

Reading the *Exeter Book* Riddles as Life-Writing

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ABSTRACT

There is much to be gained from interpreting the tenth-century *Exeter Book* riddles as a characteristically biographical group of texts. They comprise a rich source of information for the study of Anglo-Saxon concepts of life courses and life stages, but have yet to be treated as such despite current enthusiasm surrounding the study of historical life cycles. Probably this is due to their status as biographies of largely non-human subjects. Equipped with the insights of life-writing scholarship, including Paul de Man's argument that all autobiography is *prosopopoeia* and personification, it becomes possible to see the riddles' value as discourses on life progression and indeed as early examples of life-writing and 'object biography' in the English vernacular. Building on a consideration of the riddles alongside their Latin analogues as well as influential contemporary schemes of the life course, this paper advocates the interrogation of such critical labels as 'anthropomorphism' and 'personification', often applied to the riddles. These terms are so imprecise as to obfuscate more than they reveal of the ideas of human and non-human life experience and progression at work in these texts.

The verse riddles of the tenth-century *Exeter Book*, around ninety in number, have on occasion been recognized as tending toward a form of biography.¹ Often such observations have been made on the level of individual poems, as in the case of Riddle 9, the 'cuckoo' riddle, which Marie Nelson describes as 'an expanded development of individual life'.² More broadly, scholars have highlighted biographical elements of the riddles when drawing contrasts between these almost entirely vernacular texts and

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- 1 *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (ASPR), 3 (New York, NY, and London, 1936). I have also made frequent reference to *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, ed. Craig Williamson (Chapel Hill, NC, 1977) and *The Anglo-Saxon Riddle Tradition*, ed. and tr. Andy Orchard (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming 2017). The ASPR numbering of the riddles remains the most widely-used in the critical literature; quotations are from this source. All Old English and Latin translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
- 2 *Exeter Book*, 185. First solved as such by Franz Dietrich, 'Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs. Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum*, 11 (1859), 448–90 (458, 463). Marie Nelson, 'Plus Animate: Two Possible Transformations of Riddles by Symphosius', *Germanic Notes*, 18 (1987), 46–8 (47).

those of the Latin tradition, including the riddles of Symphosius, Aldhelm, Tatwine and Eusebius.³ The *Exeter Book* riddles are often characterized as more expanded and linearly narrative than the highly concise and paradoxical Latin *aenigmata*, despite a number of exceptions to this rule.⁴ In his 1910 edition, Frederick Tupper remarked how 'life [is] lent' to the subjects of the *Exeter Book* riddles through the narration of 'a change of state, by which the creature is bereft of early joys', forging a contrast between 'youth and later life'.⁵ Although many of the riddles are indeed bipartite in structure, they invoke ideas of life courses that are of greater complexity than acknowledged by Tupper.

The recent explosion of interest in the theory and practice of 'life-writing' provides a valuable new opportunity to reassess these texts with new critical tools at hand. Since the late twentieth century, interest in traditions of biography and 'life-writing', generally considered the more capacious of the two labels, has boomed. As a category, life-writing has been seen to 'include not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes . . . lyric poems, scientific and historical writing, and digital forms'.⁶ Scholars have scrutinized the ways in which these texts assert 'assumptions about what a person is, about the parameters of consciousness, motivation, and memory, and about the understanding, interpretation, and restructuring of experience', all of which have implications for the riddles.⁷ Critical attention has turned also to 'object biographies', narratives of the experiences of things; many of the *Exeter Book* riddles can lay claim to be just this.⁸ The poems describe entities which change over time, often responding to human

3 All edited in *Collectiones Aenigmatum Merovingicae Aetatis*, ed. and tr. F. Glorie, 2 vols, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (CCSL), 133 (165–208, 209–71, 359–540) and 133A (611–721) (Turnhout, 1968). The Berne Riddles are edited as *Aenigmata "Tullii"*, 133A, 541–610.

4 Williamson argues that the 'Latin riddles are exercises in ingenuity. Each . . . turns on a simple metaphor or paradox like a small jewel set with wit . . . The Old English riddles are projective play. They expand on the self and inspire the world . . . with lyrical power': *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011), 8. Andy Orchard has stressed the instability of any binary erected between vernacular and Latin riddles: 'Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle Tradition', in Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (ed.), *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Latin Literature for Michael Lapidge*, vol. 1, (Toronto, 2005), 284–304. Many riddles trouble any sense of a division, including the Latin Riddle 90 of the (*Exeter Book*, 240) as well as vernacular riddles which closely render Latin sources, including Riddle 35 'mail coat' (*Exeter Book*, 198), translating Aldhelm's Aenigma 33, 'Lorica' (Dietrich, 'Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung', 454–5, 470; CCSL, 133, 417), and Riddle 40 (*Exeter Book*, 200–3), translating Aldhelm's Aenigma 100, 'Creatura' (Dietrich, 'Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung', 455, 472–3; CCSL, 133, 529–39).

5 Frederick Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston, MA, 1910), lxxxix, xciv–xcv.

6 Zachary Leader, 'Introduction', in Leader (ed.), *On Life-Writing* (Oxford, 2015), 1–6 (1). See also Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester, 1994); Linda R. Anderson, *Autobiography* (London, 2001); Hermione Lee, *Body Parts: Essays in Life-Writing* (London, 2005).

7 Paula R. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford, 1999), 90.

8 See for example Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 64–91; Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, 'The Cultural Biography of Objects', *World Archaeology*, 31 (1999), 169–78.

intervention.⁹ In doing so, they offer responses to the kind of questions which Igor Kopytoff sees as necessary for the production of a ‘biography of a thing’, such as ‘Where does the thing come from and who made it?’ and ‘What are the recognized “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life”[?]’¹⁰ The riddles can nonetheless be understood as participating in the genre of life-writing in a manner which exceeds the field of ‘object biography’. In his 1979 essay ‘Autobiography as De-facement’ Paul de Man argued that all autobiography amounts to the rhetorical device of *protopoieia*, so commonly associated with the riddles.¹¹ In considering all autobiographical writings as acts of impersonation, de Man elides any division between human and non-human subjects for biography. As will be seen, the riddles themselves trouble this distinction, describing the development of non-human entities while at the same time engaging with culturally constructed patterns for human life development.

Alongside theoretical explorations of life-writing, the social and cultural study of lived life cycles has also advanced rapidly in recent years, including the study of early medieval life courses.¹² The riddles have yet to be analysed in this context. Historians of early medieval life stages often warn against the relevance of literary texts, perceived to stand at a remote distance from ‘real’, lived experience; Patrick Joseph Ryan argues to the contrary that all kinds of literary representations should be read ‘for discourse’, ‘patterns of meaning’ which ‘frame the thoughts and feelings’ present in cultures including the Anglo-Saxons.¹³ Such an approach, closing the presumed gap between literary texts and historical experience, is ultimately beneficial for discussion of the riddles, allowing them to constitute a resource for the study of life courses in Anglo-Saxon England.

The riddles are well known for their diversity as a group of texts and any generalizations made about the collection as a whole will necessarily be incomplete and artificial. Nevertheless, this essay aims to bring together a group of riddles and examine their representations of life courses; no assertion or conclusion is intended as applicable to all the riddles in the *Exeter Book*. For the sake of clarity, and to a large degree reflecting divisions within the texts, this paper will partition patterns of life progression into three broad areas: early development, subsequent maturity, and intimations of old age. In my analysis I aim to remain continually aware of potential genre-related issues impacting the presentation of life narratives, particularly strategies of description often seen as specific to riddlic discourse. These include Murphy’s

9 On which see Jennifer Neville, ‘The Unexpected Treasure of the ‘Implement Trope’: Hierarchical Relationships in the Old English Riddles’, *The Review of English Studies (RES)*, 62 (2011), 505–19.

10 Kopytoff, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things’, 66–7.

11 Paul de Man, ‘Autobiography as De-facement’, *Modern Language Notes*, 94 (1979), 919–30 (926–30).

12 See in particular J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986); Isabelle Cochelin, ‘Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions of the Life Cycle’, in Cochelin and Karen E. Smyth (eds), *Medieval Life Cycles: Continuity and Change* (Turnhout, 2013), 1–54. M. H. Porck, ‘Growing Old Among the Anglo-Saxons: The Cultural Conceptualisation of Old Age in Early Medieval England’, PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2016, especially 25–57.

13 Patrick Joseph Ryan, *Master-Servant Childhood: A History of the Idea of Childhood in Medieval English Culture* (Basingstoke, 2013), 5–6.

concept of ‘metaphorical focus’, which organizes a riddle’s obfuscating description but is separate from its named solution,¹⁴ as well as Williamson’s identification of more specific tendencies toward ‘selected details’, ‘multiple comparisons’, ‘arithmetical’ description and the language of ‘family relation’.¹⁵ The riddles do nonetheless concern themselves with concepts of life courses in a manner which interacts with and exceeds these modes of description. Motifs emerge with coherency and seem to bear relation to influential life course schemes such as those of Augustine and Isidore. The texts can be found to yield references to repeated, potentially culturally resonant ideas attached to the maturation of human and non-human entities; in this regard, they respond well to being read within the interpretive framework of life-writing.

I. PORTRAYALS OF EARLY LIFE

As, in Nelson’s words, ‘an expanded development of individual life’, Riddle 9 has attracted considerable attention in its representation of a life course. The riddle is commonly understood to describe a cuckoo chick, placed as an egg into the nest of a bird of a different species.¹⁶

Mec on þissum dagum deadne ofgeafun
 fæder ond modor; ne wæs me feorh þa gen,
 ealdor in innan. Ða mec an ongon,
 welhold mege, wedum þeccan,
 heold ond freoþode, hleosceorpe wrah 5
 swa arlice swa hire agen bearn,
 oþþæt ic under sceate, swa min gesceapu wæron,
 ungesibbum weardð eacen gæste.
 Mec seo friþe mæg fedde siþþan,
 oþþæt ic aweox, widdor meahte 10
 siþas asettan. Heo hæfde swæsra þy læs
 suna ond dohtra, þy heo swa dyde.¹⁷

(In these days my father and mother gave me up for dead; there was no life in me yet, vitality inside. Then began a certain one, a most faithful kinswoman, to cover me with clothes, kept and cared for me, wrapped me in a protective-garment, as graciously as she did her own children, until under a covering, as was my fate, I became increased with spirit among the unrelated. The fair kinswoman fed me afterwards, until I grew and might wider set my paths. She had fewer dear ones, son and daughters, because she did so.)

14 Patrick J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, PA, 2011), especially 18–21, 47.

15 Adapted from Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures*, 20–2.

16 On the text’s zoological accuracy see Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 159; Jennifer Neville, ‘Fostering the Cuckoo: *Exeter Book* Riddle 9’, *RES*, 58 (2007), 431–46 (433).

17 *Exeter Book*, 185.

Neville has engaged with this text most thoroughly from the perspective of youth and age and their associated behaviours, arguing for its pertinence to broader cultural narratives of childhood, specifically fosterage.¹⁸ She sees the latter part of the riddle as a 'sinister nightmare' revolving centrally around the mother bird's tragedy in losing her biological children.¹⁹ Nelson contrastingly stresses the riddle's interest in the cuckoo child's own perspective; followed later by Bitterli, she stresses the cuckoo's isolation, its status as a 'survivor' and a figure caught between states.²⁰ The riddle is indeed preoccupied with the egg's straddling of a boundary between death and life. The chick begins without *feorh*, in concordance with Isidore's theory that eggs remain lifeless until heated sufficiently.²¹ Eventually, under the mother's coverings, the cuckoo finds itself *eacen gæste*, 'increased in spirit' (8b). The text does not dwell upon a specific moment of genesis, like emergence from the egg, as a significant event; instead, the early development of the bird is incremental and accumulative. After the cuckoo is invested with *feorh*, the mother 'feeds' it; the verb *fedan* is semantically broad and can also be understood as to 'nourish' more generally.²²

The indistinct, gradual nature of the cuckoo's early development is resonant across the *Exeter Book* riddle collection. Scenes of birth or parturition appear to be avoided. Where they do occur, they correspond in all but one instance to a parallel in a related Latin text, and the single remaining example may be indirectly related to a Latin analogue. The texts consistently find analogues in Aldhelm's collection of riddles in particular; this is unsurprising given, as Lapidge and Rosier observe, '[n]early one third of the Enigmata contain an explicit reference to birth', as part of Aldhelm's intense interest in generation, parturition and *viscera*.²³ The following table traces instances of the Old English verbs *cennan* and *acennan* when used to describe creatures in the riddles.²⁴ As can be seen, these verbs almost always correspond to the Latin verbs *gignere* ('to beget, bear, bring forth') or *generare* ('to beget, procreate, engender') in Latin *aenigmata*.²⁵

18 Neville, 'Fostering the Cuckoo'.

19 *Ibid.*, 435.

20 Marie Nelson, 'Plus Animate', 46–7; Dieter Bitterli, 'The Survival of the Dead Cuckoo: Exeter Book Riddle 9', in Thomas Honegger (ed.), *Riddles, Knights and Cross-Dressing Saints: Essays on Medieval English Language and Literature* (Bern, 2004), 95–114 (105).

21 Isidore, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, *Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis* (Oxford, 1911), vol. 2, XII.7.79.

22 Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (eds), *The Dictionary of Old English: A to H Online* (DOE) (2016). <<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe>> accessed 18 December 2016, s.v. *fedan* I, II.

23 *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, tr. Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier (Cambridge, 1985), 64.

24 The table excludes the reference to 'all creatures that were born according to nature' (*ealra wihta/ þara þe æfter gecyndum cenned wære*, 14b–15) in Riddle 39 (*Exeter Book*, 199–200).

25 Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary. Revised, Enlarged and in Great Part Rewritten by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short* (Oxford, 1879) (Lewis and Short), s.v. *gigno*, I; *genero*, I.

Table 1. References to Birth in the *Exeter Book Riddles*

<i>Exeter Book riddle</i>	Latin analogue, if extant
Riddle 35 ('mail coat') ²⁶	Aldhelm, Aenigma 33, 'Lorica' ²⁷
Mec se wæta wong, wundrum freorig, of his innape ærist cende. (1–2)	Roscida me genuit gelido de uiscere tellus (1)
(The wet field, wondrously cold, first gave birth to me from its insides.)	(The wet ground gave birth to me from its freezing innards)
Riddle 40 ('creation')	Aldhelm, Aenigma 100, 'Creatura' ²⁸
ond ic giestron wæs geong acenned mære to monnum þurh minre modor hrif. (44–5)	Ecce, tamen matris horno generabar ab aluo (24)
(and I was born young yesterday, celebrated among men, through my mother's womb.)	(Look, I was this year produced from my mother's womb)
Riddle 50 ('fire') ²⁹	Aldhelm, Aenigma 44, 'Ignis' ³⁰
Wiga is on eorþan wundrum acenned dryhtum to nytte, of dumbum twam (1–2)	Me pater et mater gelido genuere rigore, Fomitibus siccis dum mox rudimenta uigebant (1–2)
(A warrior is on earth, useful to men, wondrously born of a dumb two.)	(My father and mother gave birth to me from freezing rigidity, and soon my beginnings started to thrive in dry tinder.)
	Berne Riddle 23, 'De ignis scintilla' ³¹
	Durus mihi pater, dura me generat mater, Verbere nam multo huius de uiscere fundor. (1–2)
	(Rough is my father and rough also is the mother who gives birth to me; after much beating I was shed here from the inside.)
Riddle 84 ('water') ³²	
An wiht is on eorþan wundrum acenned (1)	
(A creature is on earth wondrously born)	

Neither of the two Old English verbs is precise in its designation: *cennan* has a wide breadth of meaning within the field of human procreation, capable of signifying 'to generate', 'to bear or bring forth (a child)', 'to conceive' and 'to be pregnant'.³³ *Acennan* is even broader and carries more abstract senses like 'propagate', 'grow' and even 'declare'.³⁴ This breadth is typical of verbs able to denote 'to give birth' in Old English; no specific word denotes solely the moment of parturition. Plank concludes a study of the verbs (including notably also *tieman* and *beran*) by observing 'most . . . are referentially quite versatile' in that they 'do not specifically designate one and only one phase in the process of a child's coming into existence, but may alternatively refer to several phases', while 'many of them are preferably used as rather generic descriptions of the entire episode'.³⁵ Old English in general can thus be seen to harbour an ambiguity around the creation of offspring on the level of its available verbs. Nonetheless, even as these verbs are broad and capacious, they are only used by the riddles to describe the creation of individual entities in the four places recorded in the table.

Turning to specific instances, Riddle 35 stays close to Aldhelm's 'Lorica', as does the very similar Leiden Riddle with which the *Exeter Book* text shares its opening lines.³⁶ The use of *cennan* in this context aligns with *gignere*. Similarly, Riddle 40 uses *cennan* to parallel *generare* in Aldhelm's 'Creatura'. The specific phrase *geong acenned* forms part of a small group of similar collocations in Old English poetry, including also *wundrum acenned*. In the entire corpus, this second phrase appears only twice, in the following two entries on the table, Riddle 50 and Riddle 84, although other collocations involving *wundrum* do occur across the riddle collection more broadly.³⁷ Riddle 50's reference to a wondrous creation echoes Aldhelm's 'Ignis' as well as Berne Riddle 23. Riddle 84 has no clear Latin analogue, but it is possible to suggest a relationship between Riddle 50 and Riddle 84, particularly as the half-line *wundrum*

26 This line exists in a very similar form in the Leiden Riddle: *Mec se ueta uong, wundrum freorig/ ob his innadae aerst cen[.]æ*. *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ASPR, 6 (New York, NY, and London 1942), 109. On the Leiden Riddle and Riddle 35 see Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 243–8; Thomas Klein, 'The Old English Translation of Aldhelm's Riddle *Lorica*', *RES*, 48 (1997), 345–9; Benjamin Weber 'The Isidorian Context of Aldhelm's "Lorica" and Exeter Riddle 35', *Neophilologus*, 96 (2012), 457–66.

27 CCSL, 133, 417; my translation.

28 *Ibid.*, 529–39; my translation.

29 *Exeter Book*, 206. Moritz Trautmann, 'Die Auflösungen der altenglischen Rätsel', *Anglia Beiblatt*, 5 (1984), 46–51 (50); Georg Herzfeld, *Die Räthsel des Exeterbuches und ihr Verfasser* (Berlin, 1890), 69.

30 CCSL, 133, 429; my translation.

31 *Ibid.*, 133A, 569; my translation.

32 *Exeter Book*, 236–8. Dietrich, 'Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung', 484–5.

33 DOE, s.v. *cennan*, A.; A.1.; A.2.; A.1.b.

34 DOE, s.v. *ā-cennan*, A.4; A.6; B.

35 *Thesaurus of Old English*, Frans Plank, 'Coming into Being Among the Anglo-Saxons', *Folia Linguistica*, 16 (1982), 73–118 (106). See also Javier E. Díaz Vera, 'On *sārnesse þū ācennst cild*: Being Born in the History of English, with Special Reference to the Old and Middle English Periods', *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, 8 (2000), 79–96.

36 The Leiden Riddle diverges primarily from the *Exeter Book* riddle in its final two lines. See note 26 above.

37 These consist of *wundrum freorig* ('wondrously cold') in Riddle 35 above (1b), as well as two other formulations in Riddle 84: *wundrum beweped*, 'wondrously sustained' (22a), and *wundrum gewlitedad*, 'wondrously beautified' (41a). The phrase *wundrum gegierwed* ('wondrously adorned') can be found in the same line position in Riddle 36 and Riddle 68 (2b; 2b; *The Exeter Book*, 198, 231).

acenned appears in precisely the same position in both texts. In both cases it seems to describe the origins of an entity born *on eorþan*, although due to manuscript damage the phrase *on eorþan* is supplied in Riddle 84 by editors following Tupper.³⁸ In one respect the phrase *wundrum acenned* is more appropriate in Riddle 50 than in the later riddle. The ‘fire’ riddle is more concerned with surprising birth in terms of failures of inheritance: the Old English text highlights the dumb quality of the flints, while Aldhelm’s and the Berne Riddle emphasize cross-generational contrasts of cold and hot, hard and soft and rough and smooth. ‘Water’ lacks such a sense of disrupted inheritance in the wondrous nature of its birth; its parentage is not explicitly identified in the text as it survives, though as *modor* (‘mother’, 4a) of many creatures the element is aligned with God the *fæder* (9b) and Christ the *sunu* (10b). Peter Orton has recently suggested that the composition of the second block of riddles in the *Exeter Book* manuscript (Riddles 61–95) may have been informed by a reading of the first block (Riddles 1–59).³⁹ As part of this argument, he notes a similarity between Riddle 84 and the earlier Riddle 41, also solved as ‘water’, in their description of the substance as ‘the mother of many species or creatures’ (Riddle 84, 4; Riddle 41, 2).⁴⁰ Riddle 84 could similarly be seen to draw from Riddle 50 in its reference to the wondrous birth *on eorþan* of its ‘water’ solution. In echoing this earlier riddle, the poem would then form an indirect relationship with Aldhelm’s ‘Ignis’ and Berne Riddle 23. Each reference to the event of birth in the *Exeter Book* riddles could therefore be seen as relating to a Latin analogue to some degree. Three out of the four are clear in their connection to a Latin text.

This close relationship between Old English and Latin references to birth in the riddles suggests a reluctance to introduce new references to birth in the collection as a whole. It should be noted that birth as the point of origin for an individual life is by no means the only conceptual model available for Anglo-Saxon poets. In fact, the paucity of writings on birth surviving from Anglo-Saxon England has been noted by scholars of the medical literature, even taking into account a lost chapter on gynaecology from *Bald’s Leechbook*.⁴¹ It is only possible to speculate for what reasons birth is absent in the corpus; it has been suggested, for instance, that birth may have been women’s area of expertise, situated at a distance from predominantly male contexts of textual production.⁴² Despite the absence of writings on birth, there was

38 Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 56, 223, following Karl D. Bülbring, ‘Die Räthsel des Exeterbuches und ihr Verfasser’, by Georg Herzfeld’, *Literaturblatt für germanische und romanische Philologie*, 12 (1891), 155–8 (158).

39 Peter Orton, ‘The Exeter Book Riddles: Authorship and Transmission’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 44 (2015), 131–62.

40 *Ibid.*, 148. Riddle 41 was first solved as ‘water’ by Tupper (*The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 171). See also Mercedes Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata* (Morgantown, WV, 2015), 423.

41 Marilyn Deegan, ‘Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Anglo-Saxon Medical Texts: A Preliminary Survey’, in Deegan and D. G. Scragg (eds), *Medicine in Early Medieval England: Four Papers* (Manchester, 1989), 17. See also Malcolm Laurence Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (Cambridge, 1993), 174.

42 Deegan, ‘Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Anglo-Saxon Medical Texts’, 17–8; L. M. C. Weston, ‘Women’s Medicine, Women’s Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms’, *Modern Philology*, 92 (1995), 279–93.

seemingly an established tradition of embryology in Anglo-Saxon England.⁴³ In his *Laterculus Malalianus*, Theodore dwells upon Christ's prenatal life, drawing from Augustine's embryological scheme.⁴⁴ The anonymous author of the Old English 'Formation of the Foetus' adapts a chapter of Vindicianus' late fourth-century *Gynaecia* into a vernacular account of the foetus' growth in monthly stages, tracing the development of veins and limbs before noting the stage at which the foetus begins to move and becomes *cwic* ('alive'), a point of 'animation' situated in the fifth month.⁴⁵ In light of their apparent cultural significance, schemes of embryology may provide a useful context for presentations of early life in the riddles.

In addition to setting out an influential embryological scheme, Augustine also meditates upon the nature of *infantia* and *pueritia*, or 'infancy' and 'childhood', in a manner which foregrounds a mode of gradual, staggered development. Later given precise age spans of 0–7 years and 7–14 years by Isidore, Augustine's accounts of *infantia* and *pueritia* in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* are aligned, like the rest of the seven ages, with a day of creation and an age in the history of man:⁴⁶

Primordia enim generis humani, in quibus ista luce frui coepit, bene comparantur primo diei quo deus fecit lucem . . . quia et unusquisque homo, cum primo nascitur et exit ad lucem, primam aetatem agit infantiam. Haec tenditur ab Adam usque ad Noe generationibus decem. Quasi vespera huius diei fit diluuium, quia et infantia nostra tamquam oblivionis diluuium deletur.

Et incipit mane a temporibus Noe, secunda aetas tamquam pueritia, et tenditur haec aetas usque ad Abraham aliis generationibus decem. Et bene comparatur secundo diei quo factum est firmamentum inter aquam et aquam; quia et arca, in qua erat Noe cum suis, firmamentum erat inter aquas inferiores in quibus natabat et superiores quibus compluebatur. Haec aetas non diluuium deletur, quia et pueritia nostra non oblivione tergitur de memoria.⁴⁷

43 László Sándor Chardonens, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, 900–1100: Study and Texts* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2007), 226; Marianne Elsackers, 'The Early Medieval Latin and Vernacular Vocabulary of Abortion and Embryology', in Michèle Goyens, Pieter de Leemans, An Smets (eds), *Science Translated: Latin and Vernacular Translations of Scientific Treatises in Medieval Europe* (Leuven, 2008), 377–414. Leslie Lockett detects oblique references to ensoulment before birth at several points in the Old English poetic corpus; see *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions* (Toronto, 2011), 19–24.

44 Theodore, *Laterculus Malalianus*, 13, ed. and tr. Jane Stevenson, *The 'Laterculus Malalianus' and the School of Archbishop Theodore* (Cambridge, 1995), 138–9 (196–7). Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, ed. Almut Mutzenbecher, CCL, 44a (Turnhout, 1975), LVI (95–6); see Elsackers, 'Vocabulary of Abortion and Embryology', 383–5.

45 'The Formation of the Foetus', ed. Chardonens, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics*, 223–9. See also László Sándor Chardonens, 'A New Edition of the Old English "Formation of the Foetus"', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 47 (2000), 10–1; Elsackers, 'Vocabulary of Abortion and Embryology', 402–5. The point of 'animation' is usually situated in the third month in Vindicianus' embryology: *Theodori Prisciani Euporiston libri III cum Physicorum fragmento et additamentis pseudo-Theodoreis (accedunt Vindiciani Afri quae ferunter reliquiae)*, ed. V. Rose (Leipzig, 1894), XX, 452–6, 465; see Elsackers, 404. Deegan ('Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Anglo-Saxon Medical Texts') believes the ensoulment of the foetus in the Old English text implicitly occurs in the fourth month (24).

46 Isidore, *Etymologiarum* XI.2.2–3. On *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* in Anglo-Saxon England see Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), 200, 285.

47 Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* I.23.35–6, 36, ed. Dorothea Weber, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 91 (Vienna, 1998), 104–5, lines 7–15, 1–8.

(For the beginnings of the human race, in which it began to enjoy this light, can well be compared to the first day on which God made the light . . . For every man, when he is first born and comes into the light, passes through the first age, infancy. This age extends from Adam to Noah over ten generations. The flood came like the evening of the day, because our infancy too is wiped out by the flood of forgetfulness.

In the morning the second age, like childhood, begins with the time of Noah, and this age extends up to Abraham over another ten generations. It can well be compared to the second day on which was made the firmament between the waters. For the ark, in which Noah was with his family, was the firmament between the lower waters on which it floated and the higher waters which rained upon it. This age is not wiped out by the flood, because our childhood too is not wiped from our memory by forgetfulness.)⁴⁸

These accounts of *infantia* and *pueritia* both stress intermediacy. Temporal intermediacy is evident in the first stage, brought to a close by the flood. Augustine does not extend the moral element of humanity's necessary purging by the flood into any statement on the sinfulness of infancy or the need for baptism, but even so there is a sense of a false, or at least partial, start within Augustine's scheme in that human memory of *infantia* is erased. Rather than proceeding forcefully and teleologically to the next phase, an aspect of *infantia* is lost. The account of *pueritia* foregrounds spatial intermediacy both in the position of the firmament and Noah's ark, suspended between two bodies of water. While Augustine identifies *infantia* with the undifferentiated waters on the first day of creation, *pueritia* sees an evolution into a more distinct and ordered mode of existence, more fixed also on a temporal level, as *pueritia* is not forgotten.

Augustine's presentations of early life are characterized by states of temporal and physical suspense, striking a note of accord with the caught-in-between state of Riddle 9's cuckoo. Although the cuckoo's memory extends before it is even invested with *feorh*, not erased in the manner of Augustine's *infantia*, the text shares with Augustine's account a sense of gradual development, beginning in liquidity. Elsewhere, other riddles align with Augustine's accounts. Riddle 10 is commonly solved as 'barnacle goose', seemingly reflecting a belief that these birds developed from barnacles on driftwood.⁴⁹

Neb wæs min on nearwe, ond ic neoþan wætre,
 flode underflowen, firgenstreamum
 swiþe besuncen, ond on sunde awox
 ufan yþum þeaht, anum getenge

48 Translations by Roland J. Teske, *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees and On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, The Fathers of the Church, 84 (Washington, D.C., 1991), 83–4.

49 Stopford A. Brooke, *The History of Early English Literature: Being the History of Old English from its Beginnings to the Accession of King Alfred* (New York, NY, 1892), 179; Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 161–3; Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition* (Toronto, 2009), 37–8.

liþendum wuda lice mine. 5
 Hæfde feorh cwico, þa ic of fæðmum cwom
 brimes ond beames on blacum hrægle;
 sume wæron hwite hyrste mine,
 þa mec lifgende lyft upp ahof,
 wind of wæge, siþþan wide bær 10
 ofer seolhbæþo. Saga hwæt ic hatte.⁵⁰

(My beak was in a narrow place, and I beneath water, flowed under by flood, very much sunk in mountain-streams, and in the sea I grew, covered above by waves, clutching with my body to a single wandering piece of wood. I had a living spirit when I came from the embrace of surf and beam, in a black garment; some of my trappings were white, when the air lifted me, living, aloft, wind from wave, and afterwards widely bore me, over the seal's bath. Say what I am called.)

The creature is introduced in a state of ongoing development through the verb *wæaxan*, used also in Riddle 9 (10a). Like the cuckoo, the goose is without a 'living spirit' (*feorh cwico*, 6a). The bird is furthermore submerged in an aquatic environment, *underflown* by water (2a) and 'covered over by waves' (*ufan yþum þeah*, 4a), reminiscent of Augustine's firmament and ark positioned between waters above and below (*aquas inferiores* and *superiores*). As in Riddle 9, after this period of sheltered growth the bird begins to travel new spaces, away from the *nearwe* corner in which it grew (1a).

This motif of relocation is recurrent in the riddles, such that movement away from an initial fixed base arguably constitutes the most persistent feature of their life-course narratives. In Riddle 60, a reed is removed from its watery environment and transformed into an instrument of communication, whether this is a pen or (as has otherwise been suggested) a rune staff.⁵¹

Ic wæs be sonde, sæwealle neah,
 æt merefaroþe, minum gewunade
 frumstaþole fæst; fea ænig wæs
 monna cynnes, þæt minne þær
 on anæde eard beheolde, 5
 ac mec uhtna gehwam yð sio brune
 lagufæðme beleolc. Lyt ic wende
 þæt ic ær oþþe sið æfre sceolde
 ofer meodubence muðleas sprecan,
 wordum wrixlan.⁵² 10

50 *Exeter Book*, 185–6.

51 'Pen' suggested by Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 199–200, following Edward Müller, *Die Rätsel des Exeterbuches*, Programm der herzoglichen Hauptschule zu Cöthen (Cöthen, 1861), 18; August Prehn, 'Komposition und Quellen der Rätsel des Exeterbuches', *Neuphilologische Studien* (1884), 145–285 (236–8). 'Rune staff' suggested by Moritz Trautmann, 'Zur Botschaft des Gemahls', *Anglia*, 16 (1894), 207–225 (219); Ralph W. V. Elliott, 'The Runes in *The Husband's Message*', *JEGP*, 54 (1955), 1–8.

52 1–10a, *Exeter Book*, 225.

(I was by the sand, near the sea-wall, at the ocean shore; I dwelt fast in my first place. There were few if any of mankind who could observe there my abode in solitude, yet every dawn the dark wave played about with me in its embrace. I little thought that sooner or later I should ever speak, mouthless, above the mead-bench, exchange words.)

Again, no firm point of origin is narrated in the form of a birth-like experience. The speaker is introduced in its *frumstaþol* or ‘first place’ (3a), repeatedly engulfed by the *lagufæðm*, with *fæðm* denoting ‘bosom’ or ‘embrace’, just as it does in Riddle 10 (6b).⁵³ The reed’s beginnings in life again take the form of continuous existence, detached from human society and located within an encircling liquid environment.

Many other riddles participate in a similar structure, with creatures sharing aspects of characterization with Riddle 60. The oyster in Riddle 77 offers another example of secluded, nourished subaquatic growth left behind as the creature moves on, in this case to be eaten.⁵⁴ Even when the environment is not aquatic, creatures are introduced as continuous presences gradually developing in fluid and nurturing environments. Riddle 53, commonly solved as ‘battering ram’, opens with a scene of ‘growing wood’, which ‘water and earth nourished beautifully’ (*wudu weaxende*, 3a; *Wæter . . . ond eorpe/ feddan fægre*; 3b–4a).⁵⁵ Riddle 73, ‘ash spear’, similarly states ‘I grew in a field, dwelt where the earth and the cloud of the sky nourished me’ (*lc on wonge aweox, wunode þær mec feddon/ hruse ond heofonwolcn*, 1–2a).⁵⁶ The antler-turned-inkhorns of Riddle 88 and Riddle 93 are likewise introduced as growing or standing continuously, fixed upon the head of the stag (Riddle 88, 1–9; Riddle 93, 13b–14).⁵⁷ The ‘ox’ riddles 38 and 72 both open with a phase of pleasurable nourishment and nurture, drawing to some degree from Latin analogues such as Aldhelm’s ‘Iuencus’ and Eusebius’ ‘De Vitulo’.⁵⁸ Riddle 38 makes use of a particularly interesting hapax legomenon, *geogudmyrþ* (2a), ‘youth glee’, combined with the adjective ‘greedy’ (*grædig*, 2a) to present youth as a voraciously hungry experience.⁵⁹ The milk streams from which the ox drinks are also described in a manner which stresses continuity—they are *ferðfripende*, ‘life-maintaining’ (3a). All of these texts can be seen to portray early life in terms of gradual, ongoing development, often within an atmosphere of nurture, feeding and growth. In this they resonate with Augustinian schemes of gradual development in early life. They furthermore do not distinguish birth as a clear moment of origin, resembling contemporary embryological and theological schemes which trace various stages of development, including ‘animation’, underway before birth even takes place.

53 DOE, *fæpm*, 1.

54 Dietrich, ‘Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, 483; *Exeter Book*, 234.

55 Ibid., 476; *Exeter Book*, 207.

56 Dietrich, ‘Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, 482–3; *Exeter Book*, 233–4.

57 Dietrich, ‘Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, 486–7; Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 227–8; *Exeter Book*, 239–40, 241–3.

58 CCSL, 133 and 133A: Aldhelm, Aenigma 83, ‘Iuencus’ (503); Eusebius, Aenigma 37, ‘De Vitulo’ (247).

59 MS. *geogud myrwe*, widely emended to *geogudmyrþ* (as in *Exeter Book*, 199), following Ferdinand Holthausen, ‘Zur Textkritik altenglischer Dichtungen’, *Englische Studien*, 37 (1907), 198–211 (208).

II. REPRESENTATIONS OF MATURITY

As has already been suggested, many of the *Exeter Book* riddles seem to identify movement away from a fixed base as distinctive of a later phase of life. The horns of Riddle 88 and Riddle 93 both undergo a violent eviction by ‘younger brothers’ (*gingran broþor*; Riddle 88, 17a); the loss of their first *stapol* (Riddle 88, 5a) unites them with other riddles which frame an initial period of growth followed by relocation. Such a trend aligns with an argument made by Jordi Sánchez-Martí that Anglo-Saxon writings treat journeys as symbolic of maturity.⁶⁰ Sánchez-Martí uses *Widsith* and one of the Durham Proverbs to support his point, but the riddles give far more solid evidence of the association. The philosophical background to such a link is also probably more complex than has been acknowledged. To return to Augustine, much of his description of the fifth age, *senioris aetas*, ‘not yet old age, but no longer youth’ (*nondum senectus, sed iam non iuventus*), foregrounds movement across new space:⁶¹

Et fit mane, transmigratio in Babyloniam, cum in ea captivitate populus leniter in peregrino otio collocatus est . . . Et bene comparatur illi diei quinto quo facta sunt animalia in aquis et volatilia caeli, posteaquam illi homines inter gentes tamquam in mari vivere coeperunt et habere incertam sedem et instabilem sicut volantes aves. Sed plane erant ibi etiam ceti magni . . . Ubi sane animadvertendum est quod benedixit deus illa animalia, dicens: *crecite et multiplicamini et implete aquas maris, et volatilia multiplicentur super terram*, quia revera gens Iudaeorum, ex quo dispersa est per gentes, valde multiplicata est.⁶²

(In the morning there came the exile to Babylon, and in that captivity away from their fatherland the people hardly found rest . . . It is well compared to the fifth day, on which God made the living things in the waters, and birds of the heaven. For that people began to live among the nations, as in the sea, and to have, like the birds that fly, no certain and fixed abode. Clearly in that exile there were also the great sea animals . . . Here we should, of course, note that God blessed those animals, when he said, “Increase and multiply, and fill the waters of the sea, and let the flying things multiply above the earth,” For, from the time of their dispersal among the nations, the nation of the Jews really grew greatly in number.)⁶³

The reference to ‘birds that fly’ and have ‘no certain and fixed abode’ in Augustine’s account certainly accords well with those riddles that describe birds gaining the power of flight and travelling widely. Perhaps the collection’s interest in avian subjects (see riddles 7 to 10, 13, 24, 42 and possibly 57) stems partly from the attractive model of individual growth and development which birds offer.⁶⁴ Many of these texts

60 Jordi Sánchez-Martí, ‘Age Matters in Old English Literature’, in Shannon Lewis-Simpson (ed.), *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008), 205–26 (213–4).

61 Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, I.23.39, 107, lines 4–5; tr. Teske, *On Genesis*, 85.

62 Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, I.23.39, 107–8, lines 9–20.

63 Augustine, *On Genesis*, tr. Teske, 85–6.

64 On the consecutive bird riddles see Audrey Meaney, ‘Birds on the Stream of Consciousness: Riddles 7 to 10 of the Exeter Book’, *Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, 18 (2002), 119–52; Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called*, 35–56. Niles argues for ‘crows’ as Riddle 57’s solution (*Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play*

invoke the shifting modes of spatial orientation available to birds, including the static, contained space of the egg giving way to release (central to Riddle 13, ‘ten chickens’),⁶⁵ as well as acts of treading earth and stirring water contrasted with flight (as in Riddle 7, ‘swan’).⁶⁶ Opportunities are abundant for the narration of movement into and through new space as the birds move through time.

The motif of travel in later life is nonetheless not constrained to bird riddles; it is present also in many other texts. Riddle 72 begins with a *lytel* ox (1a) situated in a context of feeding and nurture similar to those discussed above. The ox’s life takes place within a vaguely familial context in metaphorical terms, which textual damage renders unclear in its details. Over the course of the text the ox becomes *yldra* (‘older’, 10a), and its circumstances change:

Ic wæs lytel [.]
fo[.]
[.]te geaf [.]
[.]pe þe unc gemæne [.]
[.] sweostor min, 5
fedde mec [.] oft ic feower teah
swæse broþor, þara onsundran gehwylc
dægtidum me drincan sealde
þurh þyrel þearle. Ic þæh on lust,
oþþæt ic wæs yldra ond þæt an forlet 10
sweartum hyrde, siþade widdor,
mearcþapas Walas træd, moras pæðde,
bunden under beame, beag hæfde on healse,
wean on laste weorc þrowade,
earfoða dæl.⁶⁷ 15

(I was little . . . gave . . . what us two together . . . my sister, fed me . . . often I pulled at four dear brothers, who each separately during the daytime gave me drink abundantly. I drank in joy, until I was older and gave that one up to the dark herdsman, travelled more widely, trod the Welsh boundary-paths, traversed the moors, bound under a beam, had a ring around my neck, in the track of misery, endured work, a share of sorrows.)⁶⁸

of the Texts (Turnhout, 2006), 127–30) drawing on Ferdinand Holthausen (‘Ein altenglisches Rätsel’, *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 15 (1927), 453–4). Scholars have recently turned to non-bird solutions, including ‘musical notes’ (Laurence K. Shook, ‘Riddles Relating to the Anglo-Saxon Scriptorium’, in J. Reginald O’Donnell (ed.), *Essays in Honour of Anton Charles Pegis* (Toronto, 1974), 215–36 (225–6)).

65 Erika von Erhardt-Siebold, ‘Old English Riddle 13’, *Modern Language Notes*, 65 (1950), 97–100; Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 142.

66 *Exeter Book*, 184–5. Riddle 7 was first solved as ‘swan’ by Dietrich (‘Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, 462).

67 1–15a, *Exeter Book*, 232–3. The metre of 12a (MS *mearcþapas walas træd*) is troubled by *Walas*, seemingly a scribal conjecture and elided by Williamson (*The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 108, 344) but retained here. See Lindy Brady, ‘The “Dark Welsh” as Slaves and Slave Traders in Exeter Book Riddles 52 and 72’, *English Studies*, 95 (2014), 235–55, especially 244–8.

68 In this translation I follow Trautmann, *Die altenglischen Rätsel (die Rätsel des Exeterbuchs)* (Heidelberg, 1915), in taking *þæh* (9b) as the past tense of *þicgan*, ‘to drink, consume’ (126–7, 191).

Megan Cavell argues that, upon entry to the later stage, the ox becomes an ‘exile’ on the terms of Stanley Greenfield, seeing this as ‘indicated by the appositive references to wandering paths’.⁶⁹ However, given the trend across the riddles connecting later life and movement away from home, it is worth considering whether the riddle is invoking Greenfield’s ‘exile’ motif as a distinct, self-contained theme.⁷⁰ These lines, and indeed the ‘exile’ theme more broadly, may be better understood as part of a wider scheme of association. In his account of *senioris aetas* Augustine forges a connection between the life stage and the exile of the Jewish people, dispersed ‘among the nations’ (*inter gentes*), linking the idea of travel among alien peoples with age progression. In an Old English context, *Widsith*, the lynchpin of Sánchez-Martí’s argument that travel is connected with notions of adulthood in Old English literature, makes use of a very similar register:

Swa ic geondferde fela fremdra londa
geond ginne grund; godes ond yfles
þær ic cunnade, cnosle bidæled,
freomægum feor, folgade wide.⁷¹

(Thus I travelled through many foreign lands over the wide region; I experienced there good and evil, parted from my kindred, far from my kinsmen, I served widely.)⁷²

Language which Greenfield sees as key to the ‘exile’ motif occurs also in distinctly age-related contexts in the riddles, including the noun *sīþas* (‘paths’) and the verb *asettan* (‘to set’) in Riddle 9 (11a).⁷³ It may ultimately be beneficial to review Greenfield’s delineation of the ‘exile’ theme in the light of the employment of the constituent language and conceptual structures in age-related riddle contexts. Although the mode of travel represented here is troubled and unhappy, as well as taking place amid alien environments, critical evaluation need not stop with the designation of the ‘exile’ theme. It is worth considering the apparently entrenched status of these experiences as a part of the general shape of the life course, a difficult yet typical, or even necessary, aspect of maturation across time.

Travel is not the only motif attached to later life in the riddles. As the reed of Riddle 60 is dislocated, it moves from a socially detached state into a world of socially placed function in its role as a message-bringer (7b–17). In this respect the text

69 Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto, 2015), 163. Stanley B. Greenfield, ‘The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of “Exile” in Anglo-Saxon Poetry’, *Speculum*, 30 (1955), 200–6, repr. in *Hero and Exile: The Art of Old English Poetry* (London and Ronceverte, WV, 1989), 125–31.

70 Greenfield defines the ‘exile’ theme as containing any or all of the following movements: ‘a sense of direction away from the ‘homeland’ or ‘beloved’; ‘departure’; ‘turning’; ‘endurance of hardships’ (continuative movement in exile); ‘seeking’, *Hero and Exile*, 128.

71 *Widsith*, 50–3, ed. Joyce Hill, *Old English Minor Heroic Poems*, 3rd edition (Durham, 2009), 32–3.

72 Translation by Sánchez-Martí, ‘Age Matters in Old English Literature’, 214.

73 Greenfield, *Hero and Exile*, 126, 129.

forms part of a much broader theme of work and service in the collection. Tupper in 1910 identified ‘the trait of utility’:

The riddler may neglect place and form and colour of his subject, but he constantly stresses its uses to mankind. Indeed, men are in the background of every riddle-picture; and the subject is usually viewed in its relation to them.⁷⁴

From this perspective, the focus on work and function in the riddles is a phenomenon contained by the genre, representing specific generic concerns about the relationship between human and non-human entities. However, the motif of work and labour can also be seen as associated with mid-life. In Riddle 72, as the ox becomes *yldra* (‘older’, 10a), it is forced to engage in *weorc* (14b), which is often translated as ‘pain’ but also understandable in the (historically separate) sense ‘work’.⁷⁵ This riddle is solely focused on the labour of the ox pulling the plough; in this respect it differs from the other ‘ox’ riddles, 12 and 38 (and their Latin analogues), which describe the ox’s post-mortem use as leather (in addition to the ploughing function, in the case of Riddle 12).⁷⁶ The central conceit of Riddle 72 may be seen to have more in common with an equivalence made by Isidore in his *Etymologies*:

Iuvenis vocatus, quod iuvare posse incipit; ut in bubus iuvenici, cum a vitulis discesserint. Est enim iuvenis in ipso aetatis incremento positus, et ad auxilium praeparatus. Nam iuvare hominis est opus aliquod conferentis. Sicut autem tresimus perfectae aetatis est annus in hominibus, ita in pecudibus ac iumentis tertius robustissimus.⁷⁷

(A youth (*iuvenis*) is so called because he begins to be able to help (*iuvare*), just as we name the young bullocks (*iuvenicus*) among oxen, when they have separated from the calves. A youth is at the peak of his development and ready to give assistance – for a person’s ‘helping’ is his contributing some work. As in human beings the thirtieth year is the time of full maturity, so in cattle and beasts of burden the third year is the strongest.)⁷⁸

Isidore draws a link between the maturation of the *iuvenis* and the *iuvenicus* in terms of their capacity to ‘help’ or ‘assist’, making use of their peak levels of physical strength.⁷⁹ The movement into working life of the ageing ox in Riddle 72 may invoke this perceived overlap with *iuvenis*. The ox’s transition is expressed as removal from its peers—the figurative ‘sister’ (5b) and ‘brothers’ (7a) formed by

74 Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, lxxxviii. See also Neville, ‘The Unexpected Treasure of the ‘Implement Trope’.

75 Roberta Frank, ‘An Aspirin for *Beowulf*: Against Aches and Pains—*ece* and *wærc*.’ *American Notes and Queries*, 15 (2002), 58–63; R. D. Fulk, ‘Old English *weorc*: Where Does It Hurt? South of the Thames’, *American Notes and Queries*, 17 (2004), 7–12.

76 *Exeter Book*, 186, 199. On Riddle 12 see Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 166–7; John W. Tanke, ‘*Wonfeax wale*: Ideology and Figuration in the Sexual Riddles of the Exeter Book’ in Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (eds), *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections* (Bloomington, IN, 1994), 21–42.

77 Isidore, *Etymologiarum*, XI.2.16

78 *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, tr. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2006), 242.

79 Lewis and Short, s.v. *iuvo*, I.

the mother cow and the cow's teats respectively. Within this context, mid-life appears to be associated with notions of usefulness and industry, although in the Old English text, the painful and miserable aspects of the useful state are stressed. This negative emotional state is not part of Isidore's account, just as it is absent from Augustine's scheme of *iuentus*, as 'among all the ages youth is truly king'.⁸⁰ Riddle 72 appears more eager to present the maturation of its figure as troubled and mournful than Latin schemes of the 'prime of life' would suggest; it nonetheless shares Isidore's link between maturity and the doing of work.

Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe has explored the close connection between vocation and identity in a group of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Latin writings.⁸¹ She focuses on Ælfric's *Colloquy*, a dialogue intended to aid Latin language-learning but which has attracted much attention for its ventriloquizing of various labourers.⁸² With specific reference to the identities performed by the monastic oblates using the text, O'Brien O'Keefe scrutinizes the resonance of the exhortation from the Consiliarius to *esto quod es*, 'be what you are', or *beo þæt þu eart* in the anonymous Old English gloss.⁸³ Discussing this imperative and its surroundings, O'Brien O'Keefe notes how identity is shown to be performed through the doing of work and the fulfilment of one's *cræft* (able to signify 'skill' or 'trade', here glossing Latin *ars*) in the sense of 'an occupation within the widest social understanding of the term . . . whether peasant, warrior, or religious'.⁸⁴ In the words of the Consiliarius,

Et hoc consilium do omnibus operariis, ut unusquisque artem suam diligenter exerceat, quia qui artem suam dimiserit, ipse dimittatur ab arte.

And þis geþeahrt ic sylle eallum wyrhtum, þæt anra gehwylc cræft his geornlice begange, forþam se þe cræft his forlæt, he byþ forlæten fram þam cræfte.⁸⁵

(And I give this advice to all workers, let each one go about his *cræft* keenly, because whoever abandons his *cræft*, will be abandoned by his *cræft*.)

O'Brien O'Keefe emphasizes how the 'consequence of not practising one's *cræft*' is being 'left incoherent and without substance', such that 'the threat of abandonment by one's *cræft* is a fundamental threat to identity itself within the understanding that 'You are what you do.'⁸⁶ This conceptual framework may be

80 . . . *revera inter omnes aetates regnat iuentus. De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, I.23.38, 106, line 2; tr. Teske, *On Genesis*, 85. On *iuentus* as the 'perfect age' see Mary Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge, 1986).

81 Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, 'Esto quod es': Ælfric's *Colloquy* and the Imperatives of Monastic Identity', in *Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto, 2012), 94–150.

82 See Earl R. Anderson, 'Social Idealism in Ælfric's *Colloquy*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3 (1974), 153–62; John Ruffing, 'The Labor Structure of Ælfric's *Colloquy*', in Allen J. Frantzen and Douglas Moffat (eds), *The Work of Work: Servitude, Slavery and Labor in Medieval England* (Glasgow, 1994), 55–70.

83 Ælfric's *Colloquy*, ed. G. N. Garmonsway, rev. ed. (Exeter, 1978), 42, line 242.

84 DOE, s.v. *cræft*, 2., 2.a; O'Brien O'Keefe, *Stealing Obedience*, 105. On the language of *cræft* and social structure, see Nicole Guenther Discenza with reference to the Old English *Boethius* (ed. Malcolm Godden and Susan Irvine, 2 vols (Oxford, 2009)): 'Power, Skill and Virtue in the Old English *Boethius*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 26 (1997), 87–108.

85 Modified from Garmonsway, Ælfric's *Colloquy*, 41, lines 237–40; my translation, after O'Brien O'Keefe, *Stealing Obedience*, 105.

86 O'Brien O'Keefe, *Stealing Obedience*, 105.

considered as intersecting with the simultaneous interest in age relations that runs through the *Colloquy*, grounded in the age of its projected audience, young oblates (committed at around the age of seven) identified throughout as *puer* or *cild*.⁸⁷ In addition to instilling principles of identity-formation founded upon social occupation, the text disseminates a notion of socially and economically contextualized adulthood in a manner congruous with Isidore's notion of 'use' and the *iuuenis*. The Consiliarius' address is rhetorically directed at individuals too young to have given up a diet which includes meat (140) and young enough to require instruction in Latin as well as the social stratification which the *Colloquy* describes and prescribes.⁸⁸

Riddle 72, of course, does not depict labour undertaken by volition—the ox is forced into its task, participating in a discourse of slavery and forced labour.⁸⁹ It is notable that animals, and cattle in particular, appear in the Ælfrician texts treated by O'Brien O'Keefe as examples of beings who do not possess the power of choice. Translating Alcuin, Ælfric argues humankind is invested with moral responsibility, else 'he would then be like an animal' (*he . . . wære þonne swilce nyten*).⁹⁰ In Ælfric's homily for the feast of St Paul, Saul is warned that if he does not choose to obey Christ, then he can be seen to 'kick against the goad' (*spurne ongean þa gade*) in the manner of an ox: 'If the ox kicks against the goad: it hurts him' (*Gif se oxa spyrnð ongean þa gade! hit derað him sylfum*).⁹¹ Riddle 72 may reflect this association of oxen with unwilling subjects. At the same time, a great array of different kinds of labour and employment is depicted in the riddles as a wider collection; as Cavell notes, it can be difficult to separate the languages of slavery, servitude and heroic obligation.⁹² Having been displaced by their *gingra* brothers, the horns of Riddle 88 and 93 do not voluntarily fulfil their roles as inkhorns: the speaker of Riddle 88 laments 'I cannot escape' (*ic gewendan ne mæg*, 30b), while that of 93 complains 'I am not able to avenge/ my miserable experience on that warrior's life' (*ic . . . ne wrecan meahte/ on wigan feore wonn-sceaft mine*, 20b–22). Their language has much in common with the 'shield' or 'chopping block' riddle, Riddle 5, embroiled in inescapable combat and unable to effectively retaliate.⁹³ Such complex dynamics of thwarted volition permeate the riddles, but in such texts as the inkhorn riddles and Riddle 72 they are firmly situated in the latter part of the text. Entrance into a social network of use and demand, along with accompanying issues of volition and constraint, appears to be associated with later life in these narratives. This connection may suggest a broader cultural association between entry into adulthood or mid-life and integration into a

87 Ibid., 94; Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1999), 125.

88 On which see O'Brien O'Keefe, *Stealing Obedience*, 94–150, especially 95, 150.

89 See Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*, 157–64 (especially 164); Brady, 'The "Dark Welsh" as Slaves and Slave Traders in Exeter Book Riddles 52 and 72', 235–48.

90 George E. MacLean, 'Ælfric's Version of Alcuin Interrogations Sigeulfi in Genesis', *Anglia*, 7 (1884), 1–59 (4–6), lines 36–41. See O'Brien O'Keefe, *Stealing Obedience*, 19.

91 *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, ed. Peter Clemoes, Early English Texts Society (EETS), s.s. 17 (Oxford, 1997), XXVII, 402–3, lines 78–9. O'Brien O'Keefe, *Stealing Obedience*, 143.

92 Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*, 158–9.

93 *Exeter Book*, 183–4. 'Shield' first proposed by Ludvig Christian Müller, *Collectanea Anglo-Saxonica, maximam partem nunc primum edita et vocabulario illustrata* (Copenhagen, 1835), 63; *der Hackeklotz* ('chopping block') first proposed by Trautmann, 'Die Auflösungen der altenglischen Rätsel', 48.

socially contextualized mode of existence, requiring strict delineation of individual identity as part of a system and contribution in accordance with this role.

Other riddles may not explicitly locate dynamics of obligation in contrast to an earlier state, but still employ age-related language in their treatment of the theme of compelled work or service. Riddle 20 has the apparent solution ‘sword’ or (allowing for a phallic double-meaning) *wæpen*.⁹⁴ The speaker describes its social role in terms closely intertwined with two separate but parallel concepts of young male adulthood:⁹⁵

ne weorþeð sio mægburg gemicledu 20
 eaforan minum þe ic æfter woc,
 nymþe ic hlafordleas hweorfan mote
 from þam healdende þe me hringas geaf.
 Me bið forð witod, gif if frean hyre,
 guþe fremme, swa ic gien dyde 25
 minum þeodne on þonc, þæt ic þolian sceal
 bearngestreona. Ic wiþ bryde ne mot
 hæmed habban, ac me þæs hyhtplegan
 geno wyrneð, se mec geara on
 bende legde; forþon ic brucan sceal 30
 on hagostealde hæleþa gestreona.⁹⁶

(that family will not become extended by offspring of mine, those that I generated from myself, unless I might turn, lordless, from the guardian who gave me rings. It is ordained from now; that if I obey my lord, make war, just as I have done before, to satisfy my prince, I shall suffer the lack of the wealth of children. I may not have sex with a bride, but he still refuses me that hope-play, who earlier laid bonds on me; therefore, I must enjoy as a *hagosteald* the wealth of men.)

Here, the martial vocation of the sword is considered against procreative activity with a *bryd*, a ‘bride’ or ‘wife’.⁹⁷ The term *hagosteald* is relatively precise in its denotation of age, seeming originally to describe a person who has not inherited a household, but later applied to groups as diverse as warriors, virgins and priests as part of the general sense ‘young unmarried man’ or ‘bachelor’; as a state the term carries the sense ‘celibacy’.⁹⁸ Other riddles are similarly interested in the idea of the *hagosteald*. The speaker of Riddle 14, a ‘horn’, is another martial figure, decorated by a *geong hagostealdmon* (2a) and kissed by men (3b).⁹⁹ Riddle 54 may use the term mockingly when it describes a *hagostealdmon* approach a butter churn and operate it in a flurry of sexual

94 Dietrich, ‘Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, 465; John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 137–9.

95 See John Tanke, ‘The Bachelor-Warrior of Exeter Book Riddle 20’, *Philological Quarterly*, 79 (2000), 409–27.

96 20–31, *Exeter Book*, 190–1.

97 DOE, s.v. *brýd*, 1.

98 Ibid., s.v. *hago-steald noun*¹, *hæg-steald*, 1; *hago-steald noun*², *hæg-steald*. See Hilding Bäck, *The Synonyms for “Child,” “Boy,” “Girl” in Old English; An Etymological-Semasiological Investigation* (Lund, 1934), 171–6; Patrick Joseph Ryan, *Master-Servant Childhood*, 29–30.

99 Dietrich, ‘Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, 464–5.

innuendo (3a);¹⁰⁰ Murphy suggests that in this context the term *hagostealdmon* ‘seems to indicate an unmarried state’ and ‘may further suggest a lack of sexual experience’.¹⁰¹ Whether or not this is the case, all three riddles are interested in the representation of young adulthood in the form of the young *hagosteald*. In this respect they may support what Burrow sees as the primary age division of importance in texts such as *Beowulf*; the division between the *geoguð* and *duguð*, young unproved warriors without land of their own, and older, landed warriors.¹⁰² Riddle 20 in particular offers a representation of an unstable early phase of adult life, holding divergent ways of life in parallel as the sword is denied fulfilment of its procreative potential.

The sexual elements of Riddle 20 and Riddle 54 may further be indicative of Anglo-Saxon conceptualizations of mid-life in their highlighting of procreative ability, also emphasized in Augustine’s characterization of *adolescencia* as the age that ‘can already bear children’ (*filios habere iam potest*).¹⁰³ The sword interweaves its hypothetical sexual activity with the martial function that displaces it, supporting Neville’s assertion that sex in the *Exeter Book* riddles is ultimately perceived as work.¹⁰⁴ It is spoken about in the same breath as other kinds of labour, as in Riddle 54, in which the metaphorical sex appears to be conducted primarily for the purpose of procreation: the riddle ends with a metaphoric pregnancy (10b–12). Similarly, Riddle 42 describes the copulation of a ‘cock and hen’: the sexual activity in this scenario is explicitly *weorc* (4b), with the ‘filling’ of the female its projected goal (*fyllo*, 5a).¹⁰⁵ Riddle 20’s idea of sex is linked to the production of *bearngestreona* (27a), punning on *gestreon* as ‘offspring’ or ‘treasure’.¹⁰⁶ The vision of young adulthood put forward by these texts seems to include the hypothetical ability to reproduce, framed in terms of industrious work. This is congruous with the wider interest in social and economic contribution in later life explored above.

In the examples discussed, experiences of maturity in the riddles appear to be characterized by travel and movement in an alien sphere, by the undertaking of work as a form of social obligation (often unwanted and difficult), and by the ability to procreate. It is notable that all of these activities involve some form of entrance into a new social network. Whereas the riddle-creatures’ experiences of early life take place either in solitude or amid familial relationships, the dynamics involved in travel, employment and procreation are reliant on wider spheres of social existence.

III. SUGGESTIONS OF OLD AGE

In comparison to the earlier two phases, clear representations of creatures experiencing states of advanced or old age in the riddles are relatively few. As a group the extant references are diverse, but equally in their individual contexts they stress

100 Trautmann, ‘Die Auflösungen der altenglischen Rätsel’, 50.

101 Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*, 192.

102 Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 126–34.

103 Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, I.23.37, 105 (line 12); tr. Teske, *On Genesis*, 84.

104 Jennifer Neville, ‘Two Don’t Make a Match: The Strange Game of Sex in the Exeter Book Riddles’, lecture, Leeds International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds (Thursday 10 July 2014).

105 Dietrich, ‘Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, 473.

106 Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*, 176.

diversity.¹⁰⁷ This can be seen as consistent with the resonance of *frod* as a key term for advanced age, emphasizing a wealth of (often negative) personal experience.¹⁰⁸ One possible reference to old age that has attracted attention is the persona of the *feaxhar cwene* ('grey-haired woman', 2b) momentarily adopted by the amorphous creature of Riddle 74, identified by Niles as *ac*, 'oak' or 'a ship made of oak'.¹⁰⁹ The compound *feaxhar* has been interpreted by Niles as a reference to the fully-formed oak tree, as trees are described as *har* elsewhere in the Old English corpus.¹¹⁰ The rest of the riddle stresses simultaneity and breadth of experience as the riddle-creature claims 'I flew with the birds and swam in the sea, dove under the wave and stepped on earth' (*Ic . . . fleah mid fuglum ond on flode swom/ deaf under yþe . . . ond on foldan stop*, 1–5a). The stag of Riddle 93 is in some ways a similar figure, described as *dægriþe frod* ('wise in the count of days', 8a) and characterized by wide-ranging motion: the riddle reports it 'waded' (*wod*, 7b), 'had to climb steep slopes' (*stealc hliþo stigan sceolde*, 9), and return 'into deep valleys' (*in deop dalu*, 11a). Being *har* or *frod* is linked on these occasions with a broad range of experience and the occupation of different places and states.

Other riddles make reference to *frod* existence as wide-ranging. In both Riddle 53 and Riddle 73, the word *frod* appears at the point of disjunction when the happily flourishing trees are torn down by human enemies.¹¹¹ Riddle 53 locates a clear transition into a new phase: the tree grows 'until, old in days, it came to be in a different, miserable state' (*oþþæt he frod dagum/ on oþrum wearð aglachade*, 4b–5). The passage recalls similar transformations elsewhere in the riddles, such as the ox's in Riddle 72, but rather than being *yldra*, the tree of Riddle 53 is *frod dagum*. Riddle 73 makes use of a very similar 'until' clause to mark the ash's change of state: 'until those who hated me turned me aside, old in years' (*oþþæt me onhwyrfdon/ gearum frodne, þa me grome wurdon*, 2b–3). Teele and Dale have both discussed these two riddles as suggestive of a postlapsarian discord between humanity and nature.¹¹² The *frod* trees are described as such when they experience human domination. In this regard, the word *frod* seems to carry a rather specific weight in the riddles—it is repeatedly used in connection with worldly history in a Christian framework. In Riddle 83, the speaker, identifiable as 'gold' or 'ore', discusses its history of human relations in a similar manner:¹¹³

Frod wæs min fromcynn [.] 1
 biden in burgum, siþþan bæles weard
 [.] wera lige bewunden,

107 For a recent overview of old age in Anglo-Saxon literature see Porck, 'Growing Old Among the Anglo-Saxons'. See also Philippa Semper, 'Byð se ealda man ceald and snoflig: Stereotypes and Subversions of the Last Stages of the Life Cycle in Old English Texts and Anglo-Saxon Contexts', in *Medieval Life Cycles*, 287–318.

108 Porck, 'Growing Old among the Anglo-Saxons', 264.

109 *Exeter Book*, 234; Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 11–56.

110 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 33.

111 *Exeter Book*, 207, 233–4.

112 Elinor Bartlet Teele, 'The Heroic Tradition in the Old English Riddles', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2004, 76; Corinne Dale, "Deope gedolgod": Wounding, Shaping and the Post-Lapsarian World in Exeter Book Riddles 53 and 73', *Marginalia*, 17 (2013), 5–14.

113 Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 366–9. See also Thomas Klein, 'The Metaphorical Cloak of Exeter Riddle 83, "Ore/Gold/Metal"', *American Notes and Queries*, 28 (2015), 11–14.

fyre gefælsad. Nu me fah warað
 eorþan broþor, se me ærest wearð 5
 gumena to gyrne. Ic ful gearwe gemon
 hwa min fromcynn fruman agette
 eall of earde¹¹⁴

(Old was my ancestry . . . waited in the strongholds, since the guardian of fire . . . of men wound about with flames, purified with fire. Now the guilty brother of the earth guards me, he who first among men became trouble for me. I very readily remember who in the beginning poured my ancestry, all out of the earth.)¹¹⁵

Although not used of a singular subject, the adjective here is again employed to signal wariness of the degradation caused by humans; this form of wisdom-through-experience manifests across historical time. In Riddles 83, 73 and 53, *frod* thus seems to be used to register enhanced perspective and accumulated consciousness of the actions of humanity developed across a period far longer than the human lifespan. At the same time, this awareness is distinguished by a distinctly unhappy emotional weight, resonating with the references to increased misery and discontent in later life linked elsewhere in the riddles with the experiences of travel and labour.

The only riddle in the *Exeter Book* that uses the term *eald* to describe an individual creature is Riddle 8, the ‘nightingale’ riddle.¹¹⁶ This text also gives an impression of enhanced perspective, but differently. As I have suggested elsewhere, although the term *eald* in this riddle is usually translated as ‘traditional’, it may be better understood as ‘old’, particularly as Pliny describes the different roles adopted by nightingales as students and teachers.¹¹⁷ The riddle is, however, unconcerned with Pliny’s pedagogical framework. Instead it prioritizes the nightingale’s ability to modulate its tone: the highly varied nature of the bird’s song is emphasized as it ‘exchanges’ its noises through the verb *wrixlan* (2b) a term associated elsewhere with the composition of poetry.¹¹⁸ The riddle’s intense interest in the multi-voiced nature of the bird may be understood as privileging another, more verbal, form of diversity. Riddle 8 thus also gives a picture of an apparently aged individual with a wide range of knowledge, abilities and skills. The primary associations attached to advanced age in the riddles appear therefore to be diversity, wide-ranging experience, and enhanced perspective.

IV. CONCLUSION

The *Exeter Book* riddles have yet to be fully appreciated as pieces of life-writing, despite the recent surge in critical interest in the theory and practice of the genre, as

114 1–8a, modified from *Exeter Book*, 236. The MS reading of 3b is *life bewunden*; the emendation to *lige* was first proposed by Ferdinand Holthausen (‘Zu alt- und mittelenglischen Dichtungen. XV’, *Anglia*, 24 (1901), 264–7(265)).

115 Translation after Niles (*Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 133).

116 Solution first offered by Dietrich, ‘Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, 463. See also Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 153–8; Mercedes Salvador-Bello, ‘The Evening Singer of Riddle 8 (K-D)’, *Selim*, 9 (1999), 57–68.

117 ‘*Eald æfensceop*: Poetic Craft and the Authority of the Aged in Old English Verse’, *Quaestio Insularis*, 17 (2017), 74–100 (94–7).

118 Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies*, 232.

well as in historical ideas of life cycles. As demonstrated, the riddles offer notions of life courses which at times align neatly with patterns detected by scholars elsewhere and at times signal new areas of enquiry altogether. They are revelatory of recurrent patterns, including gradual narratives of origin, movement away from a fixed base in mid-life, and incremental acquisition of wide-ranging experience. Such indications will be useful for those keen to understand more of Anglo-Saxon conceptualizations of human life progression.

Through focusing on those aspects of the riddles which may reflect cultural concepts of the human life course, space is opened for a more considered and careful assessment of the utility of such broad labels as ‘anthropomorphism’ and ‘personification’ when applied to the riddles.¹¹⁹ De Man’s conceptualization of all autobiography as *prosopopoeia* is a helpful corrective to any hasty elision of first-person voices in the riddles with conversion into the human. Furthermore, few of the aspects of life-course patterning traced by this paper can be adequately understood as metaphorical imports of exclusively human narratives. Concepts of gradual formation in early life may be continuous with some contemporary concepts of pre-natal human development, but equally they are continuous with Augustinian schemes of human creation which are themselves tightly intertwined with the coming-into-being of the world and of human society, exceeding the single frame of reference of the human body. The riddles are fascinated by the transition of objects and animals into the field of work undertaken as service to humanity; this kind of narrative is not solely comprehensible as ‘anthropomorphism’, coherent also in terms of the existence across time of non-human entities. This is attested to by Isidore’s paralleling of the *iuvencus* and the *iuvenis* in their prime. Equally, the nature of being *frod* in the sense of ‘aged’ and ‘experienced’ is not a specifically human quality in the riddles, nor elsewhere in Old English; having gathered a breadth of experience over time is a condition open to the stag of Riddle 93 as well as the gold of Riddle 83.¹²⁰ The *eald* nightingale of Riddle 8 benefits from acquired knowledge which cannot be understood wholly as a metaphorical reference to human experience in old age, consistent with the broad reach of *eald* as an adjective in Old English.¹²¹

When considered in all these regards, the human life course does not seem to be used by the riddles as a sharply defined, portable metaphorical conceit. When in Riddle 38 the young ox is described as *geogudmyrþe grædig* (2a) there is no need to interpret this state as distinctly human in scope, and therefore necessarily ironic or distancing. These observations signal that greater precision is needed in scholarly discussions of what in particular is ‘human’ and carried over into these texts when they are described as ‘anthropomorphic’. In many ways these labels can be seen to hide more than they reveal, obfuscating what specifically is considered incongruous when attributed to a non-human entity.

119 See, for example, Williamson’s statement: ‘for the most part Old English *Riddles* are anthropomorphic – they describe something not human in human disguise’ (*The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 26).

120 DOE, s.v. *frod*, especially 2. a., 2. b.

121 Ibid., s.v. *eald*. See also Ashley Crandell Amos, ‘Old English Words for *Old*’, in Michael M. Sheehan (ed.), *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, Papers in Mediaeval Studies 11 (Toronto, 1990), 95–106 (95, 98–100).

This essay furthermore has implications for the treatment of the riddles as a discrete generic group within the corpus of Old English poetry. Many of the structural features of the life course detected in this paper can be found in other texts. *The Dream of the Rood* in particular resonates with the riddles in the cross's account of its personal history, framed in terms of remembrance across the passage of time: *Þæt wæs geara iu,—ic þæt gyta geman* ('That was years ago—I remember it yet', 1).¹²² The cross undergoes analogous experiences of dislocation from a place of origin (29–30a), travel away from home (30b–33a), compelled service (30b–51a) and broader social contribution (80b–121), as well as knowledge gained through difficult experience, both in terms of personal history and the history of the world (especially at 29; 78–80a). *The Dream of the Rood* has been aligned with the riddlic genre previously, but the close connections between the poem's narrative of non-human life progression and that of the riddles signal that further consideration is necessary.¹²³ Indeed, Paul de Man's assertion that not only is autobiography understandable as *protopopoeia*, but also as 'restoration in the face of death' may have resonance for the cross's organization of personal experience in response to Christ's ambiguous experience of death and the cross's period of obscurity in the ground (75–76a).¹²⁴ *The Wife's Lament* similarly takes the form of an autobiographical life narrative, as is stated in the poem's opening lines (*Ic þis gieðd wrece bi me ful geomorre,/ minre sylfre sið*, 'I express this song about myself, very sorrowful, my own journey', 1–2a).¹²⁵ This narrative also centres on experiences of dislocation from home and subsequent travel amid new social spheres, with these undertakings juxtaposed against an elusive concept of death experienced, approximated or postponed, as suggested by the speaker's occupation of a grave-like cave and statement that her miserable existence may be perpetuated eternally (27–32a, 36b; 39b–41).¹²⁶ The *Exeter Book* riddles are likewise interested in narrating experiences of being or becoming 'dead' (particularly Riddle 9, 2b; Riddle 12, 15a; Riddle 74, 4b), appropriately for texts so concerned

122 *The Dream of the Rood*, ed. Michael Swanton, rev. ed. (Exeter, 1996).

123 See Margaret Schlauch, 'The "Dream of the Rood" as Protopopoeia', in Percy W. Long (ed.) *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (New York, NY, and London, 1940), 23–34; Peter Orton, 'The Technique of Object-Personification in *The Dream of the Rood* and a Comparison with the Old English Riddles', *Leeds Studies in English*, 11 (1980), 1–18; Christine E. Fell, 'Runes and Riddles in Anglo-Saxon England', in Carole Hough and Kathryn A. Lowe (eds), *'Lastworda Betst': Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell with her Unpublished Writings* (Donington, 2002), 264–77.

124 'Autobiography as De-facement', 925. De Man is invoking a broad concept of 'death' in terms of selfhood and identity: autobiographical discourse is 'self-restoration' (925) and 'the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave' (927). Ultimately, language constitutes another kind of privation, such that de Man concludes 'the restoration of mortality by autobiography . . . deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores' (930). On Christ's death in *The Dream of the Rood* see Rosemary Woolf, 'Doctrinal Influences on *The Dream of the Rood*', *Medium Aevum*, 27 (1958), 137–53, especially 148.

125 *The Wife's Lament*, ed. Anne L. Klinck in *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal and London, 1992), 93–4, 177–88.

126 For the critical tradition which sees the poem's speaker occupying a death-like state see Alaric Hall, 'The Images and Structure of *The Wife's Lament*', *Leeds Studies in English*, 33 (2002), 1–29. Earlier contributions to the tradition are discussed by Berit Åström in 'Murdering the Narrator of *The Wife's Lament*', *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 27 (1999), 24–7. Kathryn A. Lowe argues that the speaker is preoccupied with the death of others in "A Fine and Private Place": *The Wife's Lament*, 11. 33–4, the Translators and the Critics', 122–4. On the riddlic quality of the poem see Faye Walker-Pelkey, "Frige hwæt ic hatte": 'The Wife's Lament' as Riddle', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 28 (1992), 242–66; Fell, 'Runes and Riddles'.

with comparisons and interrelations of the human and non-human, animate and inanimate.¹²⁷ Both the riddles and texts like *The Wife's Lament* are interested in troubling the boundaries of the life course at the same time as sketching out the shape of its progression. Comparison with similar intimations in other Old English poems, such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, is likely to further our understanding of this nexus of biographical interest paired with interrogation of the limits of life in Old English poetry.¹²⁸

Separating the riddles from the context of the vernacular corpus prohibits this kind of discussion, as well as facilitating the exclusion of the riddles from broader, interdisciplinary studies of the life-course in Anglo-Saxon culture. As suggested throughout this essay, interest in biographical structuring of experience tends to override any clear distinction between human and non-human in these texts. This aspect of the riddles may profitably be further examined with the goal of widening our understanding of this group of texts, Old English poetry more broadly, 'life-writing' practices, Anglo-Saxon concepts of life courses, and cross-cultural biographies of the non-human.

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127 *Exeter Book*, 234 (Riddle 74). See also Riddle 5, 14a; Riddle 65, 1b (*Exeter Book*, 230).

128 Both edited by Klinck in *The Old English Elegies*, 75–83, 106–45. On death and the linguistic construction of the self in *The Wanderer* see Margrét Gunnarsdóttir Champion, 'From Plaint to Praise: Language as Cure in "The Wanderer"', *Studia Neophilologica*, 69 (1998), 187–202, repr. in R. M. Liuzza (ed.), *Old English Literature: Critical Essays* (New Haven, CT, 2002), 328–52.