bird is sitting.” Geffrey’s description of the second structure, a “queynte hous,” however, piles on detail after detail in a mounting series of features that are not easily explained, understood, or imagined. I will offer a reading of this structure in light of a recent critical reading of the so-called House of Rumour and its riddling aspects.

In a valley under the castle Geffrey sees “an hous” more wonderfully and “queynteliche” created than the Labyrinth (1918–23), which whirls around eternally ‘as swyft as thought’ (1924). This “queynte hous” (1925) is also the source of a fantastically loud, undifferentiated noise capable of being heard over great distances (presumably this is the same “gret swogh” that Geffrey and the Eagle hear from afar as they fly in, as described in 1025–1043, a translation and elaboration of Ovid’s Metamorphoses Book 12.48–52, the passage about a distant sea or thunderstorm). From this close perspective the sound is much more aggressive, resembling “the routing of the stoon / that from thengyn is leten goon” (1927–1934). In a greater divergence from Ovid’s description, the enormous House is constructed of wicker: woven twigs of different colours, such as are made into baskets and cages (1935–1940). The “swough” and the rubbing of

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486 Item supposito quod hic sit arbor gerens . 20 poma . et quod super quidlibet pomum sedeat vna aus quis qualiter acciperem . prima poma deorsum . absque fugacione avium . solutio attendens usque aues euolauerunt per se. (Harley 866, fol. 1v.)
the twigs in motion fills the house with squeaks and “chirkinges” (1941–1944). As in Ovid’s description, this house has countless entrances and holes in the roof, “to leten wel the soun out go” (1945–1950); night and day the doors are open wide, without a porter to prevent tidings from entering. As a result, the house is also chock-full of tidings and gossip (loud or whispered), elaborated in a long anaphora of everyday events and situations: from “Of werre, of pees, of mariages,” through to “fyr” and “divers accident” (1961–1976). The house is sixty miles in length, and despite its weak material “hit is founded to endure / Whyl that hit lyst to Aventure, / That is the moder of tydynges, / As the see of welles and of sprynges.” It is shaped like a cage (1977–1985). The dreamer wonders, marveling that he has never in his life seen “swich a hous as this” (1986–1987). At his request to “let me seen / What wondres in this place been” (1995–6), the Eagle, having reappeared, deposits him inside the structure, a feat he would be incapable of on his own.

The house’s whirling motion and its construction materials are the respects in which it differs most significantly from Ovid’s passage; however, attempts to find other sources for them have historically met with mixed success, and the House of Rumour continues to puzzle critics. As Fyler’s notes in the Riverside Chaucer summarize, the wicker construction drew early scholars to the possibility of connections with actual woven houses in Ireland and Wales, or to the description of Fortune’s half-falling-apart house in Roman de la Rose 6108–14; however, in none of these cases is the resemblance especially close. Mary Flowers Braswell makes an analogy with a birdcage, which would be appropriate given the flapping around of the tidings rushing to escape from inside the structure.

Rebecca Davis’s discussion of what she calls ‘fugitive poetics’ in The House of Fame offers the most recent and provocative treatment of the House’s exterior. Davis proposes that the porous eel traps referred to in the poem’s closing lines “suggest an elegant material ‘‘source’”

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487 See Riverside Chaucer Explanatory Note for 1925–85, on the work of Cigada, Sypherd, Tuve, Robinson, Kittredge, Bennett, and David in these earlier interpretations.


for the House of Rumour, whose construction from “twigges” (1936) diverges from a description otherwise heavily indebted to Ovid’s account of Fame’s house in the *Metamorphoses.* Davis builds this reading into a larger analysis of water-imagery in the poem as well as some of the description summarized above, but her key lines are the peculiar description of the House’s occupants entering into a frenzy for tidings at the end of the poem:

> And whan they were alle on an hepe,  
> Tho behynde begunne up lepe,  
> And clamen up on other faste,  
> And up the nose and yén kaste,  
> And trodden fast on others heles,  
> And stampen, as men doon aftir eles. (*HF* 2149–54)

Davis observes,

> The traps evoked in the poem’s final analogy are easily passed over as we readers hasten with the crowd toward the payoff, the revelation of the “man of gret auctorite” (2158). But the trap poised at the end of The House of Fame is not only a basket within a basket—a smaller, mundane version of its cosmic counterpart “sixty myle of lengthe” (1980). Its placement at the end of the poem also demands a reappraisal of the poem’s broken form. The eel trap gathers its contents in passive fashion, designed, precisely as the House of Rumor is “shapen” (1985), to take advantage of the fugitive nature of its environment, to register what passes through. As Geoffrey had observed couriers with their bags as full of lies as “ever vessel was with lyes”—that is, the lees that remain at the bottom of an emptied cup (2130)—the analogy of the eel trap leaves us thinking not, or not only, of loss—what the poem is missing, where it fails to arrive—but of what remains.

Davis’s observation that the House of Rumour resembles an eel trap makes excellent sense of its wicker construction materials, of the crammed-in presence of living beings inside it, of its connection with water and of Ovid’s implications of gathering in the original passage. Compellingly, Davis’s theory also exploits the resemblance between the trap and the ‘porous’ structure of the poem’s turn to anaphora in the House, suggesting that the eel trap is integral to Chaucer’s poetics at the close of the poem. Davis’s article shows that a connection between the ‘queynt hous’ and an eel trap explains many of the unexpected details of this passage in a satisfying way.

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490 Ibid., 125.
491 Ibid., 126. My emphases.
I’d like to pursue this idea further on several fronts. I argue that the House of Rumour is indeed enigmatic and that it is a were or weir. On the surface, this not only explains the building materials but lends coherence to the relationship (and division) between the House of Fame and the House of Rumour, even a suggestion of the origins of both structures. The main remaining peculiar detail of the exterior, the house’s endless whirling, may also find an easier explanation as not only a nice allegorical detail, but a phenomenon to be expected from the science laid out by the Eagle: the weir is not whirling of its own volition but is marking the presence of the vortex or whirlpool, where the sounds of the world come together, at which it is strategically located. Examining Chaucer’s other poems reveals that, for Chaucer, the image of a fish caught in a weir occurs several times, especially for thinking about enigma and the wonders of everyday life. I argue that Chaucer takes up this image from the tradition of fish riddles to which I have already alluded, including the riddle found in the Oxford riddles and Secretum philosophorum.

Moving (and eternally moving) houses are prominent features of fish and river, and fish and net or trap riddles, extant in the fourteenth century, and in particular the wondrous windows of Chaucer’s structure have a closer commonality with the riddle of the fish in the trap in the Secretum philosophorum than with the passage in Ovid’s Metamorphoses.

However, the deeper question is why Chaucer turns towards enigma and riddling at the end of the poem at all—and here the solution ‘were’ bears unexpected fruit. This is a pun, on homophones for ‘were.’ In the Middle English Dictionary, “wer(e, n.(1)” refers to a weir or fish-weir. However, “wer(e, n.(5)” is a situation of great uncertainty or wonder; to fall, stand, or lie “in were” is a proverbial expression. For example, Robert Mannyng of Brunne in Handlyng Synne observes that there “ys doute & grete were / To wyte where-of dremys come.” Like Alcuin’s playful choice to define a wonder by putting the reader (through Pippin) into an experience of wonder, through the riddle of the strange man (Alcuin’s own reflection), the House of Rumour is thus a wondrous, enigmatic representation of an object (a were) that enacts its own

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494 Idelle Sullens, ed. Robert Mannyng: Handlyng Synne (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1983); ll. 462–63) for the longer passage, see ll. 387–466. Mannyng is making a similar point to Geffrey in the opening to The House of Fame.
definition upon the reader. To set the final (perhaps) part of the poem about Fame, including the birth of tidings, in were is thus to link communication to wonder, and to riddling wonder in particular, in ways that need further study. First, however, let us consider the more literal aspects of this image.

**The Fish Weir in Chaucer’s England**

It is maad as a were for fysh / Entree ther is but issue nouht.

— *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode* ⁴⁹⁵

Although our most common current use of ‘weir’ (ME “were, n(1)”) now refers to a man-made “barrier or dam to restrain water,” in Chaucer’s England ‘were’ could also refer to a variety of structures more specifically to do with catching fish. These ranged from the large ebb-weirs and fish-pounds found along mud-flats in the estuaries, to varieties of removable basket-traps and nets that armed those large ebb-weirs but were also common in mill-races and freshwater streams and rivers throughout England.⁴⁹⁷ When the threatening inscription on the gate in *The Parliament of Foules* warns, “This strem yow ledeth to the sorweful were / There as the fish in prysoun is al drye” (*PF* 138–9), the figurative fish is “drye”⁴⁹⁸ because its “prisoun” is a trap that either is lifted out of the water, or (in an estuary or tidal zone) is drained of water as the tide recedes. In either case, the sorrowful fish either slowly suffocates or is removed from the trap and killed.

In essence, fish traps or basket weirs (Anglo-Saxon *cytweras*) are a very simple labyrinth or maze (sufficient, however, to overcome fishy intellects). As Deguileville succinctly

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⁴⁹⁶ See *OED* s.v. “weir, n.”

⁴⁹⁷ See *MED* s.v. “wēr(e n.(5))”; also see s.v. “Fishing,” in Thomas F. Glick, Steven Livesey, and Faith Wallis, eds., *Medieval Science, Technology, and Medicine: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 175. “Fish seeking food or shelter entered funnel-shaped basket traps (called *retia, netz, weels, Reussen, vervaux*, etc.) designed to prevent escape. These devices of wicker or webbing could be set independently in likely spots or as the operative element in a weir, sluice, or barrier trap.” (175)

⁴⁹⁸ See *MED* s.v. “drien, v(1),” with possible semantic echoes of MED “drien, v(2).” (to suffer, endure), “driven,” and as in “dreary,” and of course a pun on humoral theory; melancholy is cold and dry, which is especially unnatural for fish.
summarizes, “Entree i a, issue non.”

Although fish-traps and nets vary by region and historical period, their dominant shape is a baited funnel, easy to enter and hard to escape. Eel traps (also known in ME as ‘boukes,’ or eel-bucks), are a special type of basket weir: wicker or reed baskets with a narrowing cone-shaped aperture made of branches attractive for the eel to push through as it enters, seeking food and safety, but that close as the eel passes by, creating a one-way valve. The other end is sealed with a wooden bung for the eels to be shaken out when the trap is removed from the water. These traps are visible in a marginal illumination of a mill-race in the Luttrell Psalter:

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499 J. J. Stürzinger, ed., Le pèlerinage de vie humaine de Guillaume de Deguileville (London: Nichols and Sons, 1893), 9892. On uses of ‘were’ to refer to nets and small traps, see the allegorical description in Chapter 25 of the Middle English translation of Guillaume de Deguileville’s Pèlerinage de la vie humaine, The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode, ed. Avril Henry (Early English Text Society, 288, 292; London, Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society 1985, 1988): “j sey thee wite it for sooth that the sak which at myn nekke j here hath so subtile a yate that what is cast ther in ne may not out ne be doon awey It is maad as a were for fysh Entree ther is but issue nouht.” (Pilgrimage 150). Deguileville’s poem, Pèlerinage de la vie humaine, reads: “… le sac que au col je porte / A une si soutil(le) porte / Que ce qui est dedens gete / N’en puet issir ne estre oste. /Fait est comme nasse a poisson, /Entree i a, issue non.” (9887–92).


Figure 6 Eel traps in a mill-race.


The Luttrell Psalter traps are only tethered at their entrance, leaving them free to drift (at least somewhat) with the current; other basket-traps recovered from medieval estuarine sites, over two metres in length, are clearly too bulky to do this.502

Why would Lady Fame have something that resembles a fish-weir? The answer to this question goes back to the Eagle’s explanation for the location of Fame’s house.503 When Geffrey,

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502 For more on weirs, in addition to Cooper’s “Hemingdon Quarry,” above, see Aidan O’Sullivan, “Place, Memory, and Identity in Estuarine Fishing Communities: Interpreting the Archaeology of Early Medieval Fish Weirs,” *World Archaeology* 35.3 (2003): 454–56, 462.

503 It is somewhat unclear from the Eagle’s language which structure he refers to by Fame’s ‘hous.’ Fame has a palace or ‘castel’ that she obviously inhabits, which is usually called by critics the House of Fame, as distinct from the House of Rumour (representing *fama*’s other meaning). The only structure at Geffrey’s destination called a ‘hous’ in its immediate description is the wicker House, and it is this structure (this ‘House of Fame’) heard from far off when Geffrey and the Eagle approach, as the Eagle’s reference to “the grete soun” of ‘compounded’ true and false tidings implies:

Se here the Hous of Fame, lo!
Maistow not heren that I do?"

1025 “What?” quod I. “The grete soun,”
in the passage I examined earlier, asserts that Fame couldn’t possibly collect all the news in the world, the Eagle explains, partially following Ovid,\(^{504}\) that Fame’s House stands “in so juste a place / That every soun mot to hit pace” (719–720). In other words, Fame is an efficient hunter: taking advantage of the multiplying properties of sound, her strategically placed, labyrinthine ‘hous’ performs the work for her that ‘all the pies / in al a realme, and alle the spies’ (703–704) would not be able to perform acting individually. Indeed, the point (in both Ovid and Chaucer) that sounds are drawn not to Fame’s House per se but rather to the midpoint location where Fame is situated, itself suggests the idea of a weir.

Understanding Fame’s ‘queynte hous’ as (at least on some level) a fantastical weir at a strategic location not only explains the house’s shape and construction, as Davis has pointed out—it also suggests some physical explanations for the peculiarities of the house’s movement, sound, and history in relation to the palace at the same site. Weirs tend to be located at places where water flows, such as mill-races or estuaries, in order to encourage fish to drift into the traps. When currents or tides from different sources run together, they produce turbulence—and we would expect a particular kind of turbulence to occur at a centralized location, where all the sound of the world draws together. When a fluid collecting from different directions has to pass through the same central space (as for example with water in a drain, or a strait), angular momentum causes the water to rotate as it approaches and passes through the confined space, forming a vortex.\(^{505}\) If the Eagle’s analogy of sound with water holds, then this house’s whirling around is consistent with the presence of a vortex. The roaring sound of the house is also

\[
\text{Quod he, “that rumbleth up and doun} \\
\text{In Fames Hous, full of tdynges,} \\
\text{Bothe of feir speche and chidynges,} \\
\text{And of fals and soth compouned.} \\
\text{1030} \\
\text{Herke wel; hyt is not rouned.} \\
\text{Herestow not the grete swogh?”} \ (HF\ 1023–1031)
\]

Setting aside that question for now, for clarity, I will refer to Fame’s Palace as a palace or castle, and use ‘House’ to refer to what critics call the House of Rumour.

\(^{504}\) Ovid’s passage also suggests Fame’s bit-by-bit gathering or accumulation of her house (legit ... addidit…) and gives just a hint of the labyrinth in her palace’s crowded echoing hallways filled with allegorical figures, which carry back the sounds they hear.

consistent with this; vortices emit a guttering, thundering, or roaring sound depending on their
strength.\(^{506}\) For example, Old Sow, one of the largest whirlpools in the world, located in the Bay
of Fundy off of Deer Island, New Brunswick, has two origin-stories for its name. Local stories
trace its name to its grunting sounds, but more likely etymologies trace back to the Old Dutch
word *sough, (pronounced ‘suff’) for drain, or *swough: a sound of water or wind—similar to
the ‘gret swough’ described by the Eagle and Geffrey in HF. 1031 and 1941. Incidentally,
small-scale whirlpools and other phenomena of turbulence can also be good places for fishing.\(^{507}\)

The idea of a weir also helps to explain the differing temporalities of the Palace and
wicker House, and even suggest the possibility of an economic relation and history of sorts
between the structures. Large medieval weirs and fisheries required a community to maintain and
harvest the tidal catch; as a source of wealth and food, they were often under the control of large
landholdings or monasteries and contributed to their prosperity.\(^{508}\) In her palace, Fame is shown
to be an arbiter of human recorded history, in the sense that her hall is populated by heralds from
different time periods and she determines the duration of the fame of others. Yet Fame’s great
palace also contains the architectural evidence of its own history: Geffrey observes after
examining Ovid’s enormously tall pillar that

\[
\ldots \text{this halle, of which I rede,} \\
\text{Was woxen on highte, length, and brede,} \\
1495 \quad \text{Wel more be a thousand del} \\
\text{Than hyt was erst, that saugh I wel. (HF 1493–1496)}
\]

The “queynte hous” has a different kind of temporality about it, as the structure is primitive in its
construction materials yet complex in design, enduring, and focussed—as Sheila Delany


\(^{507}\) See the notes on fish in pools of deep water in *An Older Form of the Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an angle
attributed to Dame Juliana Barnes, printed from a MS. in the possession of Alfred Denison, Esq.* (London: W.
Satchell & Co, 1883), 18–19. It reads, at 163/10–12:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{yn euery place þer it is any þyng depe þer is no grete choyse in a pole for it is but a pryson to fysche and} \\
\text{þei lyve moste parte in pryson and hungre as a prisoner þer . . . Ye schall angle euery place wher it is depe} \\
\text{and clere . . . and especially if þer be a welry wherly pyt of watur or a couerete as an holow banke or greyt} \\
\text{rottes of treys or long wedys flotynge a boue þe watur wher þe fysche may couer hym at dyuere tymes} \\
\text{Also in depe stiff stremys and yn falles of water and weeres flode gates and mylle pittes and weyr þe watur} \\
\text{restith by the banke & þe streme renneythe nye þer by and ys dep & clere . . .} \\
\text{(18–19, my emphases)}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{508}\) Aidan O’Sullivan, “Place, Memory, and Identity in Estuarine Fishing Communities,” 454–56.
observes—upon events in the present. The only hints of the passage of time that we receive from it are the differing colours of the twigs that form it, and an assertion that

1980

Al was the tymber of no strengthe,
Yet hit is founded to endure
Whyl that hit lyst to Aventure,
That is the moder of tydynges,
As the see of welles and sprynges… (HF 1980–1984)

Fish weirs and eel traps have a similar relation to palaces and halls that the House has to the Palace of Fame; they are present-focused rather than memorial, their construction materials are much frailer, and yet their designs vary little from century to century. To use a distinction from earlier in my dissertation, the Palace is concerned with “what we know”; fish weirs, and the wicker “queynte hous,” are in the everyday.

Weirs in Chaucer’s Poetry

Chaucer refers to fish and to weirs several times in his poetry, often making comparisons, whether playful or profound, between helpless fish and humans, especially lovers. Some of these references have a wider cultural currency, as for instance where the Monk in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales scoffs at the idea that a cloisterless “monk, whan he is recchelees, / Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees,” (CT 1.179–180)—a proverbial comparison found in Gratian’s Decretum and other texts. Chaucer’s short poem “To Rosemounde,” begins its third stanza facetiously complaining that “Nas never pyk walwed in galauntyne / As I in love am walwed and ywounde” (ll. 17–18; “There was never a pike wallowed in galentine (gelatin) as I am wallowed and wound up in love”).

In addition to his passing references to unhappy and helpless fish, there are at least two instances where Chaucer refers explicitly to fish in weirs; each of these occurs in a context where


510 For more on design, see Cooper and O’Sullivan, op. cit.


wonder is also at stake. One we have encountered already, in the doubly inscribed gate of

Parliament of Fowls:

This strem yow ledeth to the sorweful were
There as the fish in prysoun is al drye;
Th’eschewing is only the remedye! (PF 138–140)

In The Parliament of Fowls, this side of the inscription advertises the outcome of love as a sorrowful weir, a spiritual, emotional or even intellectual trap that strands the lover—who is also positioned, in the act of receiving this message, as a reader—in “prysoun” without escape. This dilemma-inducing inscription, which I have argued is a riddling representation of love itself, is itself a kind of weir, punning upon the homophone were n. 5, “in (a) were, in a state of doubt or hesitancy”\textsuperscript{513}—it traps the dreamer in a state of indecision until his guide intervenes.

Chaucer’s other main direct exploration of this image, in the Proem to Venus in Book 3 of Troilus and Criseyde, compares particular, individual human chance attractions with fish in weirs as fellow everyday wonders, matters that foil attempts at construing:

Ye knowe al thilke covered qualitee
Of thynges, which that folk on wondren so,
Whan they kan nought construe how it may jo
She loveth hym, or whi he loveth here,
As whi this fissh, and naught that, comth to were. (TC 3.31–35)

The analogy between lovers and fish in weirs has no close counterpart in the Filostrato and is probably Chaucer’s own invention. Yet it is also a moment where Chaucer articulates premises I have found elsewhere in medieval vernacular literature writing about the everyday: that the everyday is filled with things that people wonder about; that these wonders can illuminate one another; that everyday wonders can be understood as having enigmatic structure: daily chances have “a covered qualitee” and so folk wonder at them: they “kan nought construe how it may jo.” This is perhaps the moment in Chaucer’s poetry that comes closest to articulating the everyday wonders of the Old English Metre 28 or Solomon and Saturn II, and to Langland’s alignment of “kynde wit” with sights “Of briddes and of beestes, [of blisse and of sorwe]”\textsuperscript{514}

\textsuperscript{513} See MED s.v. were, n. 5 and discussion below.

These passages in *The Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus* represent a weir as a site of uncertainty, but in Chaucer’s poetry it is also a place of encounter. When the inhabitants of the House of Rumour seeking to learn the source of a disturbance leap “And stampen, as men doon aftir eles” (*HF* 2154), it refers to the practice of creating loud noises in hopes of driving eels into the basket weirs;\(^5\) here, the ‘eels’ are as-yet-unheard, *prospective* tidings that the fishers might come to find.

As I have suggested above, one implication of taking the House of Rumour as a weir is thus that it unlocks a possible pun, between \(\text{wēr}(\text{n.(1)})\) and \(\text{wēr}(\text{n.(5)})\) of the *Middle English Dictionary*. According to the *MED*, \(\text{wēr}(\text{n.(5)})\) has the following meanings:

1. (a) A feeling or personal condition of doubt or uncertainty; also, hesitancy, indecision; **double ~**, a state of doubt or indecision between two alternatives; **in (a) ~**, in a state of doubt or hesitancy;
   (b) a state of error or confusion; **stonden upon a ~**, ?to be subject to error;
   (c) a state of anxiety, apprehension, or fear.

2. (a) An objective state of doubt, unverifiability or unpredictability; **ben (dependen, stonden) in a ~**, **lien in ~**, to be unreliable or uncertain; **holden in ~**, consider (sth.) to be uncertain;
   (b) **bouten (oute of) ~**, **withouten (ani) ~**, without doubt, certainly;—used as rime tag, often with diminished force; **this (is) no ~**, this is no matter for doubt.

3. (a) Jeopardy, danger; **in ~ forto walten**, in danger of falling;
   (b) misfortune, tribulation; also, woe, sorrow.

4. A matter of doubt, a doubtful thing; ?also, a matter to cause anxiety or involving danger or misfortune.\(^6\)

While this word has a different etymology to the watery were (n.1), and the expression is common in instances where a pun is unlikely,\(^7\) there are instances in fourteenth-century poetry that may overlap semantically with the cosmic weir of the House of Rumour. Robert Mannyng of

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\(^5\) Davis, “Fugitive Poetics,” 122.

\(^6\) See *MED* s.v. \(\text{wēr}(\text{n.(5)})\): [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED52250](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED52250); “† were, n.3” *OED Online*. June 2017, Oxford University Press. [http://www.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/227837?rskey=SfVyQW&result=3&isAdvanced=false](http://www.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/227837?rskey=SfVyQW&result=3&isAdvanced=false) (accessed July 07, 2017).

\(^7\)—as for example in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, where during Hypermnestra’s chilled hesitation, deciding whether to kill her husband at her father’s command, “drebbe of doth hire so moche wo, / That thryes doun she fyl in swich a were.” (*LGW* 2685–6)
Brunne in *Handlyng Synne* (begun in 1303, translating the Anglo-Norman *Manuel des Pechiez*) goes, like Geffrey at the beginning of *The House of Fame*, through a catalogue of six different dream types and possible origins when warning against taking dreams too seriously.\(^{518}\) Although true prophets do receive revelation in dreams, Mannyng observes, in most cases

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sebyn } & \text{þer beyn dremys so many manere,} \\
\text{þan ys } & \text{doute & grete were} \\
\text{To wyte where-of dremys come.} \quad \text{\(519\)}
\end{align*}
\]

This ‘grete were’ is an internal one, a situation rather than a mythical origin-point, but Geffrey’s quest to know where tidings come from at the end of *The House of Fame* is certainly describable as a situation of “doute & grete were.” In *Confessio Amantis* (after the plausible date range of *House of Fame*) Gower observes that

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The hevene wot what is to done,} \\
\text{Bot we that duelle under the mone} \\
\text{Stonde in this world upon a weir[.]} \quad \text{\(520\)}
\end{align*}
\]

In this passage, we mortals living in the sublunar world stand on a weir: we stand in doubt. Peck’s note to this passage in the *Confessio Amantis* highlights the Boethian dimension to this pun, in the unsteadiness of the weir of the world, and directs attention back to *The House of Fame* for a similar instance. In Book 2, Geffrey catches sight of the atmosphere,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tho gan y loken under me} \\
\text{And beheld the ayerissh bestes,} \\
\text{Cloudes, mystes, and tempestes,} \\
\text{Snowes, hayles, reynes, wyndes,} \\
\text{And th’engendrynge in hir kyndes,} \\
\text{All the wey thrugh which I cam; (HF 964–969)}
\end{align*}
\]

Geffrey explains his response to these phenomena, seen from a new angle, in the following way:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tho gan y wexen in a were,} \\
\text{And seyde, “Y wot wel y am here;} \\
\text{But wher in body or in gost} \\
\text{I not, ywys; but God, thou wost,”}
\end{align*}
\]

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For more clere entendement
Nas me never yit ysent. (HF 979–984)

Geffrey here is in a situation of profound unknowing and wonder—this might be one of the most wondrous moments in all of his dream poems. As in the quotations by Mannyng and Gower, the were is a place of uncertainty, but that uncertainty also supposes possible certainty, in the divine (or in human philosophy elevated to climb out of that weir). 521

I now turn to examine how the “queynte hous” in The House of Fame may also build some interpretive assistance for the reader by its interactions with riddling convention.

**Enigmatic Structures in the House of Rumour**

Hitherto I have addressed Chaucer’s description of the House of Rumour as a critical mystery—a puzzling description that may be contextualized by consideration of the symbolic and denotational resonances of a new ‘material source,’ in Davis’s words. However, there is also some evidence to suggest that the final part of The House of Fame, from 1918 onwards, explicitly resembles or evokes riddles extant in Chaucer’s England. In this section, then, my priority is to point up some of those resemblances, including structural ways in which the description of the so-called House of Rumour takes the form of a riddle or shares similar imagery with extant riddles. In so doing I know that I cannot do justice to a great deal of pre-existing scholarship on the House’s description, particularly the house’s ‘quaint’-ness, and its labyrinthine connection. 522 Let us turn to the description:

Tho saugh y stonde in a valeye,

---

521 I’m indebted in my interpretation of this moment of wonder to Delany’s reading of this moment as “offer[ing] a miniature model of the fideistic process,” Chaucer’s House of Fame, 84–85. Delany explains,

Subjective experience (“I know that I am here”) provides no absolute certainty (“But whether in body or in spirit I do not know”), therefore one relies on faith for another kind of certainty (“But God, you know”). The revelation is not merely that rational choice is impossible, but that it is unnecessary. ... No longer confined within the narrow limits of what can be proved, he can accept a broader definition of truth than logical or empirical truth. Having professed his faith, he is free to believe whatever does not directly contradict Christian doctrine. (85)

Under the castel, faste by,
1920 An hous, that Domus Dedaly,
That Laboryntus cleped ys,
Nas mad so wonderlych, ywis,
Ne half so queyntelych ywrought. (HF 1918–1923)

Geffrey’s opening, ‘Then I saw a very strange house’ may not immediately seem distinct from the other marvellous sights he has remarked upon—the arrival of the eagle, the ‘eyrish bestes,’ the mountain of ice, the palace, or Fame herself. However, a combination of subtle features in diction and phrasing enforce its unusualness even within the fantastic content of this poem—particularly when read in light of Chaucer’s other poetry and late medieval riddles. In Ovid, Fama’s murmuring ‘domus’ of a thousand riddled entrances and endless activity is no more a typical ‘house’ than the labyrinth of endless passages elsewhere in Metamorphoses; however, of the possible meanings for ‘domus,’ including ‘house’ and ‘structure’ and ‘home,’ ‘house’ is the most striking and attractive translation because it defamiliarizes the concept of what a house or home should be. The House of Fame passage’s reference to the ‘Domus Dedaly’ does more than provide two names for the Labyrinth (which already evokes the miniature labyrinths of fish weirs or eel bucks). It confirms a connection between the word ‘hous’ as used in The House of Fame and the Latin term domus. In so doing it also unlocks a set of associations for ‘domus’ in medieval riddles.

The opening clues establish that the ‘queynte hous’523 (this adjective now repeated twice

523 The Middle English queynte (see MED entries, “queint(e, n.” and “queint(e, adj.”), has a similar semantic range to OE wætlic. It connotes both strangeness and artifice, although the word is also capable of sustaining a euphemistic meaning, as the term’s application to the Wife of Bath and Alisoun the Miller’s Wife makes clear. It is also a wonder-word associated with enigma, in wider Middle English association and in Chaucer’s work more specifically. An example in point is from the South English Legendary, as folk marvel at a riddling exchange between a maiden (a devil, disguised), and a pilgrim (St. Andrew, disguised):

Queynte was þe escere þat so queinte vnderstod,
Ac queintore was þe answeriare þat is answere was so good. (St Andrew, lines 181–82)

See Charlotte D’Evelyn and A. J. Mill, eds., The South English Legendary, EETS OS 219–20 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956–59), 548, quoted in Gruenler, “How To Read Like A Fool,” 609., my emphases.) Chaucer’s first dream vision, the Book of the Duchess, uses ‘queynt’ prominently as an unsettling word, one that both motivates the poem’s composition and recalls the poem’s sense of loss, and fullness, imperfectly understood. Ending in a note of wonder very different from the initial reference to the Narrator's befuddled insomnia, the Narrator states:

1330 Thoghte I, ‘this is so queynt a sweven,
That I wol, be processe of tyme,
Fonde to putte this sweven in ryme
As I can best, and that anoon.’ —
This was my sweven; now hit is doon. (BD 1330–1334)
in four lines in reference to this structure, where it appears only three other times in the poem, at the beginning of Book 1) is noisy and ceaselessly moves about “as swyft as thought,” never standing still (1924–1926). A strange, noisy, and eternally, swiftly moving house occurs likewise in Symphosius’s riddle of the river and the fish, which circulated in late medieval England as the first of Tharsia’s therapeutic riddles in the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri*:

> Est domus in terris, clara que voce resultans.  
> Ipsa domus resonat, tacitus sed non sonat hospes.  
> Ambo tamen currunt, hospes simul et domus una.  

There is a house in the lands that reverberates with a clear voice.  
The house resounds, but the silent guest makes no noise.  
They run along together, though, the guest and the house as one.

Symphosius’s riddle describes the noisiness of the *domus as clara ... voce resultans* and *resonat*, descriptors for reverberation and resonance that aptly describe the echoing House of Rumour. Moreover, riddles about rivers and oceans frequently emphasize the ceaselessness of their movement. The passage in *The House of Fame* elaborates,

1925  *This queynte hous aboute wente,*  
      *That never mo hyt stille stente.*  
      *And therout com so gret a noyse*  
      *That, had hyt stonden upon Oyse,*  
      *Men myghte hyt han herd esely*  
1930  *To Rome, y trowe sikerly.* (*HF* 1925–1930)

Earlier passages in *Book of the Duchess* employ this pattern (especially ‘so ynly swete a sweet a sweven, So wonderful . . . ’ in *BD* 275–290), in such a way that the passages recall one another, and thus help to clarify the meaning of ‘queynte’ in these final lines (or at least to invite comparison as the reader and Narrator search for ways to characterize this dream). These lines create the possibility of seeing the poem as a riddle without a solution, in which the wonder experienced by the Narrator and potential reader will not be resolved into full understanding—at least until they understand that the ‘proposition’ of this riddle also includes affect (‘ynly’ sweetness, wonder).

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525 For early medieval riddles, fish or fish-and-river riddles can be found in BER 30, ALD 61, EUS 40, ALC D80, EXE 43, and EXE 85.
To a medieval reader cued to consider this passage as a riddle, the facts that the house is loud and moving swiftly in HF 1925–1927, would likely suggest that the solution may have something to do with water. In Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, the succeeding lines’ reference to the river Oise to compare the house’s noisiness, I think, would acknowledge this possible solution while turning the interpreter’s gaze in another direction: a *domus* that stands upon a river could not be a river itself—and a *domus* so loud that it could be heard for hundreds of miles must be either fantastical or metaphoric. However, with a possible associative connection already built between a noisy, ceaselessly moving river or ocean and Fame’s many-entranced house, another closer association with a late medieval Latin riddle becomes possible in succeeding lines—namely, with the fish riddle we have already examined that circulated in the *Secretum philosophorum* as well as other manuscripts of the ‘Oxford riddles’ group. This riddle runs,

Inimici mei venerunt ad domum meam et domus mea exivit per foramina et ego solus remansi inter inimicos meos.  

My enemies came to my home, and my house escaped through the windows [or gaps/holes], and I remained alone amongst my enemies.

Here the swift-running house of the river exhibits its signature quality by escaping through the windows in place of the hapless inhabitant; in a nice twist, the ‘windows’ (*foramina*) are the gaps in the net or trap, rather than gaps in the fluid house itself; the solid net is a set of obstructions on a house with no foundation or structure.  

That an English-speaking reader would be expected to substitute ‘windows’ for ‘foramina’ is made clear, among other things, by the *Secretum philosophorum*, which uses “fenestras” in its explanation of how the riddle works: “Nam recia que sunt inimici eius venerunt ad aquam que est domus eius, et domus, id est aqua, exivit per fenestras, id est foramina retis; et tunc piscis remansit in reti.” (“For the traps/nets, which are its enemies, came to the water which is its house, and the house, that is the water, escaped through


527 A close variant of this riddle, the fourth riddle on fol. 113v of London, British Library, Arundel 292, likewise reads:

Inimici mei circu(m)dederunt me i(n) domo mea . (et) dom(us) mea exiuit p(er) fenest(ri)s (et) ego solus remansi . ——— pissis

My enemies surrounded me in my home, and my house escaped through the windows and I alone remained.

——— Fissh
the windows, that is the gaps in the net; and then the fish remained in the trap.”

The word *riddle* in modern English has two main associations: riddle as guessing game, and riddle as verb: to riddle is to perforate, to fill with holes; *riddled* indicates the porous quality of a material. This modern association comes from the confluence of two terms in Middle English: *redels* as a “riddle, problem, an enigma, a puzzle; also, a trick, deception,” related to Old English *ræd* or advice (as well as to *reden*, to read/advise); and *ridel*, meaning sieve, or (by the fifteenth century) fishing net. The confluence between the riddle wisdom-game and nets and sieves occurs in other languages as well; one of the ancient Greek terms for riddle, *griphos*, also means fishing net.

Like eggs and nuts, sieves and nets are good figures for *enigma*. Where ‘nut’ and ‘egg’ provide effective metaphors for cracking an integumental structure and benefiting from the results, though, sieves and nets emphasize the porosity of riddles, their orientations towards catching and escape, inside and outside, harvest, and—figuratively, in a riddle context—the entrapment of the unwary, or the winnowing of the knowing from the wondering. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus’s persecution by Poseidon will end when his oar is mistaken for a winnowing fan. In a story well-known from classical antiquity into the Middle Ages, Homer is supposed to have died of frustration at his failure to solve a riddle posed to him by local fishermen.

This context of winnowing and fish netting as figures for riddle lends a different significance to the *mille foramina tectis* (a thousand windows/gaps in the roof) that are found in Fame’s *domus* in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The importance of the windows in Ovid for Chaucer is

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529 See MED s.v. “redels, n.” and “ridel, n.(1).”


suggested by the fact that both Chaucer’s structures are many-windowed, as the House of Fame is fitted with as many “windowes / As flakes falle in grete snowes” (HF 1191–1192).534 Both the Palace of Fame and the House of Rumour are sieve-like, riddle-like, net-like, in their outer appearance; thereby, as Davis suggests, they create the possibility for their catch to be collected and used elsewhere.535 Chaucer’s passages regarding these gaps read:

1945    And eke this hous hath of entrees
        As fele as of leves ben in trees
        In somer, whan they grene been;
        And on the roof men may yet seen
        A thousand holes, and wel moo,
1950    To leten wel the soun out goo. (HF 1945–1950)

Chaucer’s description follows Ovid’s somewhat, as Ovid’s passage likewise includes the many windows and gaps in the roof—yet in Ovid, as seen above, these are emphasized as being entrances, allowing the sound to enter from every direction. In Ovid’s massive bronze structure, these openings might might have more strongly evoked the Roman habit of leaving large openings in the roof for rain to enter. Ovid’s lacks the detail that the roofholes exist to let the sound escape, but Chaucer’s passage emphasizes this feature strongly, returning to it as the larger tidings try to depart the House:536

534 Chaucer’s association of many windows with falling snow has a precedent in Aldhelm’s riddle 67 on the sieve, ‘Cribellus’ (‘Cribellus’ is the diminutive of ‘Cribrum’ (sieve or riddle)). ALD 67.1–4 begins:

\[
\begin{align*}
    \text{Sicca pruinosa in crebris effundo fenestris} \\
    \text{Candentemque niuem iactans de uiscere furuo/} \\
    \text{Et tamin omnis amat quamuis sit frigida nimbo} \\
    \text{Densor et nebulis late spargatur in aula; […] (ALD 67.1–4)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
    I, \text{ dry and hoary, pour out through my many windows} \\
    \text{White snow, throwing it from my dark belly;} \\
    \text{All men love this snow, though it is cold,} \\
    \text{Denser than a raincloud and wide-flung in clouds throughout the room.}
\end{align*}
\]


535 Davis hints at the sieve-like qualities of the House of Rumour in her discussion of the role of grain imagery in “Fugitive Poetics,” 125. She writes: “Thought turns out to be a device both of collection and of dispersal, a significant feature of the flexible, porous containers to which Chaucer increasingly resorts in the poem’s final book. Like the ‘‘lathe,’’ whose doors open to release the harvest (2140), Thought’s ‘‘vertu’’ depends on its capacity not only to contain but ultimately to ‘‘tellen’’ the dream.” (125)

536 As has been pointed out to me, the true and false tidings struggling to exit and being indistinguishable once they do, also evokes the classical tradition of the gates of horn and ivory through which true and deceitful dreams pass respectively, as witnessed in Penelope’s speech from Odyssey 19.560–569, and through which Aeneas passes to exit the Underworld in Virgil’s Aeneid 6.893–898.
[hit] went anoon
Up to a wyndowe out to goon;

Or, but hit myghte out there pace,
Hyt gan out crepe at som crevace,
And flygh forth faste for the nones.
And somtyme saugh I thoo at ones
A lesyng and a sad soth sawe,

That gonne of aventure drawe
Out at a wyndowe for to pace;
And, when they metten in that place,
They were achekked bothe two,
And neyther of hem moste out goo

For other, so they gonne crowde, (HF 2083–2095)

The prospect of trying and being unable to exit or escape through windows, crevaces, or holes (foramina) is much more evocative of the fish in river riddle. The analogy is not exact, as the tidings do eventually make their way out through the window-holes—but the House definitely serves a winnowing or trapping function: undifferentiated sounds and ‘swough’ depart easily and disperse back into the world, while the bulkier (and more animate) tidings are held until they are ready to pass to Fame. A possible connection between tidings and the fish in the weir is suggested further in the behaviour of the beings in the structure when they hear of a distant disturbance:

For I saugh rennynge every wight
As faste as that they hadden myght,
And everych cried, “What thing is that?”
And somme sayde, “I not never what.”
And whan they were alle on an hepe,

Tho behynde begunne up lepe,
And clamben up on other faste,
And up the nose and yën kaste,
And troden fast on others heles,
And stampen, as men doon aftir eles. (HF 2145–2154)

These wondering “wights” attempt to flush out their fresh tiding by stamping, creating noise and disturbance to drive it into their metaphorical traps. However, this group no longer reads as wholly human either. Their leaping and ignorance, their eager hunger for the new tiding, and their clambering thrashing, evoke the behaviour of fish themselves. This passage of running creatures inhabiting a racing house has commonalities with Symphosius’s “Ambo tamen currunt, hospes simul et domus una.” (“But both of them are running, the guest and the house together.”)

The “queynte hous” known as the House of Rumour, has long posed a riddle to Chaucer
scholars: why does Chaucer separate Ovid’s House of Fame into two buildings, and why is this second one so strange, and why does it involve the detail that it is made of wicker? Over the past pages I have claimed that the structure can best be understood as a were. That is, it is a weir for tidings, constructed of the materials of which fish-weirs were built and containing their same labyrinthine structure. It is also a riddle, with features evocative of fish riddles and especially the ‘fish in the net/trap’ riddle of the *Secretum philosophorum*, that draw out the riddling, winnowing qualities of the “queynte hous” with slim chances that lead towards the solution of were. And it is a pun, on *in were*, in a state of doubt or wondrous uncertainty. Chaucer’s poem from its very beginning, has been interested in wonder, and Geffrey is motivated during his journey, by his desire to see and hear “wonder thinges.” What then, is the significance that he sets the final actions of the poem inside a were, inside a riddle? To conclude this dissertation I’d like to offer some suggestions on the wider significance of this episode for wonder in the poem.

### 4.3 Al the Wondermost Was This

… “Nost not thou
That ys betyd, lo, late or now?”
“No,” quod the other, “tel me what.” (*HF* 2048–49)

‘And everych cried, “What thing is that?”
And some sayde, “I not never what.” (*HF* 2147–48)

Over past decades Chaucer scholars have drawn productive attention to the ways that the House of Rumour offers insight into the relation between ‘reality’ and communication in the imagination. Such critics have often seen in the House of Rumour’s open-ended state a significant moment not only in what Sheila Delany calls “Chaucer’s statement of artistic intention” in the poem, but in Chaucer’s development as a poet. They perceive in *House of Fame*’s unfinishedness a sign of Chaucer’s trajectory towards *Canterbury Tales*. Central to these readings tends to be a treatment of the relationship between phantasm (or imaginative figment) and tiding, and between truth and fiction in the poem. As Kathryn Lynch observes,

> Most readers agree that Chaucer’s dream visions are self-reflective, that, as Sheila Delany puts it, these are poems that regard “[their] own feet,” rather than the world outside, as the *Canterbury Tales* would do. Chaucer is frequently seen as reaching and overcoming

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poetic impasse in the early poems, as he comes up against the limits of reference, imagination, or memory—or as he probes the gaps between experience and authority, or communication and interpretation.\footnote{Kathryn L. Lynch, \textit{Chaucer's Philosophical Visions} (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 3.}

For Boitani, critically, the phantasmic tidings represent “not reality as such, as it \textit{exists} in the sublunary world, or as it \textit{is} in the hyperuranian universe of being, but as it is \textit{told}. Geoffrey does not find war, but tidings of war.”\footnote{Boitani, \textit{Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame}, 209–10.} As the true and false tidings each grow “more than hit ever was,” Boitani suggests, “[r]eality as told is different from reality as it existed before it was told.”\footnote{Ibid., 210.} For Cooper, the ambiguity and scepticism of \textit{The House of Fame} act as Chaucer’s \textit{sed contra} to Dantean poetic illusions of final certainty; Chaucer “acknowledges the power of Fame to make judgements, but he denies her God’s infallibility just as he denies the power of the poet to replicate divine truth.”\footnote{Cooper continues, “The end of the \textit{House of Fame}, or its lack of ending as it breaks off unfinished, matches its refusal of a Last Judgement, or a last anything.” (65) Cooper, “Four Last Things,” 65.} Watson notes that tidings amount to an “assemblage of images of the past into a form that never was,” yet proposes finally that “visionaries and dream poets alike assert the necessity of treating the phantasm as a vehicle of the real”—as such phantasms are the means by which past events act in the present. For Akbari, \textit{The House of Fame} is the point at which Chaucer moves definitively away from the premise of allegory that language can transparently mediate between subject and object, and towards “Chaucer’s adoption of verisimilitude as the only viable way to convey reality in his \textit{Canterbury Tales}.”\footnote{Watson, “The Phantasmal Past,” 37; he continues, “for belief in the imaginative constructs that allow visionary journeys to continue serve to link the other world with this one, reach out mysteriously to or from the past to renew the life of the present.” (37).} Davis’s own analysis of ‘fugitive poetics’ in the poem proposes that in the eel-catching structure, Chaucer “demands a reappraisal of the poem’s broken form,” anticipating the \textit{Canterbury Tales} in exploring the ability of poetic form to gather moving parts together.\footnote{Akbari, \textit{Seeing Through the Veil}, 20.}

How does reappraising the enigmatic in Chaucer’s “queynte hous,” and understanding the house as a \textit{were}, intervene in this conversation? A preliminary response has to do with what we

\citation{Kathryn L. Lynch, \textit{Chaucer's Philosophical Visions} (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 3.}{538}
\citation{Boitani, \textit{Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame}, 209–10.}{539}
\citation{Ibid., 210.}{540}
\citation{Cooper continues, “The end of the \textit{House of Fame}, or its lack of ending as it breaks off unfinished, matches its refusal of a Last Judgement, or a last anything.” (65) Cooper, “Four Last Things,” 65.}{541}
\citation{Watson, “The Phantasmal Past,” 37; he continues, “for belief in the imaginative constructs that allow visionary journeys to continue serve to link the other world with this one, reach out mysteriously to or from the past to renew the life of the present.” (37).}{542}
\citation{Akbari, \textit{Seeing Through the Veil}, 20.}{543}
\citation{Davis, “Fugitive Poetics,” 126–132.}{544}
think riddles offer. In Chapter 1, I suggested two possibilities latent in Symphosius’s collection and the later Symphosian tradition: that riddles change perception of the ordinary, generating wonder spontaneously in imaginative description—and that riddles draw out wonder that was already inherent in the phenomenon, but overlooked. The *Secretum philosophorum* offers a more ambivalent set of insights: that what “seems impossible” from one perspective is “secret and necessary” from another, but also that marvels, “mirabilia,” are “truffe,” trifles, if seen from another angle—and that, perhaps, it doesn’t matter whether the wonder was inherent in the phenomenon or not; perhaps this is the wrong question. Riddles offer a dilated, adorned perspective on what would seem trifling if proposed directly, and in so doing they open up a space of enlarged possibility, of wonder, in the everyday. So let us take advantage of that wonder to consider what is revealed in the were.

Geffrey’s mobile viewpoint as he approaches and discovers the secrets of the House of Rumour provides a number of perspectives upon the communications the House fosters. Many of Geffrey’s individual details have analogues in Ovid’s description from *Metamorphoses*, but Geffrey’s description differs from Ovid’s perhaps most in the ways that it directs wonder at these features. The wonders of the House have the effect of a “varied and adorned propounding” in rendering marvellous, and thereby inviting new attention to, the wonders of communication itself.

The leading edge of Geffrey’s encounter is the roar of undifferentiated sound, which evokes the passage of the distant thunderstorm from Ovid quoted earlier in Geffrey and the Eagle’s approach; this roar is caused by the “gret swogh” as sound from all over the world passes through the vortex and is hurled out again into the air, and also by the creaking of the twigs in the wicker. Amidst the roar and creaking twigs, Geffrey discerns tidings, presented in an elaborate anaphora and distinct for the different worldly events they relate (“Of werres, of pes, of mariages…” (1961)). This is what constitutes Boitani’s “reality as it is told,”545 or Delany’s “history in the making . . . the raw material of tradition.”546 The “queynte hous” appears to contain an assembled aural simulacrum of the present human world below, and combined with

545 Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary House of Fame*, 209.
546 Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame*, 106.
its strange shape and other mysteries, it provokes in Geffrey a profound wonder and an appetite to know more in hopes that it will do him good:

“Certys,” quod y, “in al myn age,
Ne saugh y such an hous as this.”
And as y wondred me, ywys,
Upon this hous, tho war was y
1990 How that myn egle faste by
Was perched hye upon a stoon;
And I gan streghte to hym gon,
And seyde thus: “Y preye the
That thou a while abide me,
1995 For Goddis love, and lete me seen
What wondres in this place been;
For yit, paraunter, y may lere
Som good theron, or sumwhat here
That leef me were, or that y wente.” (HF 1986–1999)

When the Eagle sets him free inside the structure, Geffrey approaches closer to the origin of these tidings, but in doing so he does not move closer to the events themselves. Instead he encounters a different kind of anaphora, one heralding not the variety of tidings in the world, nor yet a privileged distinction between true and false, but a fundamental, almost molecular similarity in these tidings as the strange inhabitants of the Hous perform their transmission. This second anaphora elides everything but the common formulas of conversation:

2050 And than he tolde hym this and that,
And swor therto that hit was soth —
“Thus hath he sayd,” and “Thus he doth,”
“Thus shal hit be,” “Thus herde y seye,”
“That shal be founde,” “That dar I leye”— (HF 2050–2054)

Although it is their particularities that render “this and that” interesting to the parties concerned, here the repetition of demonstrative pronouns presents tidings as a repertoire of basic narrative fragments. The fundamental similarity between these fragments is also suggested by their shared genesis, as each is premised upon the following exchange:

… “Nost not thou
That ys betyd, lo, late or now?”
“No,” quod he, “tel me what.” (HF 2048–49)

This exchange is not (or only barely) a riddle, as the first speaker’s introduction is too vague to map onto or allow the second speaker to guess a specific tiding. However, it does show a kind of commonality of structure both to riddling and to phrases such as the Eagle’s conversational
gambit in Book 2 of talking up the wondrous tidings of the House of Fame in order to generate, through wonder, interest in his explanation. The first utterance (‘do you know what?’) exists to build up interest in the description to follow, and thereby to settle the speaker and listener into a consensual social relation.

A playful perspective on the desire involved in this kind of exchange is suggested in the Secretum philosophorum’s riddle of the straw: “Item docebo tibi illud quod nescis nec ego scio nec alius animus in mundo nec alius animus sciet illud postquam docuero tibi” (I’ll teach you something that you don’t know, that I don’t know, that no other soul in the world knows, and nor will any soul know it after I’ve taught you.) The ‘fit’ of this riddle is that the information is unknown to every soul in the world because it is both particular and worthless, but it works as a joke because “I’ll teach you something you don’t know” is a persuasive opening. These statements in the Secretum create ‘a new way of looking at (and being in) the world’ in that they reshape the world as a horizon of novelty and opportunity to learn; in so doing they reshape the receiver of the tidings as an inquirer, a person receptive to and responsive to external stimuli, and secondarily as a person in a relation with the riddle-teller, who is now someone with valuable information to communicate to others. While the measured, then broken straw of the riddle’s solution points up the potential for abuse in this kind of communication (not all secrets are worth knowing), it also evokes a truth: that the unknown is infinite and everywhere even within the familiar world. The disguise of the riddle, what seems impossible—the slim chance of a tiding so secret no one knows or will ever know it—turns out to be ‘necessary’ after all, as it reveals that the everyday is always fuller and more unknowable than the ‘trifling’ perspective will ever notice.

Where the straw riddle merely plays a joke upon the recipient, though, Geffrey’s insight into the conversational narrative structure of tidings expands into an overarching myth of language, one that links such basic conversational formulas ultimately with the movement of history. Geffrey reports,

But al the wondermost was this:

Whan oon had herd a thing, ywis,
He com forth ryght to another wight,

547 London, British Library, MS Harley 866, 1v. My transcription and translation.
And gan him tellen anon-ryght
The same that to him was told,
Or hyt a forlong way was old,

But gan somewhat for to eche
To this tydynge in this speche
More than hit ever was.

And nat so sone departed nas
Tho fro him, that he ne mette

With the thriddle; and or he lette
Any stounde, he told him als;
Were the tydynge soth or fals,
Yt wolde he telle hyt natheles,
And evermo with more encres

Than yt was erst. Thus north and south
Wente every tydyng fro mouth to mouth,
And that encreasing ever moo,
As fyr ys wont to quyke and goo
From a sparke spronge amys,

Til al a citee brenst up ys.

Many critics have commented upon this passage, which culminates with the tidings’
intermingling as they struggle to escape the window. In particular, Watson gives a brilliant
reading of the final lines of the passage, in pointing up the ability of talk to impact history:

For all that fact and “tidinge” instantly become indistinguishable, it is thus “tidinges,”
more than the slow work of institution-building or acts of individual heroism, that, in this
imaginary cosmos, are seen to bring about change through time. Coming between events
and their afterlife, “tidinges” generate differences between one moment and the next by
recasting the “soth” of an event within an endless array of alternative versions whose
very variance makes its own impact on what happens next.548

But if the insight that tidings are the true history-makers is one main secret at the centre of this
were, there are still a few left. The “al the wondermost” sequence shows that the tidings that end
as forces which shape the world begin with the urge to tell (and to add to) tidings. This is an
ongoing preoccupation in the poem, as demonstrated earlier in the words of Geffrey and the
Eagle during their flight, and later in the behaviour of the shipmen, pilgrims and pardoners who
cram their bags full of tidings and lesings to carry with them. In each passage, the poem
repeatedly asserts that it doesn’t matter to the teller whether the tale is true or false. Yet why
wouldn’t it matter? And what underlies this communicative urge?

The *House of Fame* continues by portraying eager quests for new information, as Geffrey’s desire “for to pleyen and for to lere, / And eke a tydynge for to here” (2133–34) puts him in company with those everyday storytellers who gather up tidings for their own use. Moving still closer, the final lines portray the leading edge of wonder, as the rippling awareness that there is something unknown on the horizon invites a new kind of communication and interest:

For I saugh rennynge every wight  
As faste as that they hadden myght,  
And everych cried, “What thing is that?”  
And somme sayde, “I not never what.” (*HF* 2145–48)

The moment of arrival, of encountering wonder directly, for Geffrey, is another *vidi* riddle very similar to Alcuin’s *quid est mirum? vidi hominem*...:

Atte laste y saugh a man,  
Which that y [nevene] nat ne kan […] (*HF* 2155–56).

As Geffrey’s description of ignorance suddenly transfers over to the reader, the unsolveable riddle of the Man of Gret Auctoritee poses its own kind of answer to the questions above. Chaucer’s *were*-riddle reflects that the origins of tidings are in doubt, *in were*, a matter of wonder. Yet too the riddle represents that the origins of storytelling lie in the persistent human need for wonder, and in the power of wonder to shape perceptions and social relations which have an impact on the everyday.
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