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OLD ENGLISH ECOLOGIES: ENVIRONMENTAL READINGS
OF ANGLO-SAXON TEXTS AND CULTURE

by

Ilse Schweitzer VanDonkelaar

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
Western Michigan University
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Ilse Schweitzer VanDonkelaar, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2013

Conventionally, scholars have viewed representations of the natural world in Anglo-Saxon (Old English) literature as peripheral, static, or largely symbolic: a “backdrop” before which the events of human and divine history unfold. In “Old English Ecologies,” I apply the relatively new critical perspectives of ecocriticism and place-based study to the Anglo-Saxon canon to reveal the depth and changeability in these literary landscapes. Overall, this interdisciplinary study of Anglo-Saxon texts brings together literary and environmental sources and modes of inquiry to explore the place of humans (and non-humans) within the natural environments of Anglo-Saxon England, as well as the ways in which natural cycles and processes are reflected in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture. Looking to Old English scriptural, hagiographical, epic, gnomic, and elegiac poetry, as well as homilies, prayers, and philosophical and didactic works, I locate imagined or figurative landscapes in these texts. Employing ecocritical theory, I find intersections between these figurative spaces—the mead-hall, the conventional “center” of human society in the Anglo-Saxon world, as well as the lonely worlds of exile (water, wood, and wilderness), and the grave, the earthly body’s final “home”—and their actual counterparts. Ultimately, the project confronts the conventional reading of the Anglo-Saxon worldview of earth’s impending and inevitable decay with evidence that

cyclical and seasonal views of time pervade the works of the period. By juxtaposing my ecological readings with archaeological reports and landscape histories, I am able to expose the paradoxes of finding one's literary, actual, and ecological place(s) in an Anglo-Saxon landscape that is always in flux, yet trapped in stasis.

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Ilse Schweitzer VanDonkelaar

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: AN ARGUMENT FOR ECO-ANGLO-SAXONISM

Over the past several decades, worldwide, we have witnessed a rising public awareness of environmental change and devastation. Today, public outrage and activism over the destruction of nature seem to have reached a pinnacle. Environmental destruction in the forms of unchecked pollution, deforestation, consumption of global resources, and their attendant effects of climate change, increasing numbers of endangered species, and a reduction of global food and water supplies, have affected the artistic, political, and economic climates of the United States and beyond. To see evidence of widespread popular awareness of environmental degradation, one need only look to the marketplace: the emphasis on producing hybrid or fuel-efficient automobiles reflects concern over the abuse of fuel resources; companies of every type are scrambling to earn “green” reputations by advertising environmentally sound products or entertainment programming.

The origins of this modern “green” movement can be traced in part to the awareness raised by the environmental writings of Rachel Carson, the twentieth-century American author whose *Silent Spring* (1962) warns of the devastating environmental effects of pollution and pesticides. Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us* (2007) posits the removal (possibly extinction) of the human species from Earth, asking and answering the question, “how long would it take to recover lost ground and restore Eden to the way it must have gleamed and smelled the day before Adam, or *Homo habilis*, appeared?”¹ In another form of media, Al Gore’s and Davis Guggenheim’s 2006 film documentary “An

¹ Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Picador Press, 2007), 5.

Inconvenient Truth” traces attempts to inject environmental reform into the political arena over the past two decades, and warns of incipient worldwide climate change.

Whereas Gore’s and Guggenheim’s warning of global climate change gives voice and justification for a growing public anxiety over the extent of our own tendencies to consume and pollute — thus, our own effects on the global climate — Weisman’s vision posits an earth suddenly lacking humans and, gradually, consuming the ruins of our civilization and returning to “Eden.” Both film and text reveal different contemporary anxieties about our relationship to this earth: we fear our own devastating impact on the planet; we fear the natural changes that our actions have caused; we fear that we are, ultimately, insignificant in the greater cycles and “life” of the planet earth.

While these anxieties are linked to recent waves of environmental debate and activism in various media, humanity’s relationship to and effects upon the natural world have been sources of fear (and impetus for artistic and textual production) for centuries. As Ken Hiltner observes in his study of John Milton’s England, “early modern England, and especially London, was confronted with a host of environmental crises, including urban air pollution, acid rain, deforestation, endangered species, wetland loss, and rampant consumerism — to name but a few.”² Even before the early modern period, as early as 1286, popular concern over environmental hazards resulted in the establishment of a commission to study air pollution in London.³ Though we may believe that the “green movement” is born of our postmodern era of global industry, rapid scientific and technological advancement, and instant communication, concern about our impact on the environment is nothing new. Indeed, it seems as though every generations has its own

² Ken Hiltner, “Introduction,” in *Renaissance Ecology: Imagining Eden in Milton’s England*, ed. Ken Hiltner (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

sense of environmental apocalypse and attendant ways of navigating these fears and channeling their anxieties into art, literature, and industry.

Background and Methodology

The question of humanity's place in the natural world has been raised in the literature and media of English-speaking cultures from the earliest uses of the language. English literature in the United States finds its ultimate origins in the medieval texts of Britain, notably, the Anglo-Saxon (or Old English) literary corpus. This body of poetry and prose spans the sixth through eleventh centuries; much of the extant poetry is preserved in four tenth- to eleventh-century manuscripts and is often divided (by contemporary scholars) into genres of elegy, heroic (or epic) poetry, gnomic poetry, enigmatic verse (comprising riddles and dialogues), hagiographical poetry, and verse accounts of scriptural events, while the culture's prose takes the forms of numerous sermons, translations of classical works, saints' lives, law codes, historical chronicles, and medical compendia. While there is no dearth of literary criticism dedicated to mining these texts in search of the "Anglo-Saxon world," much of this criticism focuses on the artificiality of texts as perceptions of the environment, representations that reveal more about the author's worldview than about the world itself.⁴ To combat this perception of

⁴ For example, in the most comprehensive study of the natural world in Anglo-Saxon poetry to date, Jennifer Neville argues that the portrayal of natural phenomena in this culture is largely representational and lacking realism. According to Neville, poetic representations of nature do not provide us with objective data and clear images of the physical environment; instead, they reveal "how the human race views itself, what it prizes and despises, through its assimilation of otherwise neutral data to value-laden patterns" (p. 10). Though she acknowledges the impact of the actual environment, including weather conditions, technology, disease and hygiene, and local wildlife, on Anglo-Saxon depictions of nature (pp. 3–16), Neville contends that "'the natural world' in Old English poetry can appear disappointing, limited, erroneous, stagnant, even unimaginative" and that the natural world "is not really a self-sufficient, externally defined entity at all. It is instead a reflection of human constructions" (p. 10). See Neville,

the natural world as flat, representational, or a mere backdrop to the events of human history, we must employ interdisciplinary approaches that illuminate the connections between the representation of nature and the realities of life in a particular environment.

The questions we pose for ourselves today — are we separate from or subject to nature? Are we meant to be residents or stewards of the earth? Is nature something to be feared, enjoyed, learned from? — are also suggested by the ways in which Anglo-Saxon authors wrote about nature. The anxieties of existence, the fear of a hostile natural world, were present then as they are now; textual evidence suggests that an Anglo-Saxon individual was probably just as or perhaps even more aware of the difficulties of survival and the roles of production, growth, decay, and renewal in extending life as is a contemporary audience.

While the concepts of nature, environment, and landscape may typically appear on the periphery of literary human drama, the relatively new critical framework of ecocriticism provides useful methods and guiding questions for bringing them to the center of one's vision. First named in 1978, ecocriticism is a theoretical approach that emphasizes the wide spectrum of environmental issues present in any literary text, ranging from the presentation of the natural world in that text to considerations of the text itself as an ecological creation.⁵ Concepts interrogated and illuminated by the ecocritic may include environmental phenomena such as growth, energy, balance / imbalance,

Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵ William Rueckert, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 105. Cheryl Glotfelty adds that ecocriticism is a perspective with which critics can study the relationship between texts and the physical environment. See Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

symbiosis, mutuality, and the availability of resources,⁶ as these appear in the environment of the text and as they influence human (and non-human) characters. While ecocriticism might be most broadly defined as “the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human [...] entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself,”⁷ at times these studies move beyond the dichotomy of the human and non-human, shifting the focus of most literary analyses to a perspective that emphasizes the environment over its human inhabitant. As Gillian Rudd has it, “ecocriticism strives to move away from the anthropocentrism which creates and operates a value-system in which the only things that are seen, let alone valued, are those that serve some kind of purpose in human terms.”⁸ Greg Garrard echoes this sentiment, observing that “much ecocriticism has taken for granted that its task is to overcome anthropocentrism [...] The metaphysical argument for biocentrism is meant to sustain moral claims about the intrinsic value of the natural world, which will in turn affect our attitudes and behaviour towards nature.”⁹

Clearly, ecocriticism has larger political and social aims; undergirding this analytical framework is a philosophy whose practitioners strive to alter the ways in which modern audiences think and speak about the environment and our place(s) within it. Since this critical methodology developed within the last thirty years, it is most suitably applied to the environmental writings of Carson and beyond, as well as to the preceding traditions of nature writing that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of American naturalist writings and British Romantic texts. However, critics such as David

⁶ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002).

⁷ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

⁸ Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 5–6.

⁹ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 202.

Mazel have called to extend the scope of “ecocritical studies” and the definition of ecocritical writing to new literary frontiers;¹⁰ in fact, as Gillian Rudd observes, ecocriticism “is now reaching into every genre and period.”¹¹ According to Rudd, the work of the ecocritic is not “to claim that texts are themselves ‘green’ in outlook but to reveal how pervasive the tensions between human and non-human are, even when being portrayed as being in harmony.”¹² Therefore, we need not establish that a text belongs to the canon of “nature writing,” is “green,” or comes from a culture and time with a view of the natural world comparable to our own in order to read it ecocritically.

Ecocriticism and its attendant objectives of global environmental reform and preservation, though seemingly far removed from the world of Anglo-Saxon England, are not as separate as one might think. Our current fears of environmental degradation and climate change are reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon spiritual anxiety over worldly decay and apocalypse, though of course the primary causes in each case (rising carbon levels and warming oceans vs. humanity’s sinful state, respectively) are dissimilar. While environmental apocalypticism (re)appears across time and cultures, with nearly each generation facing its own vision of “impending doom and destruction,” when we find reflections of our own fears of and confusion over the natural world across such wide measures of time and space, we must look to discover how our interactions with the environment have changed or remained the same. Although ecocriticism seeks to decentralize the human from human narratives,¹³ bringing nature and environment into

¹⁰ David Mazel, *A Century of Early Ecocriticism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 17.

¹¹ Rudd, *Greenery*, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ In her own ecocritiques, Rudd points out this contradiction: “I aim to maintain an attentiveness to and awareness of the non-human, while also being conscious of the paradoxes surrounding reading texts which are themselves self-evidently human constructs.” See Rudd, *Greenery*, 16. As we shall see, Rudd’s struggle with this paradoxical element of ecocriticism is not limited to Middle English texts; my ecocritical readings

focus, we still see the importance of establishing a continuum of environmental reading as far back as we can go in human history. Such a continuum will allow us to contextualize our historical understanding of the natural world and our place within (or without) it; further, ecocritical readings of early literatures will allow us to glean information about how medieval writers and cultures existed in or made use of their environments, how they channeled their environmental anxieties, and how these environments have changed over time.

In recent years, ecocriticism has crept into discussions of early modern and Middle English literatures, with several scholars developing new models for applying ecocritical theory to these canonical works. Notable among these studies is Gillian Rudd's *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature*, in which she divides her chapters according to landscape features (forests, wilderness, coasts and oceans, and gardens), outlines the stereotypical portrayals and meanings affixed to these landscapes in Middle English texts, and follows this with an analysis of the ways in which human characters transform or are transformed by these settings.¹⁴ Rebecca Douglass likewise explores the possible uses of ecocriticism in Middle English literature. Noting that this theoretical approach tends to be more issue-driven than solidly methodological, Douglass lays out a series of questions that may serve the medievalist-

of Anglo-Saxon texts reveal a fascination with and even acceptance of contradiction and ambiguity in the poetry of this culture.

¹⁴ Rudd foregrounds the artifice of these literary landscapes, yet she also employs social and landscape history in her analyses, illustrating the ways in which nature in Middle English literature reflected and affected human interactions with the physical environment. For example, in a chapter describing trees and forests in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, *The Parliament of Fowles*, *The Book of Duchess*, and Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Rudd explains that the medieval forest is generally defined as threatening to and uncontrollable by humans, yet can also signify cultivation and civilization, as the elite of society would demonstrate wealth, mastery of the environment, and the luxury of leisure time by hunting in forests. See Rudd, *Greenery*, 48–91.

ecocritic in future analyses.¹⁵ Douglass suggests that ecocritics inquire as to how representations of nature reflect or influence the treatment of land and wilderness; whether the text is concerned with issues of land use, ownership, or control; how settings, landscapes, and metaphors relate to real and historical geography and ecology; and what myths of forest, wilderness, nature, or “otherworld” are being built or interrogated.¹⁶ Finally, Sarah Stanbury’s 2004 article, “EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature,” provides a venue for the author to “engage in dialogue with ethical concerns of ecocriticism and to situate Chaucer within an important critical dialogue that has paid, to date, little attention to premodern texts.”¹⁷

The works of Rudd, Douglass, and Stanbury demonstrate the relevance of ecocritical theory to Middle English literature *as well as* the relevance of ecocritical analyses to our contemporary relationship with nature. Yet the fact that scholars have experimented in applying ecocriticism to Middle English texts serves to highlight the lack of ecocritiques of earlier Anglo-Saxon texts. Currently, ecocriticism has been slow to move into Anglo-Saxon studies, with the most notable entry being the work of Alfred K.

¹⁵ Rebecca Douglass, “Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature” *Studies in Medievalism* 10 (1998): 139–50.

¹⁶ Putting her own experimental methodology to work, Douglass uses this list of questions to interrogate Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* and *Miller’s Tale*; her analysis, however, is less focused on Middle English texts than it is a “test-drive” for her ecocritical methodology. Douglass, “Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature,” 150–52. Just as Douglass takes it upon herself to establish a useful ecocritical methodology for medieval literature, she sets a further challenge for medievalists. Douglass ends her critique with the observation that many modern environmental and ecocritical writers (including Lynn White and Neil Evernden) have traced current environmentally destructive views and practices to the medieval period and the ideology of medieval Christianity. This implicit challenge to medievalists to “reclaim” the texts of medieval Europe, or at least to define medieval relationships between humans and landscape, applies to the literature of Anglo-Saxon England as much as to the Middle English canon. Moreover, by comprehending the history of our definition of “nature,” we may better understand our current assumptions and practices about life on Earth. See Douglass, “Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature,” 159–60.

¹⁷ Sarah Stanbury, “EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature,” *The Chaucer Review* 39.1 (2004): 2. In her conclusion, Stanbury echoes Douglass’s observation about the role of medieval culture in shaping our relationship with nature. Referring to the real-time, historical effects of Chaucerian texts, Stanbury observes that the parceling-out of nature in the Middle Ages “may have had dire historical consequences for land use by exonerating her human subjects from custodial responsibilities.” See Stanbury, “EcoChaucer,” 13.

Siewers, whose analysis blends Anglo-Saxon, medieval Celtic literature, Heideggerian phenomenology, and space- or place-based studies.¹⁸ In general, the overarching Christian worldview espoused by Anglo-Saxon poetry, as well as the purported symbolic and unrealistic representations of nature in Anglo-Saxon verse (in Neville’s view, anyway), seem to have perplexed readers wishing to apply this new critical perspective to English’s oldest poems. As Garrard has it, “Christian tropes are problematic for ecocritics [...] the underlying narrative structure of Christian mythology claims a directionality and coherence for the history of Creation that is at odds with evolutionary and ecological processes.”¹⁹ Certainly, much of Anglo-Saxon literature was composed within and reflects a perspective in which the Christian faith is central to life and thought. As such, this literature is conventionally believed to depict a clear hierarchy — one that locates God and the heavenly host at the top, humankind on a lower plane, and Satan and wrathful spirits in Hell at the lowest point of the pole.²⁰ Rotating around this central axis, the landscape is conventionally viewed as peripheral, generalized, nameless, and at times, dangerous to exiled humanity. Yet such a segregated view of the Anglo-Saxon poetic world may lead us to ignore the horizontal relationship of humankind to the population of “Created things” on earth in favor of the clearer and more dramatic vertical relationship among God, humans, and Satan.

¹⁸ See Alfred K. Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape*, The New Middle Ages Series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); also Siewers, “Desert Islands: Europe’s Archipelago as Ascetic Landscape,” in *Studies in the Medieval Atlantic*, ed. Benjamin Hudson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 35–64.

¹⁹ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 202.

²⁰ This structure is reminiscent of the “Great Chain of Being,” a concept developed by classical philosophers (notably Plato and Aristotle) and elaborated by medieval scholastic writers. In this view of Creation, God is positioned atop a vertical axis; below Him are positioned Created beings in descending levels of resemblance to the Almighty (angels, humans, animals, vegetables, minerals, etc.). This kind of organization of the Created world informs the “natural history” writings of Pliny and Isidore of Seville, sources that would have been known to Anglo-Saxon scholastics.

In a list of interpretive questions demonstrating the scope and relevance of ecocritical analysis to Middle English texts, Rudd hits on several queries that bring this horizontal relationship into focus. She asks us to consider, “how far humans are regarded [sic] part of the world, how far set apart from it; whether nature (or Nature) is seen in hierarchical terms or as made up of a vast array of different things each equally worthy.”²¹ One of ecocriticism’s mandates — to widen our conventional, anthropocentric view, moving nature from the periphery to the center of our attention and analysis — may deconstruct the medieval “spiritual hierarchy,” leveling the narrative field and decentering human voices within the texts they create. Some texts, notably the Anglo-Saxon riddles, in which objects “turn the tables” and speak of wilderness homes and human predators, practically cry out for this kind of ecocritical reading. Regarding the corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry as a whole, including the vast versifications of scriptural material, we find that we may in fact *not* be served by deconstructing or ignoring the vertical and central relationship between God and humankind in this worldview. Instead, this corpus of literature demands a reading that connects the “center-point” of the human and the divine within a complex array or grid of other organisms, phenomena, and things, in order to document the relationships between these actors / actants and track their movements over and beyond the face of the earth.²² Further, ecocritical principles will be especially useful to determine how (well) humankind fits into the natural landscape, and whether or not individuals are successful, able to survive and thrive, in any given habitat.

²¹ Rudd, *Greenery*, 5.

²² This view of our world(s) as grids or “assemblages” of things is influenced by Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), and exploration of ecophilosophy and vital materialism.

While many have not yet explored ecocritical methodologies, Anglo-Saxon scholars have tended to seize upon space- / place- / landscape-focused studies, with numerous recent publications emphasizing less the green world and more the constructed world of spaces — including architectural, historical, memorial, social, or mental spaces. Essay collections such as Joseph Sterrett and Peter Thomas’s *Sacred Text — Sacred Space* (2011), Wendy Davies, Guy Halsall, and Andrew Reynolds’s *People and Space in the Middle Ages: 300–1300* (2006), and Clare A. Lees and Gillian Overing’s *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes* (2006) offer compelling readings of the layering of human conceptions of space upon the actual medieval landscape. However, each of these collections also focuses on changing notions of place and landscape over time, creating a timeline of criticism that begins with Anglo-Saxon spaces and proceeds right through the Middle English and early modern periods, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and contemporary culture.²³ Another spatial study which dedicates most of its analysis to Anglo-Saxon culture and literature is Lori Ann Garner’s *Structuring Spaces: Oral Poetics and Architecture in Early Medieval England* (2011), though Garner also moves into analysis of Middle English texts in the final chapters of her volume. Despite the lack of a focused, exclusive study of Anglo-Saxon texts and landscape among these entries, each of these volumes provides interdisciplinary discussions of landscape that bring religious, historical, and legal texts alongside archaeological and environmental reports.

Even though place-based studies tend to not foreground environmental themes in the same manner that ecocriticism does, they still offer valuable elements to this

²³ Further, the expanse of space covered by these collections extends over time and geographical distance, as one essay in Overing and Lees’s collection investigates “Medieval Monasticism as a Cultural Resource in the Pacific Northwest.”

methodology. Melded with the principles of ecocritical reading, place-studies allow us to focus on human perceptions of “being in place” as well as surviving and thriving within a landscape. In the intersection between ecocriticism and place-based criticism, we discover how ecological processes, such as nourishment, growth, evolution, and decay, are brought within human-constructed spaces, including the hall and the grave. Further, though we read these texts with a knowledge of their production history (the oral circulation of texts, the preservation of texts in scriptoria by clergy members, the value of a manuscript or gospel book), we lose something of the performative and interactive qualities that some of these texts may have held in their original form. These qualities may have allowed for performance in or interaction with the natural world, linking literary representation of nature with the actual environment.²⁴ This consideration of “performance in place” will demonstrate how the performance of a text links the spatial location of the performer or auditor(s) to a wider network of things and processes.

This environmentally- and place-centered approach explores the interactions that Anglo-Saxons could have had with their natural surroundings in the creation and performance of these texts. Beyond this, this approach illuminates the ways in which Anglo-Saxons understood humanity’s place(s) within an earthly environment, and how that place might change in time and space. Further, this type of environmentally-focused reading of Anglo-Saxon texts brings forward ecological influences on the perception of

²⁴ For example, a charm to defend one’s self against a swarm of bees calls for the speaker to sprinkle dirt under foot and cast gravel into the swarm; another charm for delayed birth calls for the mother to chant while stepping over a grave. While these charms require the speaker to carry out certain actions in the natural world, other texts contain poetic elements that suggest oral performance. Though Anglo-Saxon texts survive in manuscript form, the uses of alliteration and formulaic phrasing in Anglo-Saxon poetry point to the literature’s origins in a Germanic, pre-literate, oral tradition. Andy Orchard observes that “there has developed the growing realization that such formulaic techniques of composition in Anglo-Saxon England were not restricted to verse,” but were used in sermons and other prose works, as well. See Andy Orchard, “Oral Tradition,” in *Reading Old English Texts*, ed. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 109.

human processes of creation and fabrication, including literary composition. Thus, this ecocritique of Anglo-Saxon texts investigates not only the place of the human within the natural world as recorded by the texts, but holds the *texts themselves* to be products of ecology — whether this be the physical process of creating a manuscript from natural materials, or the ways in which the text (whether read or performed) allows for growth and production in a human environment.

In considering both reality and representation, ecocriticism calls for an analysis of a wide cross-section of texts, placing our modern classifications of genres and sub-genres of poetry (heroic, elegiac, gnomic) alongside various forms of prose (homilies and scientific texts) and “performative” pieces such as charms and dialogues. This approach is naturally interdisciplinary, finding source material in archaeological, historical, and environmental reports in order to determine what the reality of Anglo-Saxon environments might have been. By juxtaposing the material evidence of life in Anglo-Saxon England with the textual legacy of this culture, I locate the intersections between real and imagined literary landscapes. At these points of intersection, ambiguities in the Anglo-Saxon conceptions of space and time, familiarity and unfamiliarity, movement and paralysis emerge, complicating traditional readings of home, community, exile, time, and place in Anglo-Saxon culture.

Definitions

Any study of the natural world in medieval texts must first provide a definition of ‘nature’ and must consider the apparent differences between perceptions and denotations of the ‘natural world’ for an Anglo-Saxon audience and a contemporary one. Since our

contemporary association of the word ‘nature’ with the concept of “a subset of all things that are part of the world which isn’t human or affected by humans” did not emerge until after the Enlightenment,²⁵ a simple correlation of terms between modern English and Anglo-Saxon is not a possibility.²⁶ Moreover, even modern definitions of ‘nature’ seem to be in a state of flux, as conventional boundaries between human / animal, nature / culture, and wildness / civilization tend to dissolve when closely examined. Thus, reading texts from an earlier period and culture (such as that of Anglo-Saxon England) requires not only a historicized definition of nature, but also one that is applicable to literary texts which may, on the surface, appear to describe things outside of our modern definition of ‘natural.’

Consulting Jane Roberts’s thesaurus of the Anglo-Saxon language reveals that, of the spectrum of Anglo-Saxon terms comparable to the modern ‘nature,’ the most suitable synonyms emphasize the construction and physicality of the world.²⁷ Terms for the physical world can be divided into groups wherein the primary meaning of each word is ‘earth’ (referring to the world *and* the substance of soil), ‘creation,’ a ‘dwelling place,’ and ‘a surface.’ Several terms defining the world also foreground the physicality of the world in contrast to heaven, for example, the Old English *middangeard* indicates the placement of the world between heaven and hell. It is crucial to note here that instead of suggesting a dichotomy between nature and culture, the Anglo-Saxon lexicon supports a

²⁵ Douglass, “Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature,” 145.

²⁶ Douglass points out the lexicographical problems for the medievalist engaging in ecocritique; she defines a number of terms (including ‘culture,’ ‘nature,’ ‘landscape,’ ‘ecology,’ ‘pastoral,’ ‘wilderness,’ ‘forest,’ and ‘desert’) which either enter English *after* the fourteenth century, or whose current meanings have shifted significantly since then. This vocabulary would allow a scholar of late medieval or Middle English literature to choose the proper terminology and account for the nuances of terms like ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’ now considered separate in their meanings, but, as Douglass shows, not always so. See Douglass, “Ecocriticism,” 142–52.

²⁷ Jane Roberts, Christian Kay and Lynne Grundy, eds., *A Thesaurus of Old English*, 2 vols (London: King’s College London Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1995): I.23.

dichotomy between the physical and ephemeral. Concurrently, the sheer number of terms for ‘world’ that communicate the *createdness* of the world indicate that the actions of God inside and outside of time and space are included in the Anglo-Saxon conception of ‘the world.’²⁸

Neville notes that the Anglo-Saxon perception of the outside world, in which “it is not possible to separate natural from supernatural phenomena,” cannot be brought into line with our contemporary view of ‘nature,’ which we define by excluding supernatural elements, and possibly even human beings.²⁹ The presence of the terms *scaeft* and *gescaeft*, indicating not simply a physical world but a *created* world, necessitate the inclusion of other divine creations — including invisible, spiritual, and demonic presences — in an Anglo-Saxon concept of nature.³⁰ Modern tendencies to define ‘nature’ by separating the natural world from what is “beyond natural” do not help to elucidate the Anglo-Saxon natural world. Instead of defining ‘nature’ here in terms of how it may enclose, define, and challenge human society,³¹ throughout this study, I will regard the “natural world” in the spirit of the Anglo-Saxon *gescaeft*, or *what has been created*. Thus, here the Anglo-Saxon world will be inclusive of all created life,

²⁸ Among the terms found in Anglo-Saxon *poetry* that are comparable to the modern ‘nature,’ many indicate something closer to ‘character’ than ‘environment.’ The terms *cynd(e)*, *gecynd*, *cyn*, and *æðelo* denote one’s ‘nature’ — a being’s essence — while the Anglo-Saxon *woruld*, *scaeft* and *gescaeft* can be translated as ‘world’ or ‘creation.’ See Neville, *Representations*, 2–3.

²⁹ Neville, 1–2. As Robert Bartlett points out, “the concept of ‘nature’ leads naturally to debate, for it is usually defined against something,” whether it be “the artificial, that is, the man-made, with grace, that is, the God-given, with the unnatural, with human society, and so on.” In accord with Neville, Bartlett further traces the first use of the term ‘supernatural’ (*supernaturalis* or *supra naturam*) to the thirteenth century, most often found in the writings of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas; he also cites Peter Lombard’s demarcation of what is *praeter natura* — beyond nature. See Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3 and 7–17.

³⁰ Neville, 2.

³¹ Neville, 18ff.

phenomena, and processes on earth and in the heavens, surely a wider definition than what we might expect, but one more fitting to the culture in question.³²

Chapter Summaries

In chapter two, I establish the Anglo-Saxon hall-structure as the traditional image of “home” for humans, as well as the central point around which the human community thrives. Embarking from this central point, I mine archaeological reports and literary texts, including *Beowulf* and the *Exeter Book* riddles, to find instances of the movement of natural resources and phenomena (animal products, including textiles, horns, skin, meat, and honey, and plant products, including timber, reeds, fruits, and vegetables) from the exterior agricultural environment, through the hall and human society. From this perspective, the concept of “home” widens from the gleaming center of the hall to the community that dwells in and around this center; likewise, the world outside the hall shifts from a place of darkness and chaos to a space intimately interwoven with the economic and cultural processes and exchanges occurring within the Anglo-Saxon settlement. By analyzing the cycling of verse and wisdom through the hall and through generations of people, texts themselves become ecological agents. Too, just as Anglo-Saxon literature at times resists the modern impositions of genre, I demonstrate the fluid

³² Anglo-Saxon scholastics such as Bede, Alcuin, and Alfred would have been informed in their views of natural history by classical texts in circulation, including Pliny (the Elder)’s first-century *Naturalis Historia* (*Natural History*), an encyclopedia work describing celestial, terrestrial, and human phenomena, and Isidore of Seville’s seventh-century *Etymologiae* (*Etymologies*), a compendium inspired by and derived from Pliny’s work. Each of these catalogued astronomical, physical, biological, zoological, botanical, chemical, and geological phenomena and “curiosities,” identifying and setting humans, animals, plants, minerals, and medicines in different categories. Yet they also included human arts and industries (the trivium and quadrivium, along with language, medicine, crafts, and sports, for example) in their compendia, indicating that classical and early medieval views of “nature” were much broader than our definitions of nature today. See Pliny, *Natural History*, ed. and trans. H. Rackham, 10 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938); also Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, trans. Stephen A. Barney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

movement of resources from natural settings to human settings, breaking down the long-observed polarity between what is “natural” and what is “human.”

Moving beyond the walls of the hall, the third chapter address the poetic impulse to impose order upon the world, and the ambiguities and circular motions inherent in the Anglo-Saxon notions of place and time. In this section, I explore the contradictions in texts which seem to lock individuals, objects, and animals “in place,” while simultaneously presenting the state of existence on earth as one of change and movement.³³ Drawing from the materialist ontologies of Jane Bennett and Bill Brown, specifically their concepts of “thing-power,” I analyze processes of change among living and inanimate things as they move from place to place, forming new identities in relation to the networks of things around them. While much of Anglo-Saxon poetry serves as a reminder of the transient, temporary nature of earthly life, gnomic texts such as the “Maxims,” *Exeter Book* riddles, and Creation lyrics establish an expectation of the cyclical recurrence of seasons, as well as an acceptance that change and decay is followed by renewal and return. Thus, finding one’s place in the world is not solely a matter of geographical and social location; the poetry establishes that our journey through space is inextricably linked to a journey through time.

The next two chapters dissect the construction of exile in Anglo-Saxon texts, a state of existence in which individuals fall out of place and, in some cases, out of time. In chapter four, I bring an ecocritical perspective to familiar poems of exile — “The Wanderer,” “The Wife’s Lament,” and “The Seafarer” — to demonstrate how the exile’s

³³ Cf. Sarah Stanbury’s reference to contemporary author (and environmentalist) Barbara Kingsolver’s literary use of the ecological concept of the web as a force which “pulls mate to mate,” but which also ensures that all human choices and movements have an impact (even imperceptible) on other organisms, places, and processes. Stanbury, “EcoChaucer,” 1.

lack of fitness in his or her new environment (on the water or in the wood) mirror and compound the psychological torment of exile. While separation from home and family is certainly a dominant and painful aspect of exile, the individual's displacement to an environment in which he or she has no place or function is of paramount importance in these texts. In "The Wanderer" and "The Wife's Lament," texts that construct exile as an experience of concurrent motion and stillness, time and timelessness, this experience of exile is placed in a landscape wherein time progresses and ecological processes continue in normal fashion. As evidenced by the worldly ruin of "The Wanderer" and depictions of summer growth in "The Wife's Lament" and "The Seafarer," these environments decay and erode, change and bloom. These texts reveal the ambiguous experience for the exile in that he or she is constantly moving, forever circling around the communities he or she previously inhabited, yet psychologically and socially paralyzed in place and in time.

Chapter five interrogates the idea of the Anglo-Saxon wilderness, commonly described using the term *westen*, or 'desert,' and its marginality as compared to cultivated or claimed land. I trace various meanings for "deserted" Anglo-Saxon land, including land that is overlaid with the iconic significance of the biblical desert, in poetry and legal documents like the eleventh-century *Domesday Book*. Wilderness and "desert" intersect in the actual landscape of the East Anglian fens, a location of environmental mutability and rich produce, and home of the exiled Saint Guthlac. For Guthlac and his fellow fens-dwellers, we observe a comparable blend of impediments to and allowances for motility, caused by an alternately wet and dry environment. Moreover, the difficult and changeable environments seemingly "reserved" for exiles are at times broken open and even settled

by humans, suggesting that (in some special and supernatural cases) even the *westen* and the *meaclond* (borderland) can be subject to change and reclamation. In Guthlac's hagiography, he settles in the deserted fens and miraculously reorients the land and its resident animals around himself, creating a new "center" in this marginal space. By colonizing the fens, Guthlac himself becomes a human paradox: the exile at home. Unique among the various Anglo-Saxon exiles, Guthlac is both legendary spiritual leader *and* historical figure, inhabiting both an actual geographical location (the Crowland fens) and a metaphorical destination (the *westen*). While the text testifies to his transformation of the metaphorical desert into a paradise, the historicity of his life and the geographical grounding of his miracles remind us that the *wasta / fen* remains on the map, as enigmatic as ever.

My final chapter completes the analysis of change and renewal begun in chapter two. I begin chapter six with an examination of the nature of death as an absolute end for the body as well as a release for the soul. Anglo-Saxon homilies, prayers, and spiritual poetry break down typical separations between "human" and "nature," for their explicit descriptions of bodily decay signal the fluidity between the boundaries of the body and of the earth. Additionally, for both body and soul, death paradoxically provides a return home. The homilies and prayers ironically envision the grave as a final "house" for the body, with dirt and worms as its new companions, as the human is swallowed by the ground; meanwhile, the soul flees to its eternal *epel* (homeland) of Heaven. In the final section of this chapter, we see how the cyclical structure of time suggested both by Bede and by agricultural and numerous gnomic texts collides with the conventional reading of the Anglo-Saxon world-view of earth's impending and inevitable decay. Moreover,

several of the Anglo-Saxon riddles suggest a connection in the cycle from decay and destruction to earthly creation; while *Exeter Book* Riddles 40 and 66 both call on the audience to consider the height, depth, breadth, and variety of “Creation,” Riddle 40 suggests the process of *destruction* as a part of creation itself.³⁴ Given the variety of verbs and actions attributed to creation (at least in Riddle 40), an audience would have to consider “creation” as an active and changing entity, and not just a landscape and its inhabitants.

This exploration of Anglo-Saxon ecology and place thus follows the circular structure of time envisioned by Bede, starting from the “oikos” or communal home of the mead-hall in the first chapter of analysis, and arriving, in the final chapter, at the paired and antithetical homes of the body in the grave and the heavenly, eternal home of the soul. Throughout this study, my application of ecocriticism and interdisciplinary, place-based perspectives to England’s earliest texts reveals that, while Anglo-Saxon literature was in part informed by the literary conventions of scriptural and didactic texts and oral tradition, these texts should *also* be read in the context of a wider consideration of the Anglo-Saxon environment and economy. This environmentally-focused approach and wide scope of texts produces new information about the complex and ambiguous experience of finding one’s place in an Anglo-Saxon landscape.

What is revealed when we apply these green lenses to Anglo-Saxon literature is that, despite being composed in largely monastic settings and being informed by a strongly Christian and hierarchical worldview, Anglo-Saxon texts of nearly all genres acknowledge (implicitly, at times) a wider system of exchange and relation between

³⁴ Riddles 40 and 66 according to Krapp and Dobbie’s order in *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*. I use the ASPR numbering of the riddles throughout.

humans and fellow inhabitants (living and non-living) of this middle-earth. Though convention holds that the most central relationship in any of these texts is between the individual and God, reading for “nature” in Anglo-Saxon literature reveals a plethora of non-human characters and things, speaking themselves into existence, insisting upon their own places within the world and forming their identities in relation to each other, to space, and to time. This critical lens also brings new depth and complexity to the poetry of exile, drawing our gaze to a vibrant and changing natural world that continues its cycles of growth and death despite human plaintiffs who would focus our attention on their own placelessness. Finally, this green method of reading reveals that, despite conventional scholarly beliefs that Anglo-Saxon culture placed all value in the eternal, timeless, and spiritual life, feeling humanity exiled from the true heavenly homeland, Anglo-Saxon poetry simultaneously insists that home — the place from which we all begin and to which we all return — is *also* found in our physical and temporal bondage to earth.

Historically, critiques and analyses of nature in medieval texts (including Anglo-Saxon writings) tend to emphasize literary uses of nature as vessel, as metaphor, as map or mirror, and as part of a literary convention. Certain of these texts, including the elegies, riddles, sermons, dialogues and gnomic utterances, and charms call for a reevaluation of contemporary ways of reading nature in Anglo-Saxon texts. These texts reveal fluidity and movement between humankind and the natural world, a recognition of the interchange between the two conventionally separate spaces of “culture” and “nature,” and an inquisitiveness about the possibility to locate the “human” outside of the boundaries of civilization. Using the tenets of ecological criticism, I focus attention on

the biological and technological processes of change, transformation, and the exchange of energy and wisdom in these texts. Since an ecological reading is, by nature, an interdisciplinary one, my readings also juxtapose information about the physical environment and realities of living in it with representations of that experience in literature. Moreover, by uniting ecocritical, place-based, and materialist methodologies, I am able to illuminate various kinds of ecologies represented in Anglo-Saxon literature: the social ecology of the hall and community, ecologies of “things,” ecologies of exile, and the ecology of death and rebirth. This examination of Anglo-Saxon literature and the environment in which it was produced yields new foci and information about textual creation and the human perspective in Anglo-Saxon England, the (moving) places of the human and non-human, and the omnipresence of ecological processes in all facets of earthly existence.

CHAPTER TWO

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

As many ecocritics will point out (and any scholar of classical languages would affirm), the genesis of the prefix ‘eco-’ can be traced to the Greek *oikos*, or ‘house,’ ‘dwelling,’ or ‘habitation.’ Perhaps paradoxically for individuals who might consider the home to be an enclosure or shelter *away from* the natural world, an exploration of the ecological qualities of any literature should logically begin at the point wherein the writer dwells, or, *in the home*. For the Anglo-Saxon, we might begin with words such as ‘hus,’ (house) or ‘sele’ (hall), using the image of the hall as a starting point from which to explore the place of the human in his or her environment, yet the concept of *ham* (home) must be understood to transcend physical constructions and boundaries. As Nicholas Howe has it, Anglo-Saxons “tended to define home more through the enduring presence of land than the transient existence of buildings.”¹ Spiraling outward from a central and physical place of dwelling, an individual encounters a network of people, objects, organisms, and ideas that move around the environment and through the home itself, disrupting the idea that this human dwelling is separate and apart from the world outside of it.

For a student of literature, the multiple meanings for the term ‘dwell’ are too much to pass over at this point; literally, an individual may dwell in a certain physical

¹ Nicholas Howe, “Home and Landscape,” in *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Cultural Geography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 47.

area, yet he or she may dwell on ideas, places, or objects far afield.² This suggested division between the seats of the physical body and the spirit or mind is discernible in various poems and texts of the Anglo-Saxons, specifically at times wherein the poetic *persona* has been cast out of his or her physical home, yet continues to dwell upon the loss of and return to this place of belonging, or when death has overtaken the individual and the spirit hastens to flee from the physical realm. These moments will be investigated at length in later chapters; the first task here must be to discern what defines the Anglo-Saxon *oikos* (if such a linguistic borrowing could be acceptable!), a physical *and* mental dwelling, based on the physical remnants that history has left us, and the more ephemeral, textual remnants of literary creation.

Cosmic Hall, Communal Home

þæt healreced	Him on mod bearn
medoærn micel	hatan wolde
þonne ylde bearn	men gewyrcean
ond þær on innan	æfre gefrunon
geongum ond ealdum	eall gedælan
[...]	swylc him god sealde
He beot ne aleh	beagas dælde
sinc æt symle	Sele hlifade
heah ond horngeap	

(It came to him in mind he would command a hall, men to build a great mead-hall which the children of men should hear of forever, and therein to share out all to young and old such as God gave to him [...] He did not leave this vow unfulfilled, dealt out rings, treasure at the feast. The hall towered, high and wide-gabled) (ll. 67b–72; 80–82a)³

² For further discussion of “dwelling” in relation to mysticism, enclosure, and landscape, see Patricia Dailey, “Questions of Dwelling in Anglo-Saxon Poetry and Medieval Mysticism: Inhabiting Landscape, Body, and Mind,” *New Medieval Literatures* 8 (2006): 175–214.

³ *Beowulf*, in Elliot van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 6, *Beowulf and Judith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953). All quotations from the Anglo-Saxon come from the ASPR editions, except where otherwise indicated. Translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

The high and wide-gabled hall, with its interior walls ornamented with gold-worked swords and shields and lined with heavy, hand-carved mead-benches, its chambers lit by blazing hearth-fires and ringing with the clatter of cups, cookware, and mead-sated voices, stands as a central image of life and community in Germanic literature. Looking merely to the literature left to us from Anglo-Saxon England (including the feasting scenes from the Old English epic, *Beowulf*, and the laments over lost drinking companions in the poetic texts known to us as “The Ruin” and “The Wanderer”), the literary *wine-reced* — the wine-hall — provides a venue for poetic descriptions of social gatherings, feasting, drinking, and entertainment. These conventions stem from wider Germanic culture and literature, in which the idealized hall is a central fixture of civilization and group identity; the actual hall-structure as well as its idealized cultural image likely migrated to Anglo-Saxon England along with the Germanic cultural groups (Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Frisians) who populated the island in the fifth and sixth centuries, after the Romans and indigenous British population held sway.⁴ So ingrained is this hall-image in Anglo-Saxon and the wider Germanic literary culture that even Creation is poetically expressed as a “hope-filled heavenly building,”⁵ and the created universe comprehended as a “world-hall in the midst of the ocean, roofed by the heavens.”⁶ In the legendary first poem in the Anglo-Saxon vernacular, divinely gifted to the humble shepherd Cædmon and recorded by the historian and cleric Bede, the

⁴ As Howe points out, the migration and adaptation of Germanic building techniques to England forged a connection between the immediate “home” of Anglo-Saxon soil and the historic “home” of the continent. See Howe, “Home and Landscape,” 49–51.

⁵ Jennifer Neville, *Representations of Nature in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 146. Neville refers to the poetic account of Creation provided in the Anglo-Saxon “Genesis.”

⁶ Neville, *Representations*, 146.

shepherd calls upon the gathered monastic community to rejoice in the architectural creation of earth:

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard
 meotodes meahte ond his modgeþanc [...]
 He ærest sceop eorðan bearnum
 heofon to hrofe halig scyppend

(Now let us praise the protector of the kingdom of heaven, the Creator's might and his understanding [...] He first created earth for the children of men, heaven as roof, Holy Creator.) (ll. 1–2, 5–6)⁷

In his characterization of “heofon to hrofe” (heaven as roof), Cædmon communicates the metaphor of the world as a great hall, constructed by the “frea ælmihtig” (Lord Almighty). Bede's history also preserves one of the most famous metaphors to survive from Anglo-Saxon prose texts: the life of a human being conceived as “the swift flight of a lone sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thanes.”⁸ Insomuch as the created world and the time-span of a human life are conceptualized in Anglo-Saxon literature by the image of the hall, the earthly “home” of the Anglo-Saxon might also be represented by this architectural image.

⁷ Selected lines from “Cædmon's Hymn,” recorded by Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 215–18.

⁸ Kevin Crossley-Holland, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 159. The original simile occurs in book 2, chapter 13 of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. This “hall-centric” worldview is comparable to the modern Icelandic conception of the human's relationship to the landscape; Icelandic literary culture stems from the same Germanic root that produced Anglo-Saxon culture. Due to the Norse-Icelandic placement of the inhabited world of “middle earth” — *Miðgarðr* in Old Norse, comparable to the Anglo-Saxon term, *Middangeard* — inside the ring of the sea and separate from the realms of giants and chaos, a perception of social order emerged which positioned *innangarðs* in opposition to *utangarðs*, as Kirsten Hastrup explains, “meaning ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the farm or fence. The fence not only separated the farmstead from the wilderness, and kinsmen and friends from potential enemies, but more generally also the inviolable personal social space from the uncontrolled space of spirits and evil beyond it.” See Kirsten Hastrup, *A Place Apart: An Anthropological Study of the Icelandic World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 29. Though in her study, Hastrup analyzes the effect of mythology on contemporary views of Icelandic social space, the common origin of the two cultures, their shared linguistic concept of earth as a “middle space,” and the agrarian nature of each culture justifies a comparison between Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland and Norway.

A look at the most famous of Anglo-Saxons poems, *Beowulf*, from the Cotton Vitellius A.xv manuscript, provides further evidence of this worldview. Within the first hundred lines of the poem, a *scop* in Hrothgar's hall sings a story of Creation: "se ælmihtiga eorðan worhte, / wlitebeorhtne wang, swa wæter bebugeð, / gesette sigehreþig sunnan ond monan / leoman to leohte landbuendum" (the Almighty made the earth, a light-gleaming field, thus surrounded with water; set as a victory sign the sun and moon, lamps as light for land-dwellers) (ll. 92–95). Just as the poem earlier records Hrothgar's construction of the hall Heorot, here too the world is poetically conceived as the construction of a great Lord.⁹

Thus, Anglo-Saxon literary conventions developed "the hall" as macrocosm and microcosm of life in this world.¹⁰ Central though this image may be to Anglo-Saxon settlements and literary culture, we are faced with the question of whether the hall defined what was "home" to Anglo-Saxons. In his exploration of the concept of "home" in Anglo-Saxon culture, Howe observes that

The surviving texts of Anglo-Saxon England pay little explicit attention to home as a physical structure, a building with walls and a roof, a setting of family life. The structure that appears repeatedly and centrally in the heroic poetry of the period is the royal hall, the site of public ceremony where lord and retainers—and even some women—gather to celebrate life and thereby hold off the darkness that lies around them. But a hall in Old English poetry is not exactly a home [...]¹¹

⁹ For comparison, see also Fabienne L. Michelet's analysis of different tropes of Creation (including the trope of Creation as an architectural activity) in *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ In medieval philosophical and medical theory, the "microcosm" of the universe is the human body, which reflects the compositional elements of the world in bodily humors, as well as the world's processes, ages, and structures. In this case, however, Anglo-Saxon poetry depicts both the earthly mead-hall and the Created world itself in similar terms, thus suggesting that the earthly hall is microcosm of the "world-hall."

¹¹ Nicholas Howe, "Looking for Home in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Home and Homelessness in the Medieval and Renaissance World*, ed. Nicholas Howe (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 144.

One need only look to the description of the quintessential Anglo-Saxon literary hall — the grand structure of Heorot from *Beowulf* — to see that Howe is partially correct, for this building is more a symbol of Hrothgar’s power and wealth than a shelter for his people.¹² The king intends that the hall be his center, “ond þær on innan eall gedælan / geongum ond ealdum, swylc him god sealde” (and therein to distribute all to young and old, as God entrusted to him) (ll. 71–72), and upon the hall’s construction, “he beot ne aleh, beagas dælde, / sinc æt symle” (he did not give up his vow, distributed rings, treasure at the feast) (ll. 80–81a). Beyond functioning as a space wherein Hrothgar’s word is law and his power is signified by the dispersal of his wealth, Heorot is meant to provide a venue for gathering. The king cannot demonstrate his generosity without recipients, nor can the exchange carry any meaning without an audience. Moreover, the mere mention of “symle,” (nom. *symbol*) indicating a table or a feast, indicates the role of ritual events (feasts, celebrations, among others) in building and maintaining a community.¹³ Likewise, Howe acknowledges the hall as a space for “public ceremony,” where individuals “gather to celebrate life,” even if he questions its viability as a “home.”

The most crucial function for the hall, whether as a literary image or in physical reality, is as a space for community-building and group identity. Hugh Magennis calls the hall “the focus and centre of people’s communal being” in Old English poetry and, observing the metaphorical dominance of the hall over the Anglo-Saxon landscape, accounts for this structure’s long shadow: “Other types of buildings are mentioned

¹² See specifically lines 67–83. Further, inasmuch as one characteristic of a “home” might be a sleeping-space, Hrothgar’s retainers go to sleep after the feast within the “high house” (*heah hus*), likely denoting Heorot. They do not seek other rest-spaces until Grendel visits and ravages the hall. See *Beowulf*, lines 115–20.

¹³ The role of ritual in the hall has been explored in detail elsewhere; see Scott Brown Lowry’s doctoral dissertation, “Ritual and Politics: Power Negotiations at Anglo-Saxon Feasts” (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2003).

(comparatively rarely) in Old English poetry — temples, churches, hermit cells, and so on — but, apart from individual riddles, there is hardly a poem in Old English literature in which the concept of the hall and of life in the hall is not at least alluded to.”¹⁴ In poems emphasizing the hall’s absence, what is most keenly felt by the speaking persona are the joys of community. Within the poetic text “The Wanderer,” the titular *eardstapa* wonders what has become of “seledreamas” (hall-joys) (l. 93), and, “seledreorig” (hall-sorrowful) (l. 25), he asks “hwær ic feor oþþe neah findan meahte, / þone þe in meoduhealle mine wisse / oþþe mec freondlease frefran wolde, / weman mid wynnum” (where I far or near might find that treasure-giver who in his mead-hall might be familiar with my [treasure-giver] or would comfort me, friendless, to entertain me with delights) (ll. 26–29). Here, the wanderer’s words make clear the association between the hall and the delights of society and basic human relationships enjoyed by those who have a place in the hall.

Even in a text of more sacred content, “The Dream of the Rood,” which takes the Crucifixion and earthly wanderings of the soul as its subject matter, the soul’s ultimate reunion with the heavenly kingdom of God is cast in the more heroic terms of a feast in a great hall. The speaking persona is comforted by a vision of the afterlife “þær is blis mycel, / dream on heofonum, þær is dryhtnes folc / geseted to symle” (where there is great bliss, joy in heaven, where the Lord’s people are seated at the feast) (ll. 139–41).¹⁵

Though the image of the hall does not appear here, the *symbol* — the feast — does.

Magennis points out that the community of Christian souls “is expressed in imagery

¹⁴ Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 35.

¹⁵ “The Dream of the Rood” is contained in the Vercelli manuscript. The standard edition of poems in this collection is George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 2, *The Vercelli Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932).

which suggests the world of the secular hall with its feasting and fellowship among warriors.”¹⁶ Across the worlds of heroic and sacred poetry, hall-life is thus synonymous with joy, feasts, light, and companionship. Though not all mentions of a hall evoke the grandiose structure and royal rituals of *Beowulf*, the shared *seledreamas* of these structures involve relationships between friends or between lord and retainer.

As imagined in *Beowulf*, the “healærna mæst” (greatest of halls) (l. 78) overshadows all other halls; it is larger than life, “an idealized version of [the hall]. The thing is represented as it is in itself, but as the choicest example of its kind, transfigured by the burnishing power of poetry.”¹⁷ Though we must acknowledge that this (and likely other poetically-constructed halls in the Anglo-Saxon tradition) are imagined, and that “no great insight is required for one to perceive that what the poet depicts, always with verisimilitude, is life as it might have been lived or should have been lived, not life as it actually was lived at any given time or place,”¹⁸ the celebrated mead-hall in Anglo-Saxon culture is “survived” by remnants of actual halls in England (and comparable ruins in Scandinavia). Perhaps less finely decorated and generally smaller than the great halls of literary tradition, the tangible halls of Anglo-Saxon England are evidence of centralized community spaces while the great halls of poetry functioned in part to value and glorify the exchanges that occurred within those spaces. By exploring how both “conceptual” and tangible halls (and other structures) were composed or constructed to further the survival of Anglo-Saxon communities, we can understand that the ecological value of

¹⁶ Magennis, *Images*, 3.

¹⁷ John D. Niles, ed., *Beowulf and Lejre* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 176.

¹⁸ Niles, *Beowulf and Lejre*, 177. See also Walter Pohl, “The *Regia* and the *Hring*: Barbarian Places of Power,” in *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Mayke De Jong and Frans Theuws (Boston: Brill, 2001), 439–66.

home in Anglo-Saxon England is dependent upon finding and protecting one's place in a community.

Limitations of Mixed Literary and Archaeological Studies

Though we can mine these literatures for mentions of this setting, the reality of the hall in the history and archaeology of any Northern European region is more elusive. First, there are limits to what can be excavated and what excavation can reveal, for “most Anglo-Saxon villages underlie modern towns, villages and hamlets, [and] it is seldom possible to determine accurately how long any single structure lasted, to be able to assess how many buildings are strictly contemporary.”¹⁹ Remains from Germanic halls on the European continent generally take the form of “sunken-featured buildings” (SFBs), which may have been used for holding livestock, general storage, or for human occupation.²⁰ In a typical settlement, excavators may find one or more “hall-type buildings” surrounded by various smaller SFBs.²¹ Whether looking at the remains of a hall on the continent or one uncovered in England, these buildings shared the common features of “a large central open space, ideal for use as an assembly room” as well as one or more smaller chambers at either or both ends of the structure, “which may be interpreted as a private room, a reception area or storage room.”²² Remains from

¹⁹ Stephen Pollington, *The Mead-Hall: The Feasting Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England* (Norfolk, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2003), 66.

²⁰ Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 69.

²¹ Scandinavian settlements (which share this common Germanic heritage) of the late Iron Age (5th to 8th centuries CE) evidence the development of the hall, “a separate space dedicated to certain specialized pursuits, including drinking and, one assumes, high-level social interaction but not cooking or animal husbandry,” growing from “what was in earlier periods a single multi-purpose farm building where humans and animals lived in partitioned quarters under the same roof.” See Niles, *Beowulf and Lejre*, 185.

²² Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 71. See also Philip Dixon, “Secular Architecture,” in *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture 600–900*, ed. L. Webster and Janet Backhouse (London: British Museum Press, 1991), 67–70, esp. 70, and Helena Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements: The Archaeology of Rural*

settlements may provide suggestions as to the size, composition, and content of “typical” Anglo-Saxon halls, yet this information is derived from “shadows” of the former structures. In late Iron Age and early medieval wooden buildings,

the weight-bearing components of a structure were anchored in the subsurface with posts sunk deep into the ground. It is the traces of these posts—or, it may be, the holes made for them (the post-holes)—that today, once the top layer of soil is removed, appear as dark areas in the lighter colored subsoil. These areas of darker fill are literally only the shadows, handed down to posterity, of what once were houses, stables, shops, and so on.²³

Oftentimes these material remnants — or shadows thereof — have been paired with literary remnants to create a fuller portrait of Anglo-Saxon culture inside and outside of the hall. Critics such as John Niles warn against “circular reasoning” in this strategy, arguing that “if archaeology looks to a literary work [...] to flesh out its mute data, and if at the same time, literary scholars look to archaeology to fill in the details, [...] then there is a large chance that what will result from these discussions will be a self-confirming conceptual framework that, while not necessarily faulty, cannot bear much weight.”²⁴ Moreover, archaeology may reveal “hall-spaces” in several types of structures, as “by ‘hall’ can be meant either an individual building or no more than a room in an ordinary farm house, one that is used on certain occasions as a hall.”²⁵ In this investigation, however, the ultimate goal is not to reconstruct the reality of life in an Anglo-Saxon hall; instead, the hall and the home — both imagined or actual settings — are explored as sites where communities are built and ecological cycles occur. Remnants and remains can be viewed as evidence of the actions of humans within an environment, not necessarily as

Communities in North-West Europe, 400–900 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14–51, esp. 15 and 22–23.

²³ Niles, *Beowulf and Lejre*, 39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

pieces needing to be “reassembled.” Furthermore, whereas critics caution against using literary works as passive mirrors for a lost reality, or to “flesh out” what may be missing from archaeological reports, literature assumes a more crucial role when we view texts as active resources in the social and ecological processes occurring within Anglo-Saxon society.

A Guest is in the Hall

The Old Norse *Hávamál*, a poetic compendium of maxims, arcane dialogues, and “magical” knowledge, begins with a striking image of an individual standing at the threshold of a hall; as he steps across the partition, the text provides a virtual tour around this communal building, complete with advice as to the proper behaviors for guest and host within the standard Germanic communal building.²⁶

Gáttir allar, áðr gangi fram,
 um skoðask skyli,
 um skygnask skyli;
 Því at óvíst er at vita, hvar óvinir
 sitja á fleti fyrir.
 Gefendr heilir! gestr er inn kominn [...]

Before walking forward from all doors, one should look around, should look about, for it is unclear to know where enemies sit above the floor. Give greetings, a guest is come in [...] (ll. 1–7)²⁷

Taking a metaphorical page from *Hávamál*, we begin a tour of the Anglo-Saxon hall by stepping through the doorway. From the door, situated at the mid-point of one of

²⁶ Though this text from the *Poetic Edda* comes to us from the Icelandic thirteenth-century Codex Regius manuscript (and is therefore removed from Anglo-Saxon England by centuries and an ocean), both Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon texts share a common Germanic cultural and linguistic heritage (not to mention the architecture of the hall itself), thus the comparison here provides a useful vantage point from which to explore the idealized Anglo-Saxon hall.

²⁷ “Hávamál,” in *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, 5th ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1983), 17–44. Translation is my own.

the structure's long sides, a hall-guest would look to the left and right and see that the timbered wall extends perhaps fifteen or twenty meters on each side and expands a bit as it approaches the mid-point.²⁸ The structure of the hall would be punctuated by numerous evenly spaced vertical pillars; these columns support the walls and even partition some areas of the internal space.²⁹ The walls themselves would be constructed of timber planks or bisected logs, though other timber halls may have had panels of wattle and daub as walls.³⁰

Moving past the doorposts and overhead timber beam demarcating the doorway,³¹ as a visitor steps into the grand space of the hall, luxuries such as furniture and wall-hangings might come into view. The guest may take notice of a prominent seat within the hall, the *giefstol*, the place of highest authority. The *giefstol* earned its name as a seat from which the lord might hear cases and complaints, render judgments, greet guests and award gifts;³² in the text of *Beowulf*, it is this seat from which Hrothgar distributes rewards to his followers and this seat which the interloper Grendel is mysteriously unable to approach.

²⁸ Using one example of an excavated settlement to give an indication of size, a site at Cheddar in Somerset has yielded evidence of long buildings constructed from timber and dating to the ninth century (the settlement likely lasted several centuries beyond that). A "hall complex" on site consisted of five timber buildings, with the "main hall" measuring 24 meters by 5.5 meters at the ends (the width increased to 6 meters at the mid-point of the building). A comparable structure (referred to as "House IV") found at Lejre in Denmark dwarfs even the hall at Cheddar; this building would have measured 48 meters in length with a width of 8 meters at its ends and 11.5 meters at its midpoint. See Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 93; C. J. Arnold, *An Archaeology of the Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (London: Routledge, 1997); also Niles, *Beowulf and Lejre*, 42.

²⁹ In the case of House IV at Lejre, gaps in rows of interior post-holes suggest that the structure may have been divided into separately-functioning rooms. In addition to this, the hall at Lejre provides evidence for an interior cellar (2.5 meters by 2 meters, at a depth of half a meter) at the south-east corner of the structure. See Niles, *Beowulf and Lejre*, 42–45.

³⁰ C.P. Biggam discusses the Anglo-Saxon and Latin terminology specific to architecture; she provides examples of archaeological finds wherein Anglo-Saxon plank, timber, and plaster walls have been located. See Biggam, "Grund to Hrof: Aspects of the Old English Semantics of Building and Architecture," *Architectural History* 45 (2002): 53–54.

³¹ See Biggam, "Grund to Hrof," 55.

³² Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 81.

Mead-benches provided an area for the hall-celebrants to consume drink and enjoy their community; in the literary tradition, benches carried additional weight as indicators of a lord's ability to assemble and provide for a group of warriors. As Pollington observes, Scyld Scefing's removal of mead-benches from enemy halls in *Beowulf* "signified the leader's having overcome his neighbours and deprived them of their group identity. A lack of mead-benches implies a lack of warriors to sit along them, and therefore military defeat and societal annihilation or absorption."³³ Movable tables were also features of the Anglo-Saxon hall; the fact that the flat top and trestle legs of these tables could be disassembled suggests that the hall could serve not only as a feasting-hall but also as a place of assembly, a courtroom, a workroom, and a sleeping-space.³⁴

Behind the furniture of benches and *giefstol*, the visitor might observe woven tapestries adorning the wall. In several Anglo-Saxon wills, the writer bequeaths a *healwahrift* (hall-tapestry) to inheritors, as well as other high-status items such as *sethrægl* (seat-coverings), "beddreafes mid wahryfte 7 mid hoppscytan" (bed-clothing with tapestry and curtain), and "anes heallreafes. 7 anes burreafes. mid beodreafe. 7 mid eallum hræglum swa ðerto gebyreð" (a tapestry for a hall and tapestry for a chamber, together with a table-cover and with all the cloths which go with it).³⁵ Though not all halls may have been thus decorated, these mentions of tapestries in two of Anglo-Saxon

³³ Ibid., 85.

³⁴ Ibid.; see also Doreen Yarwood, *The English Home: A Thousand Years of Furnishing and Decoration* (London: Batsford, 1979), 14.

³⁵ See the wills of Wynflæd and Wulfwaru in Dorothy Whitelock, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Wills* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 10–15 and 62–65. Other high-status items, including buffalo-horns, variously ornamented cups and goblets, chests, linens, curtains and cloths, are mentioned in these two wills. It is interesting to note that these particular wills are left by women, indicating the ability of some Anglo-Saxon women to accumulate and distribute wealth; further, the specific objects mentioned here might all be classified as "household items," suggesting that the maintenance and economy of the household fell into the woman's purview. These translations by Whitelock.

England's surviving wills suggest that at least some of these structures were ornamented (and insulated) in a grand manner. Further, these documents indicate that the craftwork displayed in the hall was part of the exchange and transfer of material within a community and through generations. Just as the literary *giefstol* signifies the power of a ruler's ability to provide compensation to his community, so the accoutrements and decor represent and, indeed, are part of a system of exchanges and transfer of wealth between individuals and generations.³⁶

As the visitor's gaze lingers on tapestry-covered walls, he or she sees that they are illuminated by the largest source of light in the room — the hearth. The prompt mentions of fire and warmth in *Hávamál* (firewood appears in the second stanza, and the warmth of the fire in the third) indicate the centrality of the hearth within the structure of the hall *and* in the provision of hospitality, for “elds er þörf / þeim inn er kominn / ok á kné kalinn” (Fire is needed for he who is come in and has cold knees) (ll. 15–17). The functions of the hearth would have been to provide heat and light to the hall, as well as serving as a place for food-preparation. Though Anglo-Saxon poetry famously lacks any mention of the consumption of food during a feast,³⁷ the poetic record tells us that Anglo-Saxons would have imbibed ale (*ealu*), fermented drinks, including cider (*beor*), mead (*meodu*), and wine (*win*),³⁸ water, and various milk products, among other drinks available to the population.³⁹ This sharing of drinks in the hall is a common trope in Anglo-Saxon and wider Germanic literature; in fact, Magennis and Stephen Pollington

³⁶ For further descriptions of furnishings accounted for in Anglo-Saxon and other Northern European literatures and archaeological sites, see Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*, 40–44.

³⁷ For a detailed study of the prevalence of drinking and lack of eating in Anglo-Saxon literature, see Hugh Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999).

³⁸ Ann Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink: Production, Processing, Distribution and Consumption* (Norfolk, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2006), 417.

³⁹ Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 128.

suggest that the Modern English concept of “feast” encompasses two types of event in Anglo-Saxon society: a ritualized, formal “feast” and a more informal, convivial “drinking party.”⁴⁰ Magennis further demonstrates the communal importance of the drink, observing that “drinking—but not eating—has a ritual and confirmatory function with regard to social relationship. Drinking is drinking together.”⁴¹ Notably, each of the above-mentioned terms for alcoholic drinks tends to occur in compounds with terms for “hall” and “seat” (*sele*, *heall*, and *benc*, respectively).⁴²

Whether a gathering for the consumption of food or the sharing of a mead-cup, the feast itself could be regarded as a ritualistic event, “with religious, aesthetic, legal and societal ramifications” including the demonstration of the lord / ruler / chieftain’s power to provide food, good company, and protection for his community.⁴³ As the seat of the feast (or drinking-party), the hall sits at the heart of social, political, and economic interchange in Anglo-Saxon communities.⁴⁴ This image of the hall sitting “surrounded by ploughlands, woodland and *feld* (open field),” is identified by Pollington as an example of the archaeological concept of the “central place” — a focal point for the administrative, religious, legal, social, and economic activity of a society.⁴⁵ As such, we

⁴⁰ According to Pollington, translators often settle on the Modern English term “feast” to describe what actually were two separate concepts in Old English culture and language: “the first of these is the formal, ritualised *symbol* with its gift-giving and opportunities for performance, speech-making, verse-recital, exchanging praise and honour. Another term designated as a ‘feast’ is *gebeorscipe* which may be a much less structured, informal event involving drinking, merry-making and conviviality.” See Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 31.

⁴¹ Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites*, 11.

⁴² Ibid. Examples of these compounds include *beorsele* (beer-hall), *medoheall* (mead-hall) and *medubenc* (mead-bench).

⁴³ Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink*, 409.

⁴⁴ As Pollington has it, “the concept of the hall as the community’s centre remained constant to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, even though by the ninth century there were new social and economic forms of secular community—trading posts, defensive strongholds, market towns. Likewise, the development of the ecclesiastical structure and network grew more complex throughout the period, yet still the hall is invoked as the ideal of human togetherness in religious as in secular verse.” See Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 111.

understand the hall as a point around (and through) which the processes (both ecological and social) of life must move. Proceeding outward from this beating heart of a community, we expect to find evidence of the agricultural resources and processes that would have supported a vibrant social center, and evidence that may have escaped preservation in the poetic and literary records.

Hall and Home, Farm and Field

Moving outward from the hall, one encounters the agricultural settlements and communities whose inhabitants, resources, labor, and ecologies provided the economic and social basis for life inside the hall. These settlements varied considerably over time and space, as “Anglo-Saxon England” comprised varied ecosystems and environments spread over 130,000+ square km (50,000+ square miles) as well as a timeline that stretched from (roughly) the sixth through eleventh centuries. Moreover, variations in the wealth and resources of each settlement, as well as cycles of architectural development and decay, ensured that not every settlement would have boasted a hall or even one large, centralized meeting-space. However, even in sites where a great hall is not present, archaeological evidence suggests that Anglo-Saxons would have shared living spaces and depended upon each others’ labors for survival in a largely agrarian society.

Following the aforementioned migration to / invasion of post-Roman Britain by Germanic tribes in the fifth and sixth centuries, the landscape most likely saw the development of extant agricultural practices and expansion into unsettled or uncultivated land. Settlements comprising several (i.e., between one and ten) farmsteads may have

formed randomly or have been built upon existing Romano-British foundations.⁴⁶ In terms of archaeological evidence from these settlements, we must be aware that, due to the organic nature of many of the materials used in construction (i.e., wood, clay, plant material), few remnants of construction have remained to the modern day.⁴⁷ Despite this dearth of evidence, though, archaeologists have sketched rough estimates of the types of buildings and arrangements found in these settlements.⁴⁸

Looking to the Anglo-Saxon settlement at West Stow in Suffolk (occupied from the fifth through seventh centuries), we find what might be a widespread pattern in settlement layout.⁴⁹ Martin Welch describes seven “rectangular, post-built halls” surrounded by 69 SFBs, all enclosed by ditches that may have served to mark the settlement’s boundaries.⁵⁰ Speaking to possible activities taking place within these various buildings, Welch observes that

Heat-staining of the subsoil below a hearth was noted in more than one hall at West Stow, however, so it seems likely that families lived, cooked, ate and slept in the seven halls. In all probability the West Stow halls functioned as single family farmhouses [...] Presumably the sunken

⁴⁶ For example, the settlement of West Stow in East Anglia held three or four farmsteads between the early fifth and mid-seventh centuries; during the same time frame, a settlement at Mucking had between eight and ten farmsteads; the Catholme settlement in the Trent Valley held between five and seven farmsteads between the late fifth and tenth centuries. Heinrich Härke, “Early Anglo-Saxon Social Structure,” in *The Anglo-Saxons From the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines, *Studies in Historical Archaeology*, vol. 2 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1997), 140.

⁴⁷ Dominic Powlesland, “Early Anglo-Saxon Settlements, Structures, Form and Layout,” in *The Anglo-Saxons From the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines, *Studies in Historical Archaeology* vol. 2 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1997), 104.

⁴⁸ Powlesland identifies three building-types in Anglo-Saxon farmsteads: large, rectangular units with raised floors, likely used as storage buildings for grain or other material; rectangular “living quarters,” some with indications of stairwells and, thus, upper floors; and fire pits, generally one meter by fifty centimeters wide and deep, containing charcoal, cracked stone, and animal bones. Powlesland, “Anglo-Saxon Settlements,” 105–09.

⁴⁹ Due to the rarity of uncovered and extensive Anglo-Saxon settlements, the preservation and “survival” of West Stow and West Heslerton are anomalies, and are likely not indicative of Anglo-Saxon agricultural life in all regions at all times.

⁵⁰ Martin Welch, *Anglo-Saxon England* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd / English Heritage, 1992), 21. Howe notes that the halls range in size from 16 feet by 32 feet (512 sq. ft.) to 23 feet by 46 feet (1058 sq. ft.). See Howe, “Looking for Home,” 155.

featured buildings provided for a similar range of ancillary functions such as stores and workshops.⁵¹

Although Welch's assertion that the halls provided space for the basic activities of living, including food preparation, diverges a bit from Pollington's description of the typical hall-space, both provide evidence that the life of a community (or a family) depended on spaces and resources found further afield than in the hall itself. Moreover, if Welch is correct in that each of West Stow's halls supported one family, we see an Anglo-Saxon community emerge from these remains and ruins.

An uncovered settlement at West Heslerton (occupied from the late fourth through the late eighth centuries) may further "flesh out" our portrait of agricultural life around the hall. This settlement, fifty acres (200 square km) in area, likely supported 100–200 persons.⁵² Dominic Powlesland has diagrammed a number of specifically-functioning zones clustered around a stream that bisects the settlement.⁵³ These zones include a housing zone with multiple, independent structures;⁵⁴ a zone for craft or industry, containing over fifty "storehouses," metal-working furnaces, a kiln, and refuse; a zone for agricultural processing, containing evidence of plant matter; and a "high status zone," enclosed within the larger settlement and containing a higher incidence of "status items," such as glass and metalwork.⁵⁵ While one could assume that each individual controlled a quarter to a half of an acre (or one square kilometer), the separation of the

⁵¹ Welch, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 26–27.

⁵² Powlesland, "Anglo-Saxon Settlement," 111, 114.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 111–12.

⁵⁴ For further descriptions of smaller, outlying buildings and barns uncovered in Northern European sites, see Hamerow, *Early Medieval Settlements*, 31–38.

⁵⁵ Powlesland, "Anglo-Saxon Settlement," 111–13. In a subsequent discussion of his article, Powlesland also mentions a mill and mill-pond constructed on the stream. See Powlesland, "Discussion of 'Anglo-Saxon Settlement,'" in *The Anglo-Saxons From the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines, *Studies in Historical Archaeology* vol. 2 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1997), 119.

settlement into functional zones indicates a more communal mode of life. This cooperative community model is also suggested by the recent discovery of a rare Anglo-Saxon oven in Norfolk. In 2013, an annual archaeological dig in Sedgeford, near Hunstanton, Norfolk, uncovered the remains of two large ovens, believed to have been in use between 650 and 850 CE. According to the group's supervisor, one oven, now fully uncovered, is too big to have been of use to a single family and likely was used by a settlement of between 50–100 people.⁵⁶

These excavated remains from agricultural settlements provide glimpses into the lifestyles, relationships, and practices that we might observe in the hall. First, as the farmstead seems to be the smallest, familial unit in society, and agriculture and limited crafting were widespread among communities, it is obvious that the “average” Anglo-Saxon survived through agricultural labor. Second, as suggested by the size of assumed “living quarters,” as well as the lay-out of farmsteads in nucleated settlements, the life of an Anglo-Saxon was carried out in close proximity to (and perhaps dependent) on a number of other individuals.⁵⁷ With large household groups existing in agricultural settlements of up to one hundred inhabitants, the archaeological evidence suggests that Anglo-Saxon quotidian life was a communal or cooperative one, with individuals sharing responsibilities for agricultural work, equipment (including the oven at Norfolk), and other production. Third, as demonstrated by the sizes of settlements and the incorporation

⁵⁶ “Norfolk dig uncovers Anglo-Saxon oven,” in *BBC News Norfolk*, 24 September 2013. Website. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-24211947>. Accessed 25 September 2013. According to site supervisor Dr. John Jolleys, the oven would likely have been used to bake bread, dry grain, and malt barley.

⁵⁷ Citing an earlier study of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, Heinrich Härke notes that the average Anglo-Saxon “living community” was comprised of 15–36 individuals; later, he states that the settlement of Mucking was believed to support approximately 94 individuals, spread over 8–10 farmsteads, suggesting that each household supported 9–12 individuals. See Härke, “Early Anglo-Saxon Social Structure,” 138–40. Härke cites Chris Arnold, *Roman Britain to Saxon England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 125; and Arnold, *An Archaeology of the Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (London: Routledge, 1988), 166.

of outlying fields and pasture areas in sustaining livestock, Anglo-Saxon individuals must have toiled and traveled over (relatively) large plots of land, depending on the season.⁵⁸

We have some idea of what crops this kind of field-work produced. Allan R. Hall's Archaeobotanical Computer Database (ABCD), a compendium of the plant remains from excavated sites throughout England, identifies the most prevalent usable plants, predominantly cereals but also fruits and wood, from Anglo-Saxon settlements: oats, elderberry, hazel, barleys, unidentified cereals, six-row barley, blackberry / bramble, wheats, oak, flax / linseed, and rye. Other usable plants, mostly fruits, woods, and herbs, occur less frequently. These plants are evidenced by seed or fruit remains, and occur in settlements classified as urban, agricultural, and monastic.⁵⁹ Evidence such as this makes it possible to identify many of the staples of the Anglo-Saxon diet, foods that would certainly have been consumed in the hall-setting. Barley, necessary for preparing breads and beer, and wheat (specifically bread wheat) were the most prevalent cultivated grains, followed by spelt, rye, and oats (which also grew wild);⁶⁰ these grains as well as beans

⁵⁸ This work is evident in Anglo-Saxon remains, from which I. Longworth and John Cherry have calculated an average lifespan of thirty for Anglo-Saxons living before 800 C.E., observing that "a high degree of osteoarthritis of the spine suggests back-breaking field work in a damp climate." See Ian Longworth and John H. Cherry, eds., *Archaeology in Britain since 1945: New Directions* (London: British Museum, 1986), 130.

⁵⁹ The eleven plants listed here are ranked in order of the number of times that each species appears in a settlement recorded in the ABCD; "oats" appear 48 times, whereas "rye" appears 25 times. See Allan R. Hall, "Investigating Anglo-Saxon Plant Life and Plant Use: the Archaeobotanical Angle," in *From Earth to Art: the Many Aspects of the Plant-World in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. C.P. Biggam (New York: Rodopi, 2003), 116–117. Hall identifies seven areas of human activity in which plants were instrumental (and for which evidence is discoverable) in Anglo-Saxon England. In three of those areas (food and drink, medicine, and textiles), the plant matter probably would have been both cultivated and wild, and survives today "in the form of undigested remains or charred (and probably not ingested) fossils of cereals, pulses, fruit, vegetables (one of the more difficult categories to establish), and flavourings" and in "fibres from plants such as hemp and flax, and plants used for dyeing such as madder and woad." For the remaining four areas (fuel, litter and thatch, building material, and ritual), much of the plant matter would have grown wild. See Hall, "Investigating Anglo-Saxon Plant Life," 108.

⁶⁰ Debby Banham, "Be hlafum and wyrtum: Food Plants in Anglo-Saxon Society and Economy," in *From Earth to Art: The Many Aspects of the Plant-World in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. C.P. Biggam (New York: Rodopi, 2003), 121–24.

and even acorns could be ground into meal and used for baking or cooked in savory porridges.⁶¹

In addition to grains, Anglo-Saxons grew and consumed cultivated legumes (beans, peas), root vegetables (turnips, radishes, beets, carrots, parsnips, onions), and leafy greens (kale, lettuce, leeks).⁶² Further, wild crops such as mushrooms, nuts (hazelnuts and walnuts for human consumption; acorns and beechnuts for pig pannage), berries and fruits formed a part of the Anglo-Saxon diet.⁶³ Work at various Anglo-Saxon excavations has unearthed evidence of the variety of fruits consumed, including “small seeds such as strawberry, blackberry and, especially, raspberry, but there are also apple and pear pips and items as large as cherry and sloe stones, and even those of cultivated plums.”⁶⁴

Alongside evidence of crops, we can determine what types of livestock were predominant in specific locations in Anglo-Saxon England. In her numerous and comprehensive studies of faunal bone remains at the Anglo-Saxon settlement of West Stow (Suffolk), Pam J. Crabtree identifies sheep and goats as the most populous livestock

⁶¹ Alongside leavened and unleavened loaves of bread in various sizes (which would have been easier to preserve than food in other preparations), these grains, especially spelt and barley, would have been used in a savory porridge (“briw”), flavored with herbs, vegetables, and pieces of meat. Debby Banham points out that bread was easier to preserve than pottage or “briw,” which would have needed daily reheating / reboiling to kill dangerous microorganisms. See Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 123–27; Banham, “Be hlafum,” 123.

⁶² Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 123; Banham, “Be hlafum,” 124–25. As Banham points out, the Anglo-Saxon term “leac” had a wider meaning and usage than what we perceive today, for “it is clear that the leek was thought of as the unmarked form and the others, onions, garlic, probably chives and possibly several other related plants, were variations on the theme.” See Banham, “Be hlafum,” 126.

⁶³ Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 123; Banham, “Be hlafum,” 128.

⁶⁴ Banham, “Be hlafum,” 126. Certainly, the Anglo-Saxons cultivated orchards and vineyards, which may have supplied apples, pears, grapes, and plums, among others; these fruits could have been served in any number of preparations, possibly “stewed in water or wine, sweetened with honey,” boiled down into fruit preserves and used as spreads, or used to flavor ciders, wines, and other beverages. See Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 126–28.

at that site, followed by cattle and pigs.⁶⁵ Crabtree calls sheep “multi-purpose animals,” as they could be kept for meat, milk, and wool; goats may have been treated similarly.⁶⁶ Pigs, on the other hand, may have produced the medieval equivalent of “fast food”: pigs put on weight (i.e., meat) faster than other livestock.⁶⁷ Though these livestock, alongside cattle and pigs, served as the dominant sources of meat for West Stow, Crabtree also identifies domestic fowl (including chickens and geese, used for meat and eggs) and fish (pike and perch, both available locally in the River Lark) as food sources, as well as wild

⁶⁵ West Stow is notable for the sheer number of bones preserved — 175,000 bones and fragments have been uncovered; of these, 100,000 have been identified as to species or higher order taxon. See Pam J. Crabtree, “Production and Consumption in an Early Complex Society: Animal Use in Middle Saxon East Anglia,” *World Archaeology* 28.1 (1996): 61. At this site, cattle were apparently the second most common farm animals, comprising between 25–35% of bone remains. Beef would still have provided the bulk of meat for inhabitants of West Stow, as a single cow can provide up to ten times as much meat as a single sheep or goat. Pigs were apparently crucial to early (fifth-century) Anglo-Saxon settlement on the site, as they make up over 20% of the early fifth-century faunal assemblage. As pigs declined in proportion, beef production likely increased; by the sixth century, cattle are slaughtered at higher ages (most likely for meat). See Crabtree, *West Stow, Suffolk: Early Anglo-Saxon Animal Husbandry* (Ipswich, UK: Suffolk County Planning Department, 1989), 26, 106. For comparison’s sake, by the eleventh century, the scribes who compiled the royal catalog known as *The Domesday Book* recorded over 180,000 head of livestock in England’s three easternmost counties (Dorset, Cornwall, Devon). These break down into sheep (70%), swine (17%), goats (6%), cows and non-working animals (5%), and horses (less than 1.5%). See R. Welldon Finn, *An Introduction to Domesday Book* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 202.

⁶⁶ Crabtree, *West Stow*, 106. In his report on the West Stow excavation, Stanley West observes that patterns at West Stow “[suggest] that sheep were used for a combination of meat production and dairying. A small amount of wool may have been produced for domestic uses, but the data are incompatible with large scale wool production.” See Stanley E. West, *West Stow: the Anglo-Saxon Village*, 2 vols. (Ipswich, UK: Suffolk County Planning Department, 1985), 93.

⁶⁷ Heinrich Härke, “Discussion of ‘Early Anglo-Saxon Settlements,’” in *The Anglo-Saxons From the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines, *Studies in Historical Archaeology*, vol. 2 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1997), 123. Crabtree points out in her analysis of West Stow that an early settlement needing to quickly grow its livestock might rely on pigs, as they “mature quickly and multiply rapidly [...] they are ideal animals for colonizers.” Despite the usefulness of pigs as a food source for colonizers, Crabtree argues that this does not necessarily indicate a change in West Stow husbandry practices. Says Crabtree, “The West Stow data suggest that the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon colonists in Britain did not result in marked changes in animal husbandry practices. The overall picture is one of continuity rather than change. This might be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, it could be suggested that substantial elements of the Romano-British population survived in the West Stow area. The Anglo-Saxons could then be seen as a warrior elite who introduced a new language and new elements of material culture, but otherwise had very little effect on native animal husbandry practices. [...] If, on the other hand, the Anglo-Saxons replaced the native Britons in the West Stow area, they apparently found it to their advantage to preserve most of the elements of the native system of animal husbandry.” See Crabtree, “Sheep, Horses, Swine, and Kine: A Zooarchaeological Perspective on the Anglo-Saxon Settlement of England,” *Journal of Field Archaeology* 16.2 (1989), 210–12.

animals.⁶⁸ Remains of red deer, roe deer, and rabbits (as well as arrowheads likely used in hunting) occur throughout the site, though these remains never comprise more than 1% of the population of bones.⁶⁹ Likewise, wild water birds such as cranes, swans, and ducks make up a minor part of the bone assemblage, indicating that wild animals made up a small part of the West Stow diet, and that hunting, while practiced, was less important than animal husbandry to food production.⁷⁰ Whereas the evidence from West Stow indicates that, over several centuries, the settlement remained a “well-balanced economy based on cattle, sheep and pigs with little evidence for economic specialization,”⁷¹ other settlements may have evolved into specialized production centers.⁷²

Speaking to uses for animals other than for food production, Powlesland suggests the view of “livestock as mobile wealth more important for its wool, milk and traction power, as it so often is in agrarian economies.”⁷³ A prime example of these alternate purposes for livestock is the horse; while horses were primarily used for traction, transport, and as status symbols in Anglo-Saxon England, the appearance of butchery marks on the remnant bones of horses at West Stow suggest that horseflesh may have

⁶⁸ Crabtree, *West Stow*, 26–27. Speaking to the finds at West Stow and at several other Anglo-Saxon settlements, Crabtree observes that “most Anglo-Saxon domestic fowl appear to have been mature animals, suggesting that they were valued as much for their eggs as for their meat.” See Crabtree, “Production and Consumption,” 71. In some regions, seafood was a staple, with individuals consuming freshwater and ocean-found fish, shellfish, including mussels and oysters, and, in some districts, eels. See Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 127.

⁶⁹ Crabtree, *West Stow*, 26, 106. Other wild animals whose bones appeared in the assemblage include hares, foxes, badgers, and bear.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 27, 106. Crabtree speaks to the additional value of ducks to specific settlement areas: “Ducks, however, will benefit their owners by destroying slugs, snails and harmful insect larvae; they are therefore well suited to rural sites in wetland areas.” See Crabtree, “Production and Consumption,” 72.

⁷¹ Crabtree, “Production and Consumption,” 72–73.

⁷² Excavations at the settlement of Wicken Bonhunt, for example, reveal more than twenty-eight Middle Saxon (CE 650–850) architectural structures as well as a collection of 100,000 animal bones from the same period; at this site, “large numbers of skull fragments, mandibles and loose pig teeth suggest that pork production [...] was taking place on a very large scale during the Middle Saxon period.” Similarly, Crabtree believes that a settlement at Brandon, occupied from approximately 650 AD to 900 AD and producing over 150,000 faunal bone remains, may have served as a wool-production center. See Crabtree, “Production and Consumption,” 60–61, 70–72.

⁷³ Powlesland, “Early Anglo-Saxon Settlement,” 109.

been a small part of the diet.⁷⁴ Yet even if slaughtered, livestock could yield more than meat for sustenance; furs, wool, hides, bones, and horns could be harvested for craft and industry in Anglo-Saxon settlements. In the West Stow settlement, for example, though cattle provided more meat per capita than other livestock, after slaughter, “their bones were used for the production of bone objects, and their hide and sinews would have been other important secondary products.”⁷⁵ West makes similar observations from his research at West Stow: “There is considerable evidence for bone working; of splitting, paring, sawing and drilling to produce a wide variety of bone tools and combs. A number of combs can be reasonably grouped as the products of single craftsmen, suggesting some specialization.”⁷⁶ In addition to bone-working as a craft at West Stow (and likely at other Anglo-Saxon settlements), archaeological remains also suggest the practice of horn-working at these sites.⁷⁷

Herds of sheep and goats present at Anglo-Saxon sites would have provided not only meat, milk, and horn for various uses, but also the raw wool needed for producing cloth. Though cloth is a rare survival to the present day, other accoutrements in the

⁷⁴ Crabtree, *West Stow*, 106. Cows as well as horses could be multifunctional, as Fowler reminds his audience that a cow “should not be underestimated as a manure machine, one which you occasionally take out to pull an ard [plow],” while keeping your “precious ox, or pair of oxen, if you’re well-off,” in a special building. In a roundtable discussion of Anglo-Saxon livestock, Giorgio Ausenda echoes this pragmatic view, asserting that we must not assume that Anglo-Saxons raised livestock specifically for meat, as we must also consider “the amount of work that goes into keeping livestock throughout the winter. You have to cut fodder [...] you’ve got to feed it fatty foods.” See Fowler, “Discussion of ‘Farming,’” 268; Powlesland, “Discussion of ‘Early Anglo-Saxon Settlement,’” 123.

⁷⁵ Crabtree, *West Stow*, 106. As Crabtree suggests, “the wide range of products produced by cattle may explain why these animals are always second in number to sheep at West Stow” (p. 106).

⁷⁶ West, “West Stow,” 169.

⁷⁷ Crabtree, *West Stow*, 97, 103; Remains uncovered at West Stow include 51 cattle horn cores marked by cutting or chopping, as well as similarly marked horn cores from sheep and goats. Crabtree further points to uncovered goat horns, antler waste, and worked bone from Middle and Late Saxon periods at the Bridge Street Site in Ipswich, as well as evidence for worked goat horns at the Middle Saxon site of Hamwih to indicate the possible importance of horn-working as an Anglo-Saxon craft industry. See Crabtree, “Production and Consumption,” 68; for detail about horn-working at Hamwih, see Jennifer Bourdillon and Jenny P. Coy, “The Animal Bones,” in *Excavations at Melbourne Street, Southampton, 1971–76*, ed. P. Holdsworth (London: Council for British Archaeology Research Report No. 33, 1980), 79–120, esp. 97.

processing of wool have survived, including loom weights.⁷⁸ From the evidence of faunal material, archaeological studies suggest how animals figured into the Anglo-Saxon diet; likewise, from this evidence and related remains, we can ascertain the production of artifacts from faunal material in parts of Anglo-Saxon England. Livestock, including sheep, goats, pigs, cattle, and fowl made up a dominant part of the Anglo-Saxon subsistence, with the quadrupeds also providing raw materials for crafts of carving, weaving, spinning, and tanning. We can further look to remains of plant materials within these settlements to determine what vegetable matter was part of the Anglo-Saxon diet and how plants may have been used in other areas of craft and industry. Beyond the uses of specific plants (especially grains) as foundational in the Anglo-Saxon diet, vegetation was used for construction (timber and thatch) and in the production of clothing (dyes). Dependence upon certain species of animals and plants can expand beyond the necessities for survival; in an Anglo-Saxon farming settlement, the size of the community and number of individuals can also allow for the production of various and numerous animals and crops, as well as the processing and trade of these organisms for the economic growth of the community.

Verbal Transformations in Agricultural Literature

These realities of life in and around the hall settlement make their way into the literary remnants of Anglo-Saxon culture, some of which may, in turn, have been recited or otherwise used as a part of the quotidian activities of this agricultural and hall-centric

⁷⁸ West observes of the West Stow settlement that “spinning and weaving are well attested by the numbers of implements and loom weights,” though “there is some distribution evidence to suggest that weaving at least was a more restricted practice, although it should be remembered that looms are moveable and may have been installed in one or two of the SFBs in each family group at any one time.” West, “West Stow,” 169.

society. Though, like material evidence, these texts must be subject to interpretation, juxtaposing archaeological data and conclusions with poetry and prose can illuminate our understanding of how each may have functioned and been regarded within Anglo-Saxon society. Representations of flora and fauna in Anglo-Saxon poetry give clues as to the range of organisms, landscape features, and meteorological phenomena that would have been familiar to humans. Several metrical charms, blending Christian and pre-Christian texts and practices, provide more specific information about familiar landscapes and farming practices in Anglo-Saxon England. A charm for unfruitful land calls on the performer to know all of the herbs and trees growing on that parcel of land, to combine these with milk from all the landowner's cattle, and to involve the plowing equipment in the final performance of the charm.⁷⁹ The "Nine Herbs Charm," a charm for "water-elf disease," and a charm for a sudden stitch also call for special knowledge of plants and herbs.⁸⁰ The presence of cattle in the landscape (and their propensity to disappear, whether accidentally or through suspicious actions) is also demonstrated in several charms for lost cattle and one charm for delayed childbirth, which further requires a cow of one solid color.⁸¹ Swarms of bees are attested by the existence of a charm meant either to protect against them or, as Rodrigues explains, to force them into the power of the beekeeper, a suggestion that Anglo-Saxons would have seen bees as necessary (and not threatening, certainly not alien) inhabitants of the landscape.⁸²

⁷⁹ Louis J. Rodrigues, *Anglo-Saxon Verse Charms, Maxims & Heroic Legends* (Middlesex, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1994), 131.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 137–139, 143, 149.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 151. While we may read these charms as evidence of the familiarity of cattle, herbs, and bees to the "average" Anglo-Saxon, Rodrigues points out that the specifically colored cow required in the charm for delayed birth was probably rare in Anglo-Saxon England, "so their infrequency, and the difficulty of finding one, gave this kind of milk a rarity to be reckoned with as a magical factor." See Rodrigues, *Verse Charms*, 40–41.

The riddles of the tenth-century *Exeter Book* also provide numerous examples of humans gathering natural materials for the production of weapons, food, and leisure items, or observing the behaviors of various other organisms or natural processes, many of which are evidenced in Anglo-Saxon settlements by the aforementioned archaeological data. Copied in what appears to be a single scribe's hand, the *Exeter Book's* ninety riddles are part of a broader tradition of scholarly riddling; several are strikingly similar to Aldhelm's *enigmata*, riddles composed in Latin and circulated through Anglo-Saxon and continental communities.⁸³ Warning against reading the riddles as indigenous to an Anglo-Saxon agrarian society, Craig Williamson asserts that "there is no reason to believe that the Old English Riddles were based on any well-established tradition of social riddling⁸⁴ in Anglo-Saxon England" (based on a lack of mentions of "social riddling" in other forms of poetry and prose), though he admits that it would be impossible to prove or disprove such a tradition.⁸⁵ Although the *Exeter Book* was composed in a monastic setting and likely intended for a monastic or otherwise scholarly or royal audience, the fact that these riddles count on an auditor's or reader's response (unlike the Latin *enigmata*, Anglo-Saxon riddles do not contain their own solutions) hints at a widespread familiarity with the products and processes of agriculture. Further, although we cannot be sure of the *projected* audience for these texts, their construction

⁸³ See Craig Williamson, ed., *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 1–27; Nancy Porter Stork, *Through a Gloss Darkly: Aldhelm's Riddles in the British Library MS Royal 12.C.xxiii* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990).

⁸⁴ A practice of telling riddles in a public or social gathering.

⁸⁵ Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, 23. Williamson cites the Latin tradition of riddling, noting that Anglo-Saxon writers such as Aldhelm, Tatwine, Eusebius, Boniface, and Alcuin wrote riddles in Latin, but that "most of these Latin riddles are admittedly a far cry from the Old English." Indeed, Aldhelm's *enigmata* range in content from astronomical, celestial, and meteorological phenomena (the Big Dipper, sun and moon, and rainbows) to mythical creatures (the minotaur), from plants (dwarf elder) to "exotic" animals that no Anglo-Saxon would likely have seen (elephants and ant-lions). See Porter Stork, *Through a Gloss Darkly*.

and substance communicate a perception of nature that may have developed in an agricultural setting (be that the central point of the hall or the monastery, both surrounded and supported by field and farmland), where audiences would have been able to solve the verbal puzzles.

Reading these texts, therefore, we see more than just a clever poetic exercise meant to entertain and stump a scribe or a bishop. In the riddles, we find reflections of the physical remains of Anglo-Saxon settlement as well as an awareness of the cycles of growth, reproduction, and death among plants and animals, and the continued “life” of objects even after they have given way to death. Two riddles, for example, describe the characteristics and harvesting of a common vegetable in the Anglo-Saxon diet: the onion. Adopting the “voice” of this bulb, Riddle 65 posits, “Ær ic wæs, eft ic cwom; æghwa mec reafað, / hafað mec on headre, ond min heafod scireþ, / biteð mec on bær lic, briceð mine wisan. / Monnan ic ne bite, nympe he me bite; / sindan þara monige þe mec bitað” (Ere I was, afterwards I came; everyone plunders me, holds me in restraint and cleaves my head, bites me on the bare body, breaks my stalk. I do not bite man unless he bites me; there are many who bite me) (ll. 2–6). The riddler articulates the cycles of growth and harvest that produce onions and other vegetation year after year, the preparation and consumption of the onion — whether eaten raw or sliced to be served in a salad or broth — and the apparent popularity of this food, as it is consumed by “monige.”

A second, more sexually explicit riddle describing the onion refers to the vegetable as “wunderlicu wiht, wifum on hyhte, / neahbuendum nyt” (a wonderful creature, a joy for women, useful to neighbors) (ll. 1–2),⁸⁶ making clear the role of an Anglo-Saxon woman as preparer of food and the onion itself as a promise of an excellent

⁸⁶ Riddle 25.

meal (playing on a perceived phallic quality to the onion as a promise of virility). In the sexual imagery of this riddle, the onion “stands up in bed” (“stonde ic on bedde,” l. 4), finds itself gripped and pulled by a young woman (ll. 6–9), until she “fixes me in a stronghold” (“fegeð mec on fæsten,” l. 9), and her “eye” is wet (“wæt bið þæt eage,” l. 11). Here, the onion casts itself in somewhat human terms — it too has a home, a point of origin in the comforting image of a “bed.” Further, in its enthusiastic harvesting, we are reminded of the fertility of the young “churl’s daughter” (“ceorles dohtor, l. 7), “curly-locked girl” (“wif wundenlocc,” l. 11), and of human sexuality and the cycle of reproduction. In the previous onion riddle, the textual puzzle capitalizes on the onion’s ability to “harm” its harvester — in the first riddle, the onion can bite; in the second, “nængum sceþþe / burgsittendra nymþe bonan anum” (I harm none of city dwellers except my slayer alone) (ll. 2–3). The observation of the onion’s ability to harm (even if it is only to wet a woman’s “eye”), paired with the riddle’s structure in assigning an intelligent voice to the vegetable, works to suggest an intimate connection between the harvester and the harvest, both subject to cycles of reproduction, growth, and death.

Additional riddles flesh out and contextualize the remnants and tools of Anglo-Saxon agricultural settlements described above. One text which describes a rake as a “wiht [...] þæt feoh fedeð” (a creature that feeds cattle) (ll. 1–2) also says of this gardening tool, “læteð hio þa wlitigan, wyrtum fæste, / stille stondan on stapolwonge, / beorhte blican, blowan ond growan” (she leaves behind radiant ones, secure with roots, to stand fixed in a settling-place, to shine brightly, to flower and germinate) (ll. 7–9).⁸⁷ In addition to the value placed here on germination and growth, we see the “radiant ones”

⁸⁷ Riddle 34. The necessity of a plentiful grain harvest for the survival of a human community (and for its livestock) is also indirectly invoked by riddle 45, a description of rising bread.

rooted in place in the ground, a reminder that, like humans, other organisms must begin within an *oikos*, a central place from which they can survive and spread. Riddle 21, an evocation of the violent, ground-tearing actions of a plow, calls up the image of the plow's "hlaford" (lord) who "wrigaþ on wonge, wegeð mec ond þyð, / saweþ on swæð min" (twists on the field, bears me and presses, sows seed in my track) (ll. 5–6). This riddle is complex not only for its obscuring of the identity of the "speaking" plow but also for a layering of violent environmental and socioeconomic relationships. According to the invented voice of the plow, it does harm and destruction to the ground, even if a human audience understands this as necessary to prepare the field for sowing: "fealleþ on sidan / þæt ic toþum tere, gif me teala þenaþ / hindewardre þæt biþ hlaford min" (what I tear with teeth falls to the side, if he exerts himself well from behind, that is my lord) (ll. 13–15). Here, the concluding line also captures a social (not to mention sexual) tension between the tool and its "hlaford," who is described earlier as "har holtes feond" (old enemy of the wood) (l. 3) and "hlaford min / woh færeð, weard æt steorte" (my bent lord marches behind my tail) (l. 4). In a constructed voice, we hear the alienation of the plow, used to assault and subdue the earth, but which is also itself subdued by a malevolent lord. Despite this complex relationship of violence between plough and lord, blade and earth, the riddle builds a shared subjugation among each of them, as the "hlaford" himself is "woh" (bent), which, though it may indicate crookedness or perversity, more obviously indicates that the human must walk hunched-over in order to "exert himself well." To break open the earth in preparation for new growth, the human is himself "bent," subjugated by the hardness of the ground and by the difficulty of his work.

Images similar to those of the subjugated plow can be found in Riddle 72, which details the life and work of an ox. Beginning with a description of the young calf nursing, the riddle turns this image to a “*sweartum hyrde*” (dark shepherd) (l. 11) milking the cow for human consumption as his or her calf ages and is weaned. The grown ox claims to have “*sipade widdor, / mearcpaþas træd, moras pæðde, / bunden under beame, beag hæfde on healse, / wean on laste weorc þrowade, / earfoða dæl*” (wandered more widely, traversed march-paths, traveled over moors, [been] bound under a tree, had a ring on the neck, woe in the track, endured toil, labor’s hardships) (ll. 11–15). Again, the plow-beast is shackled according to the needs of its human master, and both the animal itself and the work of agriculture come to exemplify human subjugation of the natural world. The usefulness of the ox’s body in tearing up ground and for producing tools and crafts forms the crux of two additional riddles; Riddle 12 characterizes the ox as “*fotum ic fere, foldan slite, / grene wongas, þenden ic gæst bere. / Gif me feorh losað, fæste binde / swearte wealas, hwilum sellan men. / Hwilum ic deorum drincan selle / beorne of bosme*” (by foot I go, tear the earth, green plains, while I carry breath. If life fails me, I bind fast the dark foreigners, sometimes better men. Sometimes I give up a precious drink to man from a bladder) (ll. 1–6). Once again, the ox is characterized as a plow-beast, yet this text also references the human consumption and processing of the animal’s body after death, when its hide is made into leather that binds and clothes lords and servants and its bladder become vessels for liquid. Similarly, Riddle 38 works with the concept that while alive, the ox “*duna briceð; / gif he tobirsteð, bindeð cwice*” (breaks the hills; if he dies, binds the living) (ll. 6–7), turning on the idea that the ox is equally valuable in death on account of its hide.

The three “ox riddles” contain awareness of the violence with which the ox is shackled and subjected to labor and the necessary violence with which the ox rips up the fields. At the same time, these riddles communicate how crucial the beast’s labor and body are to an agricultural community, and perhaps even a fascination with the range of human uses for the ox’s body. Specifically, as Riddle 12 proceeds from clue to clue in its imagery of the full spectrum of uses for this one beast, we can almost witness the ox transforming from one form to another. As this text demonstrates the (human and economic) value of the ox through its transformations from one stage of life to another, we see the cyclical qualities of natural beings, as they serve purposes both in life and death. Further, even if these purposes / uses for natural beings are generally seen from an anthropocentric perspective, if we juxtapose this particular riddle with the riddles describing the plow or the rake, we see that even the violent breaking of ground will allow for new fertility and growth in the fields — a kind of value that transcends human economics and needs.

Several riddles in this manuscript focus more upon finished objects (typically items of luxury, belonging to a real or imagined warrior-class) than the animal or agricultural process responsible for their creation. Still, these texts must indirectly reference or bring to mind the farming settlements that underlie these crafts. Riddle 56 describes a web and loom, the machinery needed for weaving sheep’s and goat’s wool into cloth and tapestries. While the raw wool is not mentioned within the text of the riddle, its final image — “Ic lafe geseah / minum hlaforde, þær hæleð druncon, / þara flana geweorc, on flet beran” (I saw what remains with my lord, where men drank, work of the darts, be borne into the dwelling) (ll. 10–12) — makes clear that the riddle is

speaking of wool and its ultimate fate: to be woven into a tapestry (perhaps like those accounted for in the Anglo-Saxon wills) which will decorate and keep warm a drinking hall. As here, where the wool produced by a farming settlement is transformed into a high-status item associated with the Anglo-Saxon warrior lifestyle, two riddles describing horns involve a similar transformation of agricultural products into luxury items. Riddle 14 defines two types of horn: one used for drinking and one used to call men to battle. In identifying these two possible products, the texts remind their audience that the common link between the two is the raw material of animal horn. The second “horn riddle” depends in part upon the audience’s knowledge of the process of making mead, as the text provides the clue, “hæbbe me on bosme þæt on bearwe geweox” (I hold in my breast what grows in the grove) (l. 7). In this context, we might guess that what grows in the grove is a fruit made into a fermented drink, the flowering plants that attract honeybees, or honeycomb itself which expands due to the efforts of the bees.

Other *Exeter Book* riddles capitalize on an auditor’s knowledge of the life cycles and behaviors of animals moving in and around an Anglo-Saxon community. Riddle 13 contains a macroscopically detailed account of the hatching and quickening of ten chickens; similarly, the cock and hen of Riddle 42 must be widely familiar, since the riddler expects his auditor to identify them in part by their participation in the “ute plegan” (outside exercise) of copulation.⁸⁸ The riddles further reveal what must be a daily or seasonal awareness of animals’ movements across land and close to humans. Riddle 7, with the solution “swan,” describes how the bird’s feathers ruffle when “ic hrusan trede / oppe þa wic buge, oppe wado drefe / hwilum mec ahebbað ofer hæleþa byht / hyrste

⁸⁸ Riddle 42 also contains runes that, when placed in the correct order, spell out the Anglo-Saxon terms for “cock” and “hen,” thus the text *could* be solved by an audience not familiar with chicken sex.

mine, ond þeos hea lyft, / ond mec þonne wide wolcna strengu / ofer folc byreð” (I walk on earth, or inhabit a dwelling, or when I disturb the waters. At times my trappings and this high air raise me up over dwellings of men, and then the strength of the clouds carries me widely over people) (ll. 1–6). The quick succession of mentions of the swan’s “dwelling” and its passage over the dwellings of men call attention to the fact that, like humans, even animals as wide-ranging as birds must have a central place to which they return.

This focus on the bird’s mobility from earth to its own “dwelling” to water to sky further demonstrates that the swan, though perhaps most often visible in flight, is able to travel to, survive in, and escape from in extremely varied environments — “flode ond foldan” (l. 9) (water and field) — due to its wondrous vestments. Despite this ability to escape human hunters by flying over their towns, swans found their way into the production of crafts; based on finds from York, we know that flutes made of wing-bones from swans (as well as from applewood and hawthorn) were used in Anglo-Saxon England.⁸⁹ Pairing riddle with physical evidence, we might even read a hint of the future of the swan’s bones as vessels that raise music through the air and over the dwellings of men.

Another riddle, relying on a momentary yet detailed observation of the behavior of a flock or swarm, recreates the fast motion of birds or insects through a hall, down to their characteristic noise in flight. This charming description of flying insects or birds in Riddle 57 tells us that, while “Ðeos lyft byreð lytle wihte / ofer beorghleoþa” (this air bears little creatures over hill-slopes), this swarm “tredað bearonæssas, hwilum burgsalo /

⁸⁹ Pollington, *Mead-Hall*, 203.

nipþa bearna” (treads the woody shores, at times the homes of children of men).⁹⁰ The presence of bees, gnats, or swallows inside the central hall indicates that they were regular inhabitants of the surrounding agricultural landscape — so familiar, even, that the riddler can expect an auditor to have direct personal knowledge of the sound of these organisms, for “nemnað hy sylfe” (they name themselves). Similar moments of detailed observation abound in the riddle-poems; one may look to the imagery of Riddle 13:

fell hongedon
 sweotol ond gesyne on seles wæge
 anra gehwylces. Ne wæs hyra ængum þy wyr, s,
 ne siðe þy sarre, þeah hy swa sceoldon
 reafe birofene, rodra weardes
 meahum aweahte, muþum slitan
 haswe blede. Hrægl bið geniwad
 þam þe ær forðcymene frætwe leton
 licgan on laste, gewitan lond tredan.

(Skins hung clear and visible on the wall of the hall of each one. Nor was any of them the worse, not at that time the more sore, though they so had been robbed of armor, aroused by the might of heaven’s protector, to bite with mouths the dark shoots. Clothing is renewed for those who were born before, who let their armor lie behind, to depart to tread the land). (ll. 3–11)

Here, we see that the author (and, we assume, auditors) of this riddle had a meticulous and tactile knowledge of moments in the life-cycle of this organism. The riddler’s emphasis on renewal, as the chicks lose the “armor” of their eggs only to find their clothing of skin and feathers “renewed for those who were born before,” speaks to an expectation of repeated periods of loss and change as parts of the cycle of growth and reproduction. This enigma, like the earlier description of the ox, evidences an Anglo-

⁹⁰ According to Craig Williamson, suggested solutions for this riddle include starlings, swifts, jackdaws, house martins, gnats, bees, raindrops, and musical notes. See Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 227. The detail of the creatures flying through the “homes of children of men” recalls Bede’s comparison of the span of a human lifetime to the flight of a sparrow through a hall in winter.

Saxon fascination with the transformations (minute or grand) and cycling forms of life visible in the world. More than this, the intricate description of the varied forms of prison-like eggshell, the cape of membrane, tiny chick and pecking, scratching, destructive chicken, or the change from nursing calf to furrowing ox to stretching, binding leather, focuses attention upon and within the animal inhabitants of Creation, until the human can perceive himself or herself on the inside of the egg, treading the earth, or flying over the dwellings of men. At the same time, the textual structures of the riddles *rely* upon descriptions of transformation to trick and amuse the audience, as the more “identities” that an animal or object can claim in one text, the more specific that object actually becomes; herein lies the central paradox *and* greatest attraction of the riddle. An object or animal that claims multiple identities over the course of its existence speaks to an acknowledgement of the progression of one (natural) thing into another (craft) form that must be crucial to an agricultural society.

The riddles of the tenth-century *Exeter Book* suggest a familiarity between human observers and the wildlife with which they coexist or have regular interaction. Even when we focus attention *only* on the riddles reflecting the quotidian life and knowledge of an agricultural community, we see in these texts an erosion of the distinctions between the worlds inside and outside of the hall. As the riddles describe the processes by which animals and plants are incorporated into human society and use, these inhabitants of the hall and surrounding landscape are “taken in” to the human body, given voice and personality, and thus the boundaries separating the human “experience” from the experiences of other inhabitants of Earth become more fluid. Further, in many of these enigmatic texts, the relationship between the human and the plant, animal, or object

creates or focuses attention on the fertility of bodies and of the earth itself, reminding auditors that human and non-human personae are subject to cycles of birth, growth, change, and death.⁹¹ Finally, in several cases here, a speaking persona within a riddle reveals its own home, place, or *oikos* within the created world, its perambulations through the environment, and its fitness to inhabit that place.

Entertainment, Edification, Exchange, Escape?

Ic eom weorð werum, wide funden,
brungen of bearwum ond of burghleoþum,
of denum ond of dunum. Dægес mec wægун
feþre on lifte, feredon mid liste
under hrofes hleo. Hæleð mec siþþan
baþedan in bydene.

(I am valued by men, widely found, brought from groves and from mountain-slopes, from dales and from hills. By day wings bore me aloft, carried by means of skill under the shelter of a roof. Man afterwards bathed me in a vat). (ll. 1–6)⁹²

Beyond the interweaving of human and non-human voices, the riddles also interweave two seemingly disparate types of production: the manual work of agriculture and the production of verse. Riddle 27, describing the making of mead, provides more than an entertaining account of the brewing process, for the text ends with socially valuable information. Here, the production of the fermented honey-drink is re-imagined in detail, again emphasizing the transformation of raw, natural or agricultural material into a processed commodity. In the first few lines of text, we trace a descriptive

⁹¹ Although humankind may have the divine directive to use and rule all other living things on earth (Genesis 1:26–30), we see in several cases here that sometimes animals do not bow to our superiority, but instead flit through and over our abodes, or stop in for visits. Further, several riddles reveal that we are as subject to the environment (weakness in work, sexual desire, cycles of growth and death) as other animals, as established in Genesis 3:16–19, and so all living things are interlocked in a struggle to survive and thrive.

⁹² Riddle 27.

movement of the produce of the woodland harvested by the bees (notably, the Anglo-Saxon poetic lexicon includes several terms for bee and beekeeper, perhaps pointing to the importance of both insect and occupation in that culture).⁹³ We follow the path of the bees in flight, then contained in beehives and producing honeycombs (“mid liste”), the harvest of honey and fermenting of honey in vessels. The term ‘liste’ in line 4 could be translated as ‘skill,’ ‘craft,’ ‘cleverness,’ or ‘art’; the placement of the phrase “mid liste” at this point in the riddle could thus refer to several points in the mead-production process: the skill or art of the bees themselves in producing the honeycomb, or perhaps the skill and cleverness required for humans to find the hives and remove the honeycombs. Effectively, this ambiguous term works to blend the arts and skills of the bee and of the human in the production of mead.

As early as the text’s first line, the mead has introduced itself as having economic value for humans but also being available widely and in various locations — groves, heights, hills, and dales — in the natural world. As the riddle unfolds, we see a progression (from the human perspective) that starts in places far afield and moves closer and closer to the setting of the home, as the flower nectar moves from the world beyond

⁹³ Familiarity (or, at least, prevalence in Anglo-Saxon literature) can also be indicated by the number and frequency of terms for animals and plants in the Anglo-Saxon lexicon. For example, there tend to be multiple terms for domesticated animals: the Anglo-Saxon language has five general terms for “cattle” and additional terms denoting specific purposes for cattle, i.e. cattle for slaughter, working cattle, and pastured cattle; three general terms for “horse,” plus additional terms specifying sex, age, and type of horse, and numerous, species-specific terms for domestic and wild fowl. We find eight words for “frog” or “toad,” including one distinguishing a “swamp-frog”; six for “eel,” and three for “pig” or “swine,” again with additional terminology denoting sex, age, and intended use. More surprising trends are the specificity of terminology for species of birds and insects (twelve for “spider,” three for “caterpillar,” and three terms for “bee / bumblebee,” but also specific terms for “queen bee” and “drone,” three terms for “swarm of bees,” three for “honeycomb” and even a specific term for a “stump containing a swarm” — *ymbstocc*). See Jane Roberts and Christian Kay, *A Thesaurus of Old English, Volume 1: Introduction and Thesaurus* (London: King’s College Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1995). Stephen Pollington also lists terminology relating to domestication or wildness: three terms for “tame,” one for “yoke,” one for “graze,” one for “drove” or “herd”; furthermore, we find terms denoting “game,” and several words for “wild animal.” See Pollington, *Wordcraft: New English to Old English Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Norfolk, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2004).

the walls of civilization to the outbuildings of an agricultural settlement (stored within barrels or vats) and, finally, is brought to the interior of the hall. We also observe the movement of a less tangible resource — an energy taking the forms of entertainment and wisdom — in the final lines of the riddle, which warn against imbibing too much and leaving one's self open to drunkenness and ridicule. This text exemplifies the multiple transformations possible in the riddle form — not only from animal or object to usable human tool or craft — but also a transformation from the observation of manual work to the versification of knowledge. Moreover, while we cannot know whether the riddles that survive to the present day were performed in a hall-setting, the public performance of these texts would have contributed to the edification of a social group and the repertoire of an inherited oral tradition.

As discussed earlier, the hall, a foundation for life in each community, was a center for various types of production and exchange: of food, drink, social relationships, literature, and wisdom. Literary production in Anglo-Saxon England found a kind of crucible in the setting of the hall. Artistic performances, whether in the form of song, poetry, storytelling, or contests of wisdom, riddling, and boasts, were likely part of the social activities occurring in that setting. Looking to the textual evidence of these performances, we see cycles that, while not explicitly ecological, contribute to the survival and thriving of human communities. Whereas Anglo-Saxon riddles describe the integration of plants, animals, and humans within each others' life cycles, other poems performed within a community may equally ensure the continuation of human life, while also recombining with earlier texts to produce new poetic creations for human edification, entertainment, and imaginative escape.

Scholars have cited the formulaic quality of much of Anglo-Saxon poetry as evidence that the written poetic texts surviving from Anglo-Saxon England were most likely handed down orally, generated in a public setting, and performed in various incarnations and lengths in halls or other gathering places.⁹⁴ Numerous texts surviving from this period indicate the possibility of a public, oral recitation; perhaps best known among these is *Beowulf*, in which we find a reference to a possible audience (indicated by the first person plural pronoun “we”) as early as the poem’s first line. Similarly, as Ann Hagen points out, one riddle from the *Exeter Book* acknowledges an audience of “werum æt wine” (men at wine),⁹⁵ and one can imagine the performer tracing out the runes named in one particular riddle onto the hall-floor to aid the audience in naming the solution. Though it is arguable that references to “men at wine” may be more poetic convention than realism, Niles points out that “there is no reason to think that these poets’ allusions to the culture of the hall, although idealized and set in the remote past, is nothing more than a fantasy with no relation to real-life practices.”⁹⁶

The survival of songs, poems, and other texts within an oral tradition requires that they be passed along from artist to artist, generation to generation. The craft of the Anglo-Saxon poet, or *scop*, likewise requires that he or she amass a considerable mental library of histories, legends, images, and verses to which he or she may allude in the (re)creation of poetic material.⁹⁷ Looking to the example of the poem “Widsith” from the *Exeter Book*, the poet / persona Widsith has constructed a compendium of kings of

⁹⁴ For a foundational discussion of the oral-formulaic aspects of Anglo-Saxon poetry, see Francis P. Magoun, Jr., “Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry,” *Speculum* 28.3 (1953): 446–467; Larry D. Benson, “The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry,” *PMLA* 81.5 (1966): 334–341.

⁹⁵ Hagen, *Food and Drink*, 423.

⁹⁶ Niles, *Beowulf and Lejre*, 188.

⁹⁷ While there may have been *scops* of both genders in Anglo-Saxon England, from this point forward, for the sake of clarity, I will refer to these entertainers using the masculine pronoun.

peoples, uniting this with his own history of performances for various rulers. In the text's final lines, the poet lays out the system of exchange by which the *scop* survives:

Swa scriþende gesceapum hweorfað
 gleomen gumena geond grunda fela,
 þearfe secgað, þoncword sprecaþ,
 simle suð oþþe norð sumne gemetað
 gydda gleawne, geofum unhneawne,
 se þe fore duguþe wile dom aræran,
 eorlscipe æfnan, oþþæt eal scæceð,
 leoht ond lif somod [...]

(So wandering players of men, move by fate throughout many grounds, speak of need, speak words of thanks; always, south or north they meet with someone wise in poems, generous with gifts, he who in the presence of a body of nobles desires to raise up his reputation, sustain courage, until all departs, light and life together [...]) (ll. 135–142a)

The “wandering entertainer” earns a living by demonstrating his verbal prowess for benefactors, who then compensate the poet for his work in committing that benefactor’s name and deeds into verse (likely alongside the names and deeds of other powerful figures from history and legend). In this process, the benefactor’s reputation for strength, power, and generosity is sustained, perhaps drawing additional retainers to his or her community and ensuring that individuals belonging to that community contribute to its health and stability. Ironically, however, what characterizes the life of the *scop* (at least in poems such as “Deor” and “Widsith”) is a continuous movement from hall to hall, patron to patron, always seeking a new audience. In this kind of existence, though the *scop* sings the virtues of the hall and its inhabitants, he constantly circles around these homely spaces, rarely coming to rest or finding a place like home. Perhaps this vantage point — the view of one who resides outside the hall and who has travelled widely —

gives the *scop* a singular clarity of vision in beholding and comprehending the lives and wisdom of men.⁹⁸

By recombining poetic fragments to form new texts, the *scop* ensures the survival of older texts by grafting them onto new narratives, and likewise the survival of new narratives by linking them to older, tried and true formulae.⁹⁹ In the same way that these individual tropes were continually reworked into poetic and narrative performance, ensuring that they would cycle through generations of storytellers and *scops*, so would legendary and historical narratives and accounts of honor and dishonor enter these poetic cycles. For example, the account of a great treasure of Germanic legend — the neck-ring of the Brosings / Brisings — is enfolded into the narrative of *Beowulf*, as the poet compares this treasure to a neck-ring given to the eponymous hero by Wealhtheow.¹⁰⁰ As the legendary neck-ring and its attendant history is grafted onto the history of events in *Beowulf*, we see how historical and legendary material is carried by the oral tradition and used to infuse meaning and weight into new narratives. Just as the account of the neck-ring has (apparently) been recycled over generations to appear in this “new” heroic

⁹⁸ This constant wandering is reminiscent of the continuous motion experienced by exiles and will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.

⁹⁹ Again, see Magoun, Jr., “Oral-Formulaic Character,” 446–67 for a discussion of the formulaic qualities of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Among the poetic tropes that find themselves recycled through various Anglo-Saxon verses are images of nature fettered with cold and ice, as in the “Finnsburg episode” of *Beowulf*, ll. 1131–33: “the sea raged with storm, toiled with wind, winter enclosed the waves with fetters of ice,” and throughout “The Wanderer”; the notion of the poet unlocking a hoard of words, as in the first line of “Widsith”: “Widsith made a speech, unlocked his treasury of words”; and the allusions to heroes of Germanic legend, including Weland and Sigurd, as seen in *Beowulf* and the first line of “Deor”: “Weland knew of persecution by way of fetters.”

¹⁰⁰ “Nænigne ic under swegle selran hyrde / hordmaððum hæleþa, syþðan Hama ætwæg / to þære byrhtan byrig Brosinga mene, / sigle ond sincfæt; searoniðas fleah / Eormenrices, geceas ecne ræd. / þone hring hæfde Higelac Geata, / nefa Swertinges, nyhstan siðe, / siðþan he under segne sinc ealgode [...] Gehwearf þa in Francna fæþm feorh cyninges, / breostgewædu ond se beah somod” (I have heard of no better hoarded treasure of men under the sky, since Hama carried off the necklace of the Brosings to that bright burg, collar and precious setting; escaped Eormenric’s treacheries, sought out an eternal reward. Hygelac the Geat, kin of Swerting, had that collar on his latest journey, when he under his banner protected the treasure [...] Thus the wealth of the king turned to Frankish hands, the corslet and the collar together) (*Beowulf*, ll. 1197–1204; 1210–11).

narrative, the *Beowulf*-poet reports the genesis of Beowulf's own legend and its intertwining with extant Germanic tradition:

Hwilum cyninges þegn,
 guma gilphlæden, gidda gemyndig,
 se ðe ealfela ealdgesegen
 worn gemunde, word oþer fand
 soðe gebunden; secg eft ongan
 sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian
 ond on sped wrecan spel gerade,
 wordum wrixlan. Welhwylc gecwæð
 þæt he fram Sigemundes secgan hyrde
 ellendædum [...]

(At times a thegn of the king, boastful man, mindful of poems, he who remembered a multitude of very ancient traditions, arranged other words, bound accurately; again the man cunningly began to rehearse Beowulf's undertakings and skillfully to deliver a constructed narrative, to exchange words. He spoke nearly all that he heard said about Sigemund's heroic deeds [...]) (ll. 867b–76a)

The juxtaposition of Beowulf with a member of the Volsung family, both intertwined with legends of dragon-slaying,¹⁰¹ foreshadows the future deeds of Beowulf as his narrative unfolds, yet this juxtaposition may also serve as a reminder to the audience that qualities of heroism and strength are repeated tropes in literary tradition, and that these types of characters, situations, and themes cycle in and out of various stories. Thus the tales of the Volsungs, Sigemund and Sigurd, in some ways, are progenitors of *Beowulf*, and the setting of the hall (as a center for the community's shared literary traditions) is fertile ground for the creation and dissemination of these narratives.

While modern scholarship classifies Anglo-Saxon poetry in terms of genres (epic, lament, gnomic verse, and riddles, among others), readers may observe that a single Anglo-Saxon text can contain qualities (or individual lines or verses) belonging to several

¹⁰¹ It is possible that the *Beowulf*-poet confused the deeds of the Volsungs, as he (or she) has Sigemund and Fitela kill the dragon, whereas in all other versions of the Volsung legend, Sigurd is the dragon slayer.

genres. *Beowulf*, for example, is a poem epic in scope and substantively heroic and legendary; concurrently, though, the martial exploits of the poem are interwoven with fragments of religious musings, gnomic utterances, and laments over a passing world. If a version of *Beowulf* similar to the one that survives to us had been performed in the Anglo-Saxon hall, its audience would have taken in not only monstrous fights and dragon-slayings, but also observations on the nature of life in this world and the proper behavior for a man and warrior. Here and elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon canon, the poets remind their audiences that the ultimate fate of each individual is the grave, thus, what each person accomplishes on earth is weightier. The *Beowulf*-poet reminds his audience:

No þæt yðe byð
to befeonne, fremme se þe wille,
ac gesecan sceal sawlberendra,
nyde genydde, niþða bearna,
grundbuendra gearwe stowe,
þær his lichoma legerbedde fæst
swefep æfter symle.

([Death] is not easily escaped, do what he will, but it shall seek out human beings, compelled by need, the children of men, land-dwellers, [each] will prepare a place where his body, bound to the sickbed, sleeps after the feast). (ll. 1002b–1008a)

This acceptance of humankind’s mortality is inevitably linked to knowledge of the cycling of honor and reputation through kin and generations. *Beowulf*’s words to Hrothgar following the abduction of *Æschere* provide a similar rumination on life and death, yet also announce to the audience the importance of winning honor while on earth:

‘Ne sorga, snotor guma; selre bið æghwæm
þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.
Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
domes ær deape; þæt bið drihtguman
unlifgendum æfter selest.’

(Do not sorrow, wise man; it is better for everyone that he avenge his friend than that he mourn much. Each one of us must await an end of life in the world; strive who may for honor before death; that is best for the lifeless warrior afterwards). (ll. 1384–89)

This preference for earning one’s reputation and honor as opposed to expressing an abundance of emotion works, as the poem suggests, to ensure a literary immortality once the body has passed away. Moreover, the benefits of an honorable reputation succeed from generation to generation; one need only consult the genealogies recounted in *Beowulf*, “Widsith,” or the comparable sagas of Old Norse culture to see that a glorious reputation can be attached also to one’s kin.

This presents a conundrum, however, for the society depicted in *Beowulf*. While honor in Germanic societies demanded that an individual seek vengeance for the murder of his (or her) kin or destruction of property, this necessity for blood-payment could spiral into a generational feud without end. Though it is a text that glorifies martial prowess, *Beowulf* is made more complex by its suggestion of the problems inherent in this constant warfare between nations, kin-groups, and individuals. The poet makes this observation early in the narrative when he contextualizes the initial attacks of Grendel:

	Wæs seo hwil micel;
XII wintra tid	torn gēpolode
wine Scyldinga,	weana gehwelcne,
sidra sorga.	Forðam secgum wearð,
ylda bearnum,	undyrne cuð,
gyddum geomore,	þætte Grendel wan
hwile wið Hroþgar,	heteniðas wæg,
fyrene ond fæhðe	fela missera,
singale sæce,	sibbe ne wolde
wið manna hwone	mægenes Deniga,
feorhbealo feorran,	fea þingian,
ne þær nænig witenas	wenan þorfte
beorhtre bote	to banan folmum.

(It was a great while; for the time of twelve winters the lord of the Scyldings endured misery, each of misfortunes, ample sorrows. Therefore [it] was clear to men and made well-known to the children of men, troublingly in songs, that Grendel for a while raged against Hrothgar, brought hostilities, outrages and violence, for many seasons, perpetual strife; he would not make peace with any of the men of the nation of the Danes, withdraw from violent death, settle with treasure; nor was there any advisor to imagine himself owed gleaming compensation from the hands of the murderer). (ll. 146b–158)

The use of “fæhðe,” a term evoking not only violence but also the sustained hostilities of a feud, to describe Grendel’s animosity toward Hrothgar, the Danes, or perhaps humanity in general, would indicate the systematic and cyclical qualities of his attacks. Thus, Grendel does not raid Heorot at random; he is returning violence for a previous perceived insult, threat, or encroachment. Yet several lines following, the poet makes clear that Grendel will not (or cannot) comprehend any means of reparation other than violence. Whereas Anglo-Saxon law allows for monetary compensation in the case of a murder, Grendel’s feud will not be satisfied in this manner. His “fæhðe” is, therefore, both rational and irrational, lawful and outside of the law.

That the poet refers to Grendel’s raids (and his mother’s raid) as part of a feud calls to attention the cycle of violence that such actions can beget, as well as the irredeemable violence that is often paired with martial exploits and “glory-seeking.” Hrothgar’s characterization of the attack by Grendel’s mother brings to light the negative consequences of Beowulf’s heroic defeat of Grendel. The king observes,

‘Heo þa fæhðe wræc
 þe þu gystran niht Grendel cwealdest
 þurh hæstne had heardum clammum,
 forþan he to lange leode mine
 wanode ond wyrde. He æt wige gecrang
 ealdres scyldig, ond nu oþer cwom
 mihtig manscaða, wolde hyre mæg wrecan,
 ge feor hafað fæhðe gestæled.’

(She has avenged that violence because you yesterday night killed Grendel through a violent manner with hard grasps, because he for too long diminished and destroyed my people. He fell in battle, having forfeited his life, and now another has come, a mighty enemy, and wished to avenge her kinsman, and has carried this enmity far). (ll. 1333b–40)

Clearly, Hrothgar articulates the systematic progression of violence from Grendel's original raids to Beowulf's fight with Grendel to the arrival and vengeance of this powerful "oþer." Though this progression serves a narrative function for the *scop* — obviously, Beowulf must now embark upon an even more perilous journey to exact vengeance for the missing Æschere — it also strikes a chord with the poet's previous characterization of Grendel's attacks as part of a "feud," and reminds the audience that the pursuit of violence rarely finds an end. We can observe textual and meta-textual cycles here. Within the poem, pursuits of vengeance create a cycle of violence that never truly ends, for even at Beowulf's funeral, his (almost) leaderless kingdom awaits the eventual raids of enemy nations. Thinking beyond the text itself, recitations of *Beowulf* for Anglo-Saxon communities may have exposed audiences to the dangers of pursuing vengeance *ad infinitum*, thus lessening the chances of individuals acting rashly or violently, and bettering individuals' and kin-groups' chances for survival.

Related components of the oral tradition that can move cyclically through communities and generations are pieces of wisdom pertaining to proper conduct and survival. Following the slaying of Grendel in the poem's first episode, the *Beowulf*-poet offers, "forþan bið andgit æghwær selest, / ferhðes foreþanc" (therefore understanding is everywhere best, deliberation of mind) (ll. 1059–60a); the passing on of wisdom is a widespread theme throughout Anglo-Saxon literature, and even texts such as *Beowulf* can provide gnomic offerings for the edification of an audience. Even more than entertaining

or educating, gnomic texts can help construct, solidify, and protect a community itself. Speaking chiefly about the gnomic lists of the *Exeter Book*, Magennis observes, “the poems which modern commentators have come to categorize as ‘wisdom’ poems [...] can be seen as inviting their audiences to share in the acceptance and appreciation of communal values.”¹⁰² Though this is true specifically of the scattered Anglo-Saxon “Maxims” and gnomes, Magennis’s observation should also be applied to those texts which blend genres, interweaving gnomic lines with elegy or with epic. In the performance and enjoyment of those texts which feature gnomic lines, individuals within a community affirm their bonds to each other and to their shared traditions and received wisdom.

Repeated performances at social gatherings through the years would thus ensure that audiences within each generation would hear and understand these texts and their common wisdom and themes. This percolation and circulation of texts and themes among social groups resembles the organic, cyclical movement of one resource or type of energy among the various inhabitants of an ecosystem and over seasons and years. The movement and transformations of texts and wisdom has much in common with William Rueckert’s contemporary vision of the function of poetry. In his essay “Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism,” Rueckert puts forward the idea of “poems as green plants”: “reading, teaching, and critical discourse are enactments of the poem which release the stored energy so that it can flow into the reader.”¹⁰³ If literary texts

¹⁰² Magennis, *Images of Community*, 2. Magennis cites T. A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge and Totowa, NJ: Boydell and Brewer, 1976), 1–4; Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1986), 253–79.

¹⁰³ William Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 110.

function as vessels for energy, then public performance releases that energy — or *wisdom*, in the case of the riddles, gnomic poetry, heroic poetry, or sermons — into a community. Moreover, passing on information pertaining to the protection of one’s life and honor in society (i.e., how not to lose one’s honor, wealth, reputation, or protection by a kin-group), would increase one’s chances of survival and procreation, thus fulfilling biological values of encouraging survival and growth, as well as social values. As a culture characterized by membership in a community, knowledge about proper social behavior was crucial for survival in the Anglo-Saxon world. An individual who did not conduct himself or herself according to accepted norms might face exile from the community, a fate akin to death, for it entailed a lack of protection from violence and a lack of shelter and status.

Several texts, including *Beowulf*, contain wisdom and warnings pertaining to temperance and consumption in public gatherings. Hrothgar’s description of the attacks on Heorot contains an implicit warning against drinking too much, lest one be unable to defend himself or his home:

‘Ful oft gebeotedon beore druncne
ofer ealowæge oretmecgas
þæt hie in beorsele bidan woldon
Grendles guþe mid gryrum ecga.
Ðonne wæs þeos medoheal on morgentid,
drihtsele dreorfah, þonne dæg lixte,
eal bencpelu blode bestymed,
heall heorudreore.’

(Very often warriors vowed, drunk with beer, over the ale-flagon that they in the beer-hall would await combat with Grendel with the horror of swords. When daybreak gleamed in the morning, then this meadhall, princely hall, was gore-bespattered; all the benchboards bedewed with blood, the hall with sword-gore). (ll. 480–87a)

One might argue that Grendel’s abnormal strength and savagery make it unlikely that even a sober retinue could defeat him, yet by juxtaposing the seasoned fighters’ consumption of beer with their pledges to defend the hall, the poet calls into question their abilities to perform necessary duties. A similar link between ale-swilling and “big talk” occurs upon Beowulf’s arrival, when he accuses Unferth of spreading untruths about his previous deeds: “Hwæt! þu worn fela, wine min Unferð, / beore druncen ymb Breca spræce, / sægdest from his siðe” (Well, my friend Unferth, drunken with beer you spoke before about Breca, you said a great many things about his undertakings) (ll. 530–32a). In this case, the poet reveals the social danger of drinking and speaking to excess; as Beowulf links Unferth’s alcohol consumption with his slanderous speech, we see that Unferth creates a dangerous situation for himself, for it leaves Beowulf free to question his rival’s honor and courage (ll. 581–601).

The dangers of intemperance are also illustrated in another text from the *Exeter Book*, “The Fortunes of Men.” This gnomic work, composed almost solely of observations on the unpredictability of life (thus including some particularly gory examples of possible ways to die), contains references to the joys of consumption and entertainment in the hall. Two of the text’s portrayals of drinking are relevant here, for the poet warns of the possible negative outcomes of over-indulging at a communal gathering:

Sumum meces ecg	on meodubence
yrrum ealowosan	ealdor oþþringeð,
were winsadum;	bið ær his worda to hræd.
Sum sceal on beore	þurh byreles hond
meodugal mægca.	Ðonne he gemet ne con
gemearcian his muþe	mode sine,
ac sceal ful earmlice	ealdre linnan,
dreogan dryhtenbealo	dreamum biscyred,

ond hine to sylfewale secgas nemnað,
 mænað mid mupe meodugales gedrinc.

(One on the meadbench the sword's edge deprives of life, angry ale-tippler, man satisfied with wine because he is too quick of words before. One shall be, through the server's hand, a man drunk with beer. Then he knows not to measure his mouth with his mind, but shall full miserably lose life, shall suffer great misfortune, deprived of joys, and men name him as a suicide, relate by mouth the carousal of drunks). (ll. 48–57)

In the first situation described here, a surfeit of alcohol causes an individual to speak without thinking and, as a result of his brash words, he is killed by a fellow carouser. In the second instance, the means of death is unclear; this individual's drunkenness has also impaired his speech or reason, yet there is no *clear* indication of homicide. At any rate, both descriptions feature a progression of excessive drinking leading to excessive speech and, finally, death at the hand of one's companions, by accident, or by one's own self. Placed in context, these portraits of drunkenness contribute to a larger poetic rumination on the lack of control that humans may have over their lives and deaths; this may suggest that death due to intoxication "just happens." However, unlike a number of the fates outlined in "The Fortunes of Men," i.e., death by starvation, being swept out to sea (l. 15), death in war (l. 16), being consumed by animals (ll. 12–13), and death by hanging (l. 33), death due to intoxication can be avoided if one adheres to proper social conduct. Consulting a range of Anglo-Saxon texts, we see a repetition of this theme.

Beyond *Beowulf* and "The Fortunes of Men," the *Exeter Book* riddle for mead (discussed earlier in this chapter) also addresses the dangers of intoxication. Following from the lines of this riddle discussed previously, this description of mead contains the versified clue:

Nu ic eom bindere
 ond swingere, sona weorpe

esne to eorþan, hwilum ealdne ceorl.
 Sona þæt onfindeð, se þe mec fehð ongean,
 ond wið mægenþisan minre genæsteð,
 þæt he hrycge sceal hrusan secan,
 gif he unrædes ær ne geswiceð,
 strengo bistolen, strong on spræce,
 mægene binumen— nah his modes geweald,
 fota ne folma.

(Now I am binder and striker, soon cast a youth to earth, and at times the old man. Soon that one finds, he who strives against me, and contends against my force, that he shall on his back seek the ground, if he before does not cease in folly, deprived of strength, strong in talk, bodily strength carried off — not at all ruling his mind, feet, nor hands). (ll. 6b–15a)

Immediately following the lovely tracery of the bee’s path over hill and dale and the bathing of the honeycomb in a fermenting vessel, the tone of the riddle turns violent and confrontational. As the “mead” describes its own effect upon drinkers who do not respect the drink’s power, we find a clear outline of the various and interwoven dangers associated with too much alcohol. The combination of “strengo bistolen” (deprived of strength) and “strong on spræce” (strong in talk) poses a doubled threat, for not only can the drinker not physically defend himself, but he is more likely to invoke the anger and violence of others by his inability to moderate his words. The last images here — loss of power in mind, foot, and hand — indicate a complete lack of defense and severe threat to survival for the drinker.

The riddle concludes with a question, a form common to these *Exeter Book* enigmata: “Frige hwæt ic hatte, / ðe on eorþan swa esnas binde, / dole æfter dyntum be dæges leohte” (ask what I am called, which on earth thus binds youths, foolish after blows by the light of day) (ll. 15b–17). This formulation merges the textual and vocal qualities of the riddle (“ask what I am called”) with the physical identity of the object — mead and its prerequisite ingredients. This blending of material and textual in the “voice”

of the riddle's solution, characteristic of the *Exeter Book* brainteasers, reflects the intertwining of agricultural production and versification occurring in Anglo-Saxon culture. As the riddle encapsulates and preserves the transformation of natural resource into valued commodity, so too do the texts of the riddling tradition become valued commodities, for their ability to entertain, to educate, and to affirm a community. Again, a performance of the riddle for "mead" (or a similar version of it) in public would have *depended* on an audience's awareness of the risks of intemperance *and* would have likely reinforced that bit of "common sense." In serving the social functions of simultaneously entertaining and educating, riddles, among other Anglo-Saxon texts, may have worked to ingrain certain bits of shared wisdom and "survival strategies" in their audiences, thus aiding Anglo-Saxons in their successful navigation of social living. As these texts, when performed, can both strengthen communities and impart crucial knowledge to the members of those communities, it is arguable that texts have ecological as well as social value, for they can help to ensure the survival of individuals and groups.

As demonstrated by archaeological and literary data, Anglo-Saxon individuals and groups found a greater means for survival by living in communities. Settlement patterns showing a clustering of many farmsteads or other smaller buildings around a central space — often a large hall — indicate agricultural communities that likely gathered for entertainment, exchange, feasting, ritual, and perhaps even protection in the hall. The hall itself is both a symbol and an actual structure: a representation of a long-gone Germanic royal tradition revisited in Anglo-Saxon poetry and a space that anchored agricultural settlements. However, even as we establish the hall as a figural and literal center-point — an *oikos* — for a human community, it becomes clear that we cannot

view this structure as inert; this space signifies the complex matrix of cycles and motions in which a person must participate in order to survive. While the hall provides protection and shelter, it must also be porous and allow a fluidity of movement for people, things, ideas, and processes through its doors. While we cannot truly recreate the Anglo-Saxon worldview in close enough detail to know how these individuals envisioned “home,” based upon what we find in literature and in the remains of settlements, if “home” is a place of protection, a place wherein one finds an identity, and the center of a person’s world, then the *community* — represented by and coalescing around the hall — may fulfill the function of “home.”

Yet an additional problem arises here: beginning an ecocritical analysis by focusing on the center of *human* existence instead of the world beyond human civilization may seem antithetical to the purpose; indeed, analyses of the cultural and literary functions of the hall tend to focus on the polarization between this “civilized center” and the chaos of the outside world. As Niles has it, the hall “serves as the radiant center of the hero’s social world,” and Heorot in particular is “a polar opposite to the dark nether regions where the Grendel creatures make their home.”¹⁰⁴ We are reminded of Howe’s observation that the hall is where Anglo-Saxons “gather to celebrate life and thereby *hold off the darkness that lies around them.*”¹⁰⁵ This consistent characterization of the natural world as dark, monstrous, and chaotic nearly becomes a trope in heroic Anglo-Saxon poetry; the polarization serves to throw greater light on the achievements of

¹⁰⁴ Niles, *Beowulf and Lejre*, 177. Conversely, the Grendels’ cave has been interpreted as an anti-hall, displaying many of the qualities of the human-constructed hall (underwater firelight, a roof below the water, weapons along the walls, and a protective barrier from the world above in the form of a lake full of sea-beasts). Further, the Grendels’ cave is the space to which both Grendel and his mother return after their depredations. That the cave is inhospitable (even horrible) to the human invader Beowulf suggests that it is only a “homely” space for the Grendels. See Kathryn Hume, “The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 3 (1974): 63–74.

¹⁰⁵ Howe, “Looking for Home,” 144. Emphasis mine.

humankind and to glorify the Germanic tradition of sword-wielding warriors and gold-giving kings.

Taking a broader (and almost genre-blind) look at ecological themes in Anglo-Saxon poetry and juxtaposing this with what information can be gleaned from material culture and archaeological studies, we find that a different portrait emerges. From this view, the concept of “home” widens from the gleaming center of the hall to the community of organisms that dwells in and around this center; likewise, the world outside the hall shifts from a place of darkness and chaos to a space intimately interwoven with the economic and cultural processes and exchanges occurring within the Anglo-Saxon settlement. By analyzing the cycling of verse and wisdom through the hall and through generations of people, we witness the transformation of materials and resources to artifacts, foods, and other luxuries and necessities. Too, just as Anglo-Saxon literature at times resists the modern impositions of genre, blending the qualities of riddles, charms, epic, and gnomic texts, we see an acknowledgement of the fluid movement of resources from natural settings to human settings, perhaps breaking down the long-observed polarity between what is “natural” and what is “human.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE ORDER OF THINGS

Moving outward from the central human *oikos* of the symbolic and literal hall, we encounter a wider agricultural environment, land claimed, cultivated, and otherwise managed by a human community. Della Hooke's research affirms that Anglo-Saxon charters "make reference to such things as 'the bean land', 'the oat land', 'the flax land', 'the wheat land', 'the barley acres,'" showing that, at least in some places, landscapes were cultivated with one crop for a long period of time.¹ In some ways, these appellations suggest a complete human domination over "claimed" land, through changing the function of the land itself by cultivating it with one crop, by declaring that it be called "the bean land," and by recording this new appellation in a charter so that it holds meaning for the generations who come after. Agricultural practice and legal composition show an impulse to "put things in their places," if for nothing else so that the landscape may be predictable and useful to its human inhabitants, and so that they can orient themselves within a landscape.² Yet these acts of cultivating, claiming, and naming reveal a more widespread way of thinking about the created world in Anglo-Saxon culture: a perception of things within Creation as being organized, ordered, and having their own "proper places." This way of perceiving the world is most obviously reflected

¹ See Della Hooke, "Discussion of 'Farming in Early Medieval England,'" in *The Anglo-Saxons From the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines, *Studies in Historical Archaeology*, vol. 2 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1997), 262.

² As Kelley Wickham-Crowley points out, "no visual maps existed for this landscape for most of the Anglo-Saxon period and peoples; maps were verbal instead. [...] Thus, to walk the bounds by naming the shape of the land in a common language both marked it and made memory the map, transferring man's vision and judgment to the landscape in words even as the landscape itself took up residence in the mind's eye." See Wickham-Crowley, "Living on the *Ecg*: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts," in *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 89.

in the Anglo-Saxon gnomic and “Creational”³ poetry, which will be discussed in this chapter.

At the same time, the examples of “the bean land,” “the oat land,” and “the barley acres” push back against this very worldview. The existence of these terms in the charters make us wonder about the contents of these fields and acres before they were cultivated. More than this, no matter what their designations, the borders and interiors of these cultivated plots of land would still have been permeated by different species of plants and animals, as “wild things” crept into those spaces (requiring human labor to ensure that “the bean land” does not become overrun with weeds or pests). The press of uncontrollable and natural elements into spaces that humans might have considered settled or set aside for one clear purpose is a reminder of the continuous motion within the created world, whether that be motion in terms of migrating species, spreading seeds, or turning seasons. The turning seasons, moreover, both challenge and affirm the identities of these cultivated plots of land. As weather turns cold and plants die, we must ask whether the barley acres are still the barley acres, if their produce is harvested, dormant, and unidentifiable under a covering of snow? Conversely, it is this very cycling of seasons that ensures the return of beans, oats, flax, and barley to the fields, as crops are sown and the grasses and legumes germinate and grow.⁴ Through the natural cycles of seasonal change, as well as human and animal labor, these particular designations of land keep their purposes and keep (or are kept in) order.

³ My own term. I use this to denote texts such as the Anglo-Saxon *Genesis*, “The Order of the World,” “The Gifts of Men,” “Cædmon’s Hymn,” and those selections from longer works such as *Beowulf* that describe the creation of the world.

⁴ Barley and wheat are self-pollinating, oats and flax are annuals and would thus require continued planting, and beans require structural support. Thus, these particular crops would have required varying levels of tending in order to ensure continued production on these plots of land.

This simple example of agricultural organization highlights two larger trends at odds with each other in the Anglo-Saxon conception of the world: everything has a place, yet everything is also subject to change and movement. As this chapter will show, the inhabitants of the world exist in a seemingly contradictory structure, tethered to each other and encircled by God, yet also subject to constant earthly motion. In this paradoxical system of organization, humans attempt to “(re)-order the world” through words.⁵ Using poems and narratives, Anglo-Saxon orient themselves and the other inhabitants of Creation not only geographically, but also in relation to the things and people around them, finding purpose and identity in these relationships and networks. Further, by acknowledging the concurrent order and disorder in the world, these texts allow people and things to settle into new places — to be reborn in new forms — while still maintaining connections with the things and spaces around them.

Ordering the World

From the outset of Creation in Anglo-Saxon poetry, the very act of genesis is paired with demarcation, separation, and an ordering of material that was previously “deop and dim, drihtne fremde, / idel and unnyt” (deep and dim, remote from the Lord, empty and useless) (*Genesis A*, ll. 105–06). In the poetic text known as *Genesis A*,

⁵ Yi-Fu Tuan points out that the process of rebuilding and repairing one’s home is also a practice of reestablishing order in a chaotic world: “to build is a religious act, the establishment of a world in the midst of primeval disorder.” Given the several instances in Anglo-Saxon poetry in which a *scop* sings the story of Creation, merging acts of verbal and architectural building, it is clear that both physical and verbal construction become ways for Anglo-Saxons to understand and control their environments. See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 104.

preserved in the tenth-century Junius manuscript,⁶ God’s survey and construction of middle-earth follows an account of the fall of the rebel angels. Once God commands that there should be light over the face of the earth, “þa gesundrode sigora waldend / ofer laguflode leoht wið þeostrum, / sceade wið sciman. Sceop þa bam naman, / lifes brytta” (then the Lord of victories separated light from darkness, shadow from splendor, over the waters. The Giver of life then shaped names for both) (ll. 126–29). With the creation of the first day, God sets in motion “æfen ærest. Him arn on last, / þrang þystre genip, þam þe se þeoden self / sceop nihte naman. Nergend ure / hie gesundrode; siððan æfre / drugon and dydon drihtnes willan, / ece ofer eorðan” (the first evening. The obscurity of darkness hastened and advanced after it, for which the King himself shaped the name night. Our Savior divided them; ever after they fulfilled and performed the will of the Lord, eternally over the earth) (ll. 138–43). Thus are the basic divisions of time created and set into constant motion before even flood is divided from firmament, water from land, human from earth, woman from man. Parallel with the creation of a new world, the first week is filled by a series of separations. To build a framework on which life can exist — to create a new *homeland* for living things — elements of time and space must be ordered, named, and given their proper places and courses.⁷

⁶ MS Junius 11 contains the poems *Genesis A and B*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, and *Christ and Satan*. The standard edition is George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 1, *The Junius Manuscript* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931).

⁷ This propensity to order and categorize the inhabitants and phenomena of this world is also present in classical works that would have been known to Anglo-Saxon scholastics, including Pliny’s first-century *Natural History*, Isidore of Seville’s seventh-century *Etymologies*, and Lactantius’s third-century *Divine Institutes*. For example, the structure of Pliny’s *Natural History* divides his catalogue into celestial and terrestrial phenomena, followed by an accounting of the landscapes and races inhabiting various regions of the Earth; human anatomy and arts; large terrestrial animals; marine animals; birds and small terrestrial animals; insects; domestic, foreign, fruit, forest, and cultivated trees; crops; medicines; flowers; drugs of floral and faunal origins; metals; arts; stones; and gems. This order suggests a hierarchy of observations, from high / global to low / elemental, and an organization of like with like. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon gnomic and Creational poetry discussed here, however, Pliny’s objective is encyclopedic in scope; the Anglo-Saxon texts are more concerned with the placement of each individual person or thing. Lactantius,

Looking to gnomic, riddling, and Creational poetry (all poetic subsets that seek to describe, order, and catalog elements of the natural world) we find that these texts ask us to consider “home” as a concept more broadly defined than the hall or the human community. These poems express a desire to put each animal, each thing,⁸ and each phenomenon in its proper place on earth, in an epic arrangement of *feorhcynna fela* (many living kinds) (“Maxims I,” l. 14)⁹ under one heavenly roof. With their descriptions of an earthly hierarchy, Creational poems place God, the master organizer, at the apex of the universe; humankind, created in His image, is placed on earth (and attempts to keep order here below, as well); the rest of Creation is subject to humankind’s uses and needs. Yet as these organisms and things are ordered into place by the poet, the poetry also betrays a fascination with the relationship of one thing to another, the points at which these humans, animals, and things meet, and how their identities are determined in relation to each other. Returning home to the idea of the Anglo-Saxon *oikos*, we also return to ecocriticism’s mandates to revise the traditional focus on “humanity as the measure” of all things, to destabilize our view of the world as existing around the central

too, observes that “the world and all its elements run to a wonderful system, as we see: order in the heavens, the measured progress of the stars and lights of heaven within their variations, the regular and remarkable differentiation of the seasons, the diverse fruitfulness of the land [...] are all constructed to a supreme plan” (book 7, chapter 3.25). See Pliny, *Natural History*, ed. H. Rackham, 10 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938); also Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, trans. by Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 396.

⁸ Throughout this chapter, I refer to non-human phenomena as “things” instead of “objects,” in the spirit of Jane Bennett and Bill Brown’s materialist ontologies. This nomenclature allows for a greater mobility around the subject-object binary and acknowledges a greater agency of the thing itself. From a materialist perspective, the term “object” may denote something that is denied voice, agency, and identity, and which is only observed or acted upon. A “thing,” however, defies the subject-object dualism, displaying voice and/or agency, and often confounds the human who attempts to identify, name, or otherwise objectify it. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2; also see Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2004), 1–22.

⁹ Like the riddles, “Maxims I” is contained within the *Exeter Book* manuscript. The standard edition is George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 3, *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

point of the human body, and to consider the world as home and habitat for a variety of living (and non-living) things. In this way, the earthly hierarchy described in Anglo-Saxon texts occupies not only a vertical axis of increasing divinity, but expands outward to show a horizontal plane of humans, things, and phenomena moving across the face of the Earth, affecting each other as they touch and diverge.

Ecocritical theory provides a useful perspective on the distinctions (or lack thereof) between organisms, things, and their habitats. In his essay “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy,” Neil Evernden discusses ecological theory as it relates to the boundaries between one’s self and one’s place in the world, questioning the existence of “discrete entities.”¹⁰ Evernden looks to the example of chloroplasts in a plant cell as, possibly, historically separate organisms, now existing in a kind of symbiosis with the cells themselves. Speaking to the intertwining of these organisms, Evernden asks “is a plant a plant, or a system of formerly independent creatures?”¹¹ Though these musings may seem far afield from Anglo-Saxon conceptions of Creation, the poetic visions constructed in “The Order of the World” and in the “Maxims” speak to the same idea of connectedness, of interrelatedness, between organism and place, thing and place, and thing and organism. As Evernden has it, interrelatedness, the “subversive tenet of Ecology,” forces us to confront the questions in culture and nature, “where do you draw the line between one creature and another? Where does one organism stop and another

¹⁰ Neil Evernden, “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 93.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

begin? Is there even a boundary between you and the non-living world, or will the atoms in this page be a part of your body tomorrow?”¹²

In her own materialist manifesto, Jane Bennett, speaking to an ecology of things, reminds us that this view of penetrable bodily boundaries and networks of atoms and actants is not limited to human physiology; that “things, too, are vital players in the world,” part of a “complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies.”¹³ Looking inward, she sees the workings of “thing power” within the human body:

it is easy to acknowledge that humans are composed of various material parts (the minerality of our bones, or the metal of our blood, or the elasticity of our neurons). But it is more challenging to conceive of these materials as lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical means under the direction of something nonmaterial, that is, an active soul or mind.¹⁴

Though Bennett’s perspective here is less ecologically-focused than it is ontological, the crucial connection between Bennett’s and Evernden’s ecologies of things is that, in observing networks of smaller things and networks within the human body, the body and its contents become neither subject nor object. Instead, “each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated.”¹⁵ Ironically, if we return to the vantage point of the human as microcosm of the universe, then this ecological

¹² Ibid., 95. See also Paul Shepard’s assertion that “ecological thinking [...] requires a kind of vision across boundaries. The epidermis of the skin is ecologically like a pond surface or a forest soil, not a shell so much as a delicate interpenetration.” Paul Shepard, “Ecology and Man — A Viewpoint,” introduction to *The Subversive Science*, ed. P. Shepard and D. McKinley (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 2.

¹³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4. “Actant” is a term used by Bruno Latour to define a source of action; “an actant can be human or not or, most likely, a combination of both.” Bennett gives the examples of a carving knife or carriage wheel as actants when they cause accidental death or injury to a person. See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 9. Bennett also defines “thing power” as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.” See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

network of things and processes within the human body — in which each part, however miniscule, operates both individually and collaboratively — must also be observable within the created world. In this way, Bennett argues, we may “take a step toward a more ecological sensibility,” in which we “experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally.”¹⁶

Though Bennett’s musings on thingness and assemblages are inspired by her observation of a constellation of debris in a storm drain in Baltimore in 2009, her observations on the vibrancy and vitality of things are still strikingly relevant to the medieval materials and animals preserved in Anglo-Saxon riddles and Creational poems. Her call to view things “more horizontally” resonates with our awareness of the expanding horizontal plane on which we can see organisms and things moving throughout Anglo-Saxon poetry, and the process by which they connect, change identities, and journey through space and time.

Everything in its Place

These intimate points of intersection between body and environment — points where discrete boundaries disappear and where one thing “becomes” another — are represented in the poetic linking between things and places in Anglo-Saxon gnomic verse. Yet similar moments are also attested in the riddles, in which the audience “witnesses” the mysterious transformation of one thing or animal into something new. In these instances, we see the careful poetic ordering of the world destabilized, as animals and things slip out of place, acquiring new identities and new places in their new environments. While this may speak to a simultaneous ordering and disordering of the

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

created world, texts describing the wonders of Creation and the timely motions of heaven and earth also suggest that these kinds of movement, change, and transformation from one “thing” to another, one place to another, are indeed part of an “orderly” existence on earth.

Anglo-Saxon accounts of Creation and gnomic poetry attest chiefly to the omnipotence of God, *meotud*, *wuldorfæder*, and *weard*, to His position outside of human time and at the apex of the created world, and to His might and wisdom in ordering the world in the manner that we observe. These texts, including the wisdom poetry known as “Maxims I” and “Maxims II” (alternately, the Exeter “Maxims” and the Cotton “Maxims,” after the manuscripts in which they appear), “The Fates of Men” (alternately known as “The Fortunes of Men”), “The Gifts of Men,” and the Genesis-inspired “Order of the World,” create a vision of the natural world (including human society) as a work of nearly infinite variety, but also of appointed place and of predictability. Early in the text known as “Maxims I,” the poet establishes types of multiplicity visible within the created world. To humans, God grants “missenlicu mod, monge reorde” (various minds and many tongues) (l. 14), while this widespread variety repeats geographically and across species, as “feorhcynna fela fæpmeþ wide / eglond monig” (many islands widely embrace numerous races of mortals) (ll. 14–15), and the “eardas rume” (spacious lands) (l. 15) contain “efenfela bega / þeoda ond þeawa” (as many of both peoples and customs) (ll. 17–18).

This principle of multiplicity also appears in catalogs of talents divinely appointed to humankind. Near the conclusion of a ghastly list of ways to die in “The Fortunes of Men,” the poet acclaims the variety of gifts given to individuals: “swa missenlice mehtig

dryhten / geond eorþan sceat eallum dæleð, / scyreþ ond scifeð ond gesceapo healdeð” (so variously the mighty Lord throughout the surface of the earth shares with all, declares and allots and maintains Creation) (ll. 64–66). These varied abilities are rehashed and expanded in “The Gifts of Men,” another *Exeter Book* text describing how God “monnum dæleð, / syleð sundorgiefe, sendeð wide / agne spede, þara æghwylc mot / dryhtwuniendra dæl onfon” (apportions and assigns to people his special grace and distributes abroad his own riches, of which each member of the community may receive a share) (ll. 4–7). Despite a staggering variety of different talents apportioned to humankind, mirrored in the variety of species distributed throughout the created world, the poetry enumerates an appointed place for everything within Creation. In the case of the “Fortunes” and “Gifts” of men, while these lists do not speak to one’s ecological fit in a specific niche, it is true that one’s talents or gifts would allow that person to occupy a certain place in a community or in the broader society. Thus, these poetic texts speak to an implicit ordering of the world that is explicitly voiced in the “Maxims.”

The Cotton maxims (“Maxims II”) display a desire and worldview that locates everything in nature — extending to human society — in its proper place. Among the more memorable observations in the poem are descriptions of animals in their natural habitats; thus “wulf sceal on bearowe, / earm anhaga, efor sceal on holte, / toðmægenes trum” (the wolf must be in the forest, miserable solitary one, the boar must be in the wood, strong in the force of his tusks) (ll. 18–20). At times, the observations contrast how animals’ bodies and capabilities are suited to their environments, thus “fugel uppe sceal / lacan on lyfte. Leax sceal on wæle / mid sceote scriðan” (a bird must play up in the air. Salmon must glide with trout in the pool) (ll. 38–40), and “fisc sceal on wætere / cynren

cennan” (fish must in water conceive its species) (ll. 27–28). The scope of the maxims further shifts between fantastic, human, and animal subjects, insisting that “draca sceal on hlæwe, / frod, frætsum wlanc. [...] Cyning sceal on healle / beagas dælan. Bera sceal on hæðe, / eald and egesfull” (a dragon must be in the mound, old and magnificent in treasures. [...]) A king must deal out rings in the hall. A bear must be on the heath, old and dreadful) (ll. 26–30). Finally, the maxims introduce social order, placing God in His rightful place, “on heofenum, / dæda demend” (God must be in heaven, judge of deeds) (ll. 35–36), and casting undesirables (both human and non-human) into lonely settings: “þeof sceal gangan þystrum wederum. / þyrs sceal on fenne gewunian / ana innan lande” (a thief must go in dark weather, a monster must remain in the fen, alone in the land) (ll. 42–44).

Shifts between maxims concerning non-human beings (be they familiar or fantastic) and humans, as observed here in the poet’s moves between the king in his hall and the bear on the heath, the thief in the gloom and the monster in the fen, reveal a major thematic movement in the maxims. While a primary purpose of these texts (as with much gnomic poetry) is to orient the observable world around a Creator figure, the maxims also prescribe acceptable human behavior and legitimize the established social order. Thus, “Maxims I” contains the somewhat straightforward observation that “eorl sceal on eos boge”¹⁷ (an earl must be on the back of a horse) (l. 62), yet follows this with a morally prescriptive series of dicta:

widgongel wif word gespringeð, Fæmne æt hyre bordan geriseð;
oft hy mon wommum bilihð,

¹⁷ Bogian = to inhabit; translated more faithfully, the line would be “the earl shall inhabit the horse.”

hæleð hy hospe mænað, oft hyre hleor abreoþeð.
 Sceomiande man sceal in sceade hweorfan,¹⁸ scir in leohte geriseð.

(A woman at her embroidery is proper; a widely-going wife spreads words, often a man defames her with impurities, men speak of her insultingly; often her countenance decays. A man feeling shamed must turn about in shadow; the pure man in the light is proper). (ll. 63–66)

Clearly the woman’s “proper” placement at her embroidery carries a different weight than the earl’s “habitation” (the truest translation of *bogian* is “to inhabit”) in the saddle; the remaining text indicates that she is best served by staying “in her place” — indoors, keeping her hands and mind occupied, to avoid the appearance of sexual scandal (and, apparently, a decaying complexion, brought upon either by sun exposure, licentious behavior, or both). This interweaving of traditional gender roles complicates the idea of place, as the woman’s role is not only to stay indoors and at her embroidery but also to be subject to the verbal power and judgment of men. Following this, the text echoes the warning of “Maxims II” concerning the thief in the dark and the *þyrs* in the fen, this time locating the guilty man in darkness and the honest one in daylight. Taken together, these aphorisms may seem ordinary and sensible — the man on his horse, the woman at her embroidery, the guilty hidden, the innocent in plain view — yet the organization of these statements alongside seemingly “natural” observations of animals in their habitats also reinforces a “proper” social order. As Carolyne Larrington says of the maxims in her analysis of Germanic gnomic poetry, “the demonstrable truth of the nature observations allows them to be matched with other less demonstrably ‘true’ maxims. The credibility of

¹⁸ Here, the verb “hweorfan” indicates the shameful (exiled?) man’s wandering about in shadow. For more discussion of this term, see chapter four.

the natural gnomes is transferred to the maxims concerning humans.”¹⁹ The placement of these figures (man, woman, guilty person, innocent person) in these positions on earth and either inside or outside society is a product of natural and, thus, divine order, yet we cannot help but see additional shades of meaning in these maxims. Obviously the *eorl* does not “inhabit” the horse; he must inhabit a house or hall of some kind, yet in this context — as a man with the title of “earl,” and juxtaposed in the text with maxims relating to peoples’ places in warfare — his place is on horseback. Moreover, he is of a social status and class that allows him to afford a charger and, by virtue of his title, is expected to lead an army; conversely, the woman, simply as a result of her gender, must remain at her embroidery in order to safeguard her reputation. Likewise, the guilty man must exist on the outside of society as a result of behaviors judged evil or unacceptable by that society, while the innocent man may walk abroad in the light. In this way, a person’s place on earth and in society is a result both of circumstances of birth (gender, social status, abilities), as well as one’s moral behavior. Consequently, the stratification, morality, and ethics of society become interwoven with the natural or divine order as described in these maxims, and thus society’s acceptance or rejection of individuals based upon their statuses and / or behaviors, while culturally constructed, is made to seem as natural as the bird in the air or the fish in the sea.²⁰

While the maxims legitimize societal structures by aligning them with the natural and divine order, so too do they carve out a place for the products of human industry, for

¹⁹ Carolyne Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense: Gnostic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 125.

²⁰ Fabienne Michelet argues that the maxims do not only seek to make natural the social order, but to recast the world around us in an idealized form: “in these maxims, making poetry clearly entails creating a new mental world. Their ideal portrayal of nature attempts to counterbalance the constant displacement that affects the fallen world’s population following the original banishment from Eden.” Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27.

things, within the natural world. Just as hawks, bears, dragons, and fish find their places in the known world of “Maxims II,” the poet also calls attention to weaponry, as “*darod sceal on handa*” (a dart must be in the hand) (l. 21), and ornamentation, including the gem on the ring and the boss on a shield (ll. 22–23, 37). Tracing the aphorisms of “Maxims I,” we find similar observations concerning crafted things:

Gold geriseþ on guman sweorde,
 sellic sigesceorp, sinc on cwene,
 [...]
 Scyld sceal cempan, sceaft reafere,
 sceal bryde beag, bec leornere,
 husl halgum men, hæpnum synne.

(Gold is proper on a man’s sword, a select ornament of victory; jewels on a queen [...] a shield must be with a warrior, a spear with a robber, a ring with a bride, a book with a student, the Eucharist with a holy man, and sins with heathens). (ll. 125–131)²¹

Though material things may not be considered part of God’s original Creation, they are governed by the same divine order *and* the same poetic order that encompasses the remainder of the created world.

Linking together the population of animals, individuals, and things in these texts, Larrington explains how poetic creation holds together the earthly Creation: “The idea that each thing in Creation, natural (wolf, bear), human (good man), man-made (javelin, jewel) has its own appointed place, combined with the interlocking half-lines produces a satisfying sense of fitness and order; evidence of God’s providential care for his

²¹ In the final three lines of this selection, a form of the verb “sculan” appears twice — in the a-lines of line 129 and 130 — and then is only implied in the subsequent pairings of *sceaft + reafere*, *bec + leornere*, *husl + halgum men*, and *synne + hæpnum*. While the grammatical meaning here is clear, it is interesting to note that, by eliding the verb from the final half-lines, syntactically, the poet pulls each thing and its bearer closer together in these pairings.

Creation.”²² Fabienne Michelet, in her analysis of Anglo-Saxon creation and conquest narratives, confirms the function of poetry in (re)structuring the created world. Of the maxims, she states, “the verses recreate the original, natural order of the world thanks to language which links one thing to one place: a hawk must be on a glove, a wolf in the wood, a boar in the grove, and so forth.”²³ Just as Larrington points out that the poetic and grammatical structure of the maxims link thing to place, producing “a satisfying sense of fitness and order,” Michelet notes the linkages of “one thing to one place.” Just as the poems tie animals and people to the places they inhabit, so too do inanimate things display intimate connections to other things or to people — i.e., a boss on a shield, or books with a student.

Yet as these poems create a world of interwoven people, places, and things, these inhabitants press at the edges of their appointed spaces. The “Maxims”-poet(s) state that the arrow belongs with the poacher, yet we know that to fulfill its function, the arrow must fly and penetrate the body of an animal or a person deemed to be threatening. Likewise, the Eucharist may begin with the holy man, but ultimately must be ingested and become part of the supplicant’s body. In a well-known description of a hawk on the glove of its master in “Maxims II,” the poet describes, “hafuc sceal on glofe / wilde gewunian” (a hawk must be on the glove, the wild thing remain) (ll. 17–18). Certainly, the audience knows that the hawk is equally suited to be at play in the air with the other *fugel* described in a later line of “Maxims II.” The poet himself admits this tension when he observes, in contradictory manner, that *wilde gewunian* — “the wild thing (the hawk) must remain.” Playing with possible meanings for *gewunian*, which can be translated as

²² Larrington, *A Store*, 132; see also Thomas D. Hill, “Notes on the Old English ‘Maxims’ I and II,” *Notes and Queries* 17 (1970): 447.

²³ Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, 26.

“to dwell, to inhabit,” or “to remain,” the text seems to remind us that the hawk does not dwell on the glove; it might originally dwell in a forest or (if captive) in a mew. Its place on the glove, however, produces a moment in which the hawk borders on both “wild” and “tame,” as it sits in contact with its human captor while preparing to launch itself into the air in search of prey. Though the hawk may be trained by its human captors to remain on the glove, it may still behave as a “wild thing,” pushing against its poetically ordained location on the hawker’s hand and its new identity as a captive and tame resident of civilized human society. This moment of contradiction, wherein the text suggests opposing forces of wildness and civilization and the hawk’s ability to slip between both, raises questions of how such oppositional forces can coexist within the hawk, and by what greater power the hawk is itself “kept in place.”

Poetic Architecture

Whether by divine decree or by poetic power, the creation of the world as revealed in Anglo-Saxon texts involves the linking of things to other things — even if these things may be entirely unlike or disparate. Looking to the language of “Maxims I,” we see instances wherein related (albeit perhaps conflicting) phenomena are linked together by means of the poetic techniques conventional to Anglo-Saxon texts. As early as the seventh line, the poet draws a comparison between the proper places for the divine and for humankind: “Meotud sceal in wuldre, mon sceal on eorþan” (the Lord shall be in glory, man shall be on earth) (l. 7). At first reading, this line communicates the division between the divine and the human. “God” and “man” each appear at the beginning of each half-line (line 7a, the first half, begins with the grammatical subject *meotud*; line 7b,

the second half-line, begins with another grammatical subject, *mon*), establishing first a separation — quite literally, *a pause*, when the line is read aloud — between the two subjects, as well as an independence, as each clause exists independently within its own half-line and each subject (God, man) is assigned its own object of the preposition (*wuldre* / glory, *eorþan*, / earth). Clearly, there is meant to be a comparison here; the parallel structure of the half-lines calls us to recognize the different places occupied by God and man, as well as the different natures of these beings (*meotud* / God is positioned first in the line, *mon* / man is secondary).

Despite the disconnections between divine and human created here, the conventions of the poetic line work equally to bring God and man back into harmony. Just as the parallelism of the half-lines invites us to contrast the relative situations of *meotud* and *mon*, so too does this structure suggest a mirroring of their states. Moreover, the Anglo-Saxon convention of alliteration — visible here in the repetition of the initial *m* of *meotud* and *mon* and the initial *sc* sound in *sceal* — performs an interlacing and cohering function for each line, in much the same way that end-rhyme creates cohesion among multiple lines in later English poetry. In Anglo-Saxon “poetic law,” half-lines must share at least one alliterating initial sound in order for the whole line to work properly; thus, the alliteration of *meotud* and *mon* not only binds the words themselves together due to their shared phonemes, but binds together the two halves of the poetic line. These same techniques appear quite often in “Maxims I,” inviting comparisons between substantively antithetical-seeming ideas and phenomena. Following a description of a king’s lust for power (“*cyning biþ anwealdes georn*,” l. 58b), the poet observes that “*lað se þe londes monað, leof se þe mare beodeð*” (hateful (is) he who

demands land; dear (is) he who offers more) (l. 59). Again, the poet draws a contrast between two opposed concepts — the loved and the loathed. Yet the placement of the adjectives *lað* and *leof* in the same position at the beginning of each half-line and the formulaic alliteration of the initial *l* (repeated in *londes* in the a-line) which links the two phrases also poetically bind together these two antithetical concepts.

This technique reappears in a sequence of lines describing the observable and predictable qualities and processes of earth. In four lines, the poet decrees, “forst sceal freosan, fyr wudu meltan, / eorþe growan, is brycgian, / wæter helm wegan, wundrum lucan / eorþan cipas” (frost must freeze, fire melt wood, earth grow, ice make bridges, the water bear a helm, wonderfully lock away the seeds of earth) (ll. 71–74). Again, the parallel positioning of “forst” and “fyr” at the start of each half-line and as subjects for each clause in line 71 links the two as well as emphasizes the inherent contrast between frost and fire. Moreover, the required alliteration within the line, here served in the initial *f* in *forst*, *freosan*, and *fyr*, likewise binds together these seemingly opposed phenomena. Moving forward, lines 72–74 contain a subtle and clever revelation of the relationship between *eorþe* (earth) and *is* (ice). Here, the alliteration occurs between the initial vowel sounds of *eorþe* and *is*, thus forming another connection / contrast between these two elements. As the line continues, they are revealed to function in surprisingly similar ways: as earth grows and burgeons, so too does ice “build” upon itself, as ice creates a bridge across the water’s surface (l. 72). The next line expands upon this process, characterizing the ice-bridge as a helmet borne by the water, then the text establishes a new idea carried over the next two half-lines: ice performs the wondrous function of “locking away” the seeds of earth, as seeds and roots lie dormant under the frozen ground

of winter (ll. 73–74). Thus, the fourth line of this sequence returns to the concept established in the second line (“*eorþe growan*”), explaining the interwoven functions both of the seemingly disparate concepts of earth and ice: both can “grow” (the earth grows greenery, ice grows water-helmets), but it is the freezing (“locking away”) quality of ice that precedes and allows new growth on earth, as seeds lie dormant in frozen ground; thus the final image of the sequence — *eorþan ciþas* — returns via a lovely circuitous path to the initial idea of *eorþe growan*.

In another instance of poetic coherence in “Maxims I,” the poet exploits the homonymic relation between two terms — *treeo*, tree; and *treow*, faith — to connect these two ideas. Teasing out the relationships between decay and growth, the poet observes, “licgende beam læsest groweð. / Treo sceolon brædan ond treow weaxan, / sio geond bilwitra breost ariseð” (a reclining tree grows least. Trees must spread and faith flourish, which throughout the breast of the innocent rises up) (ll. 158–60). In this case, though trees and faith may seem to have little in common, the poet puns on the shared term for each concept — *treow* — to elucidate how, in the natural order of things, living trees, when not felled, but planted firmly in the ground, must flourish and grow upwards; so too must faith, when residing in the hearts of the sinless, burgeon and grow. The double-meaning of *treow* provides a lynchpin in an extended exploration of the temporal, material, and decaying as well as the eternal, internal, and flourishing. Prior to the description of the felled timber, we find observations that “mæg god syllan / eadgum æhte ond eft niman” (God may give possessions to prosperous people and take them away afterwards) (ll. 155–56), speaking to the ephemeral nature of material wealth. This is followed by “sele sceal stondan, sylf ealdian” (a hall must stand; itself grow old) (l.

157), a related comment on the inescapability of age and decay on earth even for the hall, a sign of civilization and prosperity. Finally, this reference to the hall becomes even more relevant to the subsequent comparison of *treo / treow*, as Anglo-Saxon halls were timber constructions.

The widespread linking of ideas and things through poetic construction, whether it be through syntax, alliteration, homonyms, or metaphor that we see in “Maxims I” also occurs in “Maxims II,” this time as a result of the sequence and arrangement of half-lines within the poem. Beginning with the description of the hawk on the glove of line 17 and continuing consistently through line 41 and intermittently afterward, the poet arranges the text so that each description of a new thing or phenomenon begins in the second half of each line and continues through the first half of the next line, a kind of “overflow” of each description onto the next line of text. Several lines will serve to demonstrate this pattern:

Draca sceal on hlæwe,
frod, frætwum wlanc. Fisc sceal on wætere
cynren cennan. Cyning sceal on healle
beagas dælan. Bera sceal on hæðe,
eald and egesfull. Ea of dune sceal
flodgræg feran [...] ²⁴

(A dragon must be on the mound, old and magnificent in treasures. Fish must in water conceive its species. A king must deal out rings in the hall. A bear must be on the heath, old and dreadful. A river must go downwards, a grey flood). (ll. 26b–31a)

As I have indicated using bold and underlined typeface, we can observe the same alliterative coherence within individual lines that we see in all Anglo-Saxon poetry; the two halves of line 27 are joined by the repeated initial *f*, line 28 by the repeated *c*, and so

²⁴ Bold and underlined emphases are my own.

on. Yet the poet strings these dominating images — the old dragon, the spawning fish, the generous king, the terrible bear — over *two* lines. Thus, while the dragon first appears in line 26b, the image is not fully created until we come to the mid-point of line 27, at which point the poet introduces the fish, whose description “overflows” onto the first half of line 28, and this structure continues. While on paper, the effect of this arrangement may appear disjointed and perhaps even badly planned (as the description of each thing or phenomenon still requires two half-lines, the poet certainly could have focused each poetic line on one thing, making each unified and independent), this structure also works to build a sense of continuity among a series of independent observations, thus linking together these various animals and phenomena. Though the dragon is introduced in line 26, the modifying phrase *frod, frætwum wlanc* must share a line with another tenant — the fish. Moreover, as Anglo-Saxon poetic rules dictate that half-lines must cohere through alliteration, the adjective *frod* and dative noun *frætwum*, both referring to the dragon, alliterate with the *fisc* of line 27b. Thus, the old and proud treasure keeper is linked with the spawning fish not only within the space of the poetic line, but also (as we have seen in “Maxims I”), through sound. As I have indicated in subsequent lines, this trend continues: through concatenation, fish is linked to king, king to bear, and bear to river.

Speaking about the connection between musical or poetic and architectural talents suggested in the poem “The Gifts of Men,” Lori Ann Garner observes that, in these types of gnomic texts, the “typical Anglo-Saxon paratactic style ultimately leaves to its audience the task of discerning the actual relationships of these crafts to one another.”²⁵

²⁵ See Lori Garner, *Structuring Spaces: Oral Poetics and Architecture in Early Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 4.

Considering the seemingly random scaffolding of dragon-fish-king-bear-river, we may find less obvious points of connection between these animals and things that ask us to think about their places and behaviors in new ways. For example, bears hunt for fish in rivers and polar bears were considered valuable gifts to medieval kings; dragons have a hoard in a favorite place, while salmon in particular return “home” to familiar waters to spawn.²⁶ Though this particular sequence of gnomes focuses more on animals or beasts than other sequences in “Maxims II,” it is notable that as this “overflow” structure continues, things and phenomena of varying degrees of relation are yoked together: wood is linked to a hill (ll. 33–35), God to a door (ll. 35–37), a shield-boss to a bird (ll. 37–39), and, in a bit of word-play reminiscent of “Maxims I,” *treow* (faith) in a man is linked to a forest (ll. 32–34).

The maxim-poetry provides a window into the dizzying variety of phenomena on earth and the rules (natural and human-imposed) which guide these phenomena. Throughout, we see that the “rules” that poetic convention imposes upon the poet cause him to bind together like and unlike, revealing unlikely or obscure relationships and points of connection between ideas and things. This poetic “encircling” or “binding together” of things mirrors a worldview in which God has girded together Creation by the force of His will, an idea explicitly expressed in “The Order of the World,” and suggested in these independent gnomic texts.

In the Creational poem “The Order of the World,”²⁷ the poet begins his account of the making of the world: “Forþon eal swa teofanade, se þe teala cuþe, / æghwylc wiþ

²⁶ I am indebted to Jana Schulman for pointing out this particular chain of relationships.

²⁷ “The Order of the World” is contained in the *Exeter Book* manuscript. The standard edition is George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 3, *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936). “The Order of the World” is also a fascinating example of

oprūm; sceoldon eal beran / stiþe stefnbyrd, swa him se steora bibead / missenlice gemetu þurh þa miclan gecynd” (Forthwith He who knew well joined all together, each with the other; all would submit to firm control, as the Helmsman commanded in various measures through many generations) (ll. 43–46). This “joining together” of elements (*teofanade*, infin. *teofonian*) occurs again later as the poet catalogs the specific things linked by “the Helmsman.” Beginning with the familiar construction, “Forþon swa teofenede, se þe teala cuþe” (Forthwith he who knew well thus joined together) (l. 82), almost a perfect repetition of line 43, the poet describes that God fastens together “dæg wiþ nihte, deop wið hean, / lyft wið lagustream, lond wiþ wæge, / flod wið flode, fisc wið yþum” (day with night, deep with high, air with sea, land with wave, tide with channel, fish with waves) (ll. 83–85).²⁸ Though in the majority of this catalogue, clear opposites are bound together (day and night, air and water, land and sea), the final entry — fish and wave — is another instance of a thing located in its “proper place.” The place of this pairing in the sequence suggests that we might read the entire list of opposites as moving in a slow collapse toward each other; while day and night are antithetical, as the series progresses, things draw closer to each other (land and wave, tide and channel), and finally connect with the fish in the sea.

the role of the “woðbora” (a word meaning “poet” but also containing shades of meaning of divinity, madness, prophecy) to interpret the “signs” visible in the world and to see and separate order from the chaos of Creation, and, by bringing God’s work to light by constructing praise in poetry, to engage in a kind of Creation himself. For more on the roles of poet and poetics in this text, see Robert DiNapoli, “The Heart of the Visionary Experience: *The Order of the World* and its Place in the Old English Canon,” *English Studies* 2 (1998): 97–108; Bernard Huppé, *The Web of Words: Structural Analyses of the Old English Poems: Vainglory, The Wonder of Creation, The Dream of the Rood, and Judith* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1970); Ruth Wehlau, “Rumination and Re-creation: Poetic Instruction in *The Order of the World*,” *Florilegium* 13 (1994): 65–77; and Rafał Borysławski, “Wordhordes Cræft: Confusion and the Order of the Wor(l)d in Old English Gnomes,” in *The Propur Langage of Englische Men*, ed. Marcin Krygier, et. al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 119–32.

²⁸ There is an echo here of God’s words to Noah in Genesis 8.22, in which the opposites “seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, night and day” shall not cease.

Ensuing lines explain the method by which God pulls together these phenomena: “stondað stiðlice bestryþed fæste / miclum meaholocum in þam mægenþrymme” (they stand forcibly, established fast with a great belt of might in His majesty) (ll. 87–88). Bernard Huppé noted a similarity between this text’s conceit of the linking of opposites and Boethius’s “harmony of contraries,” described in *The Consolation of Philosophy* and translated into the Anglo-Saxon vernacular by King Alfred.²⁹ Too, the idea that God “girdles” all of Creation appears in Alfred’s *Meters of Boethius*, a lyrical version of the *Consolation*; for example, in “Meter 24,” he describes how “se mid his bridle ymbebæted hæfð / ymbhwyrft ealne eorðan and heofones. / He his gewaldleðer wel gemetgað, / se stioreð a þurg ða strongan meah / ðæm hrædwæne heofones and eorðan” (He with his bridle has restrained all the circle of the earth and of heaven. He his rein³⁰ well governs; ever he steers through powerful might the swift chariots of heaven and earth) (ll. 37–41). Though both “bridle”-bound and “belted” suggest the encircling of Creation, the latter may indicate more of a threat of chaos than the former. While the God of the Boethian *Meters* is akin to a steersman or a driver, using reins to control his subjects, the *meaholocum* (*meah*, might, power; *loc*, lock, bar bolt) employed by God in “The Order of the World” connotes more of an encircling and restraining of earth’s wayward and

²⁹ Specifically, Huppé discusses this Boethian influence in his commentary on *The Order of the World*. See Huppé, *The Web of Words*, 44. In book three of the *Consolation*, the narrator observes, “this universe would never have been suitably put together into one form from such various and opposite parts, unless there were some One who joined such different parts together; and when joined, the very variety of their natures, so discordant among themselves, would break their harmony and tear them asunder unless the One held together what it wove into one whole. Such a fixed order of nature could not continue its course, could not develop motions taking such various directions in place, time, operation, space, and attributes, unless there were One who, being immutable, had the disposal of these various changes. And this cause of their remaining fixed and their moving, I call God, according to the name familiar to all.” Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. Israel Golancz, trans. W. V. Cooper (London: J.M. Dent & Company, 1902), 95.

³⁰ For “gewaldleðer,” Bosworth and Toller suggest both “rein” and “power-leather.” While I love the idea of God holding the universe together with a “power-leather,” here I’ve opted for the simpler (though less amusing) image.

oppositional entities. Michelet clarifies this poetic conceit of the *miclum meahhtlocum*, the “great belt,” stating that “the world does not dissolve and each constituent go its own way precisely because God girdles creation.”³¹

Yet even in this vision of a Creation composed of contraries (in a binary system of language and perception), the poetic juxtaposition of day and night, air and water, land and sea, fish and flood calls our attention to the points at which the edges of these converse phenomena meet: to any observer, though day and night are conceived of as opposites, they are linked by sunset and dawn; so too are land and sea linked by the water’s edge, and air and water by the horizon. In these points of connection and overlap, we find a liminal space, an ambiguous space where the “order of things” may change and where new identities may be created.³²

Slipping Out of Place

The well appointed and properly ordered world described in the “Maxims” and in Creational poetry is, obviously, a portrait of the world in its ideal state. As we have seen, however, created things and organisms press at the edges of this order, and even as things are bound to each other (and to their opposites), often they threaten to slip out of place and, in doing so, to become something else. While texts such as the metrical charms — specifically, a charm for lost or stolen cattle (that will be discussed later in this chapter)

³¹ Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, 57. Juxtaposing the “belting” imagery of “The Order of the World” with an image of “Creation clasped within God’s hand” in riddle 40, Michelet finds similar meaning in the riddle: “Images of God encircling creation suggest that, to Him at least, the cosmos is an expanse that can be grasped. In *The Order of the World*, He holds all the creation ‘in his anes fæþm’, and in *Riddle 40*, creation says that: ‘folm mec mæg bifon ond fingras þry / utan eaþe ealle ymbclyppan’. The Creator holds the universe, He controls it” See Michelet, 58. I read this image from riddle 40 differently from Michelet, as I show in chapter six. See my translation there.

³² One example of the meeting-place of land and water — the fen — as a liminal space and a space where identities can change will be discussed in detail in chapter five.

— employ performance and poetic recitation to return lost animals to their original places, other texts, including the riddles, seem to revel in this slippage and movement. In particular, the Anglo-Saxon riddles reveal a certain fascination with things that move or fall out of place, and with what happens when something is not “at home” in the world, at times providing a parallel to the human experience of exile. Though exile, whether suffered by a human or another creature displaced from its niche, is most often associated with emotional and spiritual suffering,³³ various Anglo-Saxon texts suggest that the state of exile also provides opportunities for change or transformation, a process sometimes wondrous, sometimes terrible, sometimes both at once. By virtue of being “out of one’s place,” and in contact with other things and phenomena, it is possible that an individual can become someone or something else; hence, the trusted man becomes a stranger, the wise man becomes a wanderer.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the *Exeter Book* riddles provide ready examples of creatures and things which experience stunning physical (and sometimes emotional) transformations. In several of these short texts, the thing described by the riddler (or the transformation it has undergone) is characterized using some form of the word “wundor” (a wonder or a thing that elicits astonishment). The onion-riddle of chapter two describes its target as “wundorlicu wiht” (a wonderful creature) (l. 1); so too is the sword of Riddle 20 a “wundorlicu wiht, on gewin sceapen” (a wonderful creature, shaped in a fight) (l. 1); the jay³⁴ of Riddle 24 is “wundorlicu wiht, wræsne mine stefne” (a wonderful creature, [I] change my voice) (l. 1); and in perhaps the most famous of the riddles, the formation of ice in Riddle 69 is thus described: “wundor wearð on wege;

³³ The state of exile will be discussed in detail in chapter four.

³⁴ Under the listing for the verb “wræsnan,” Bosworth and Toller suggest that the solution to this riddle is “woodpecker.”

wæter wearð to bane” (a wonder formed on the wave; water formed bone) (l. 1). In several of these examples, the “wonder” of transformation occurs when one thing shifts its identity to become another: the sword is formed through the “fight” of the forging process; the jay changes its voice to imitate other birds; ice forms at the meeting-point of water and cold air. Excepting the riddle for “ice,” in these texts the things described (or describing themselves) all use the word “wiht,” defined as “creature.” Indeed, this term appears often throughout the riddles and is used to describe things as widely ranging as bagpipes, water, sun and moon, an amphora, a ship, a one-eyed garlic seller, bellows, a loom, a pipe, a rake, the Bible, an ox, a cock and hen, birds, and insects. From a purely practical perspective, one might argue that by describing its solution as a “wiht” / “creature,” the riddle gives no hint as to whether that solution may be animal, vegetable, mineral, or other. Yet another effect of the widespread use of this term is that it collapses the very distinctions (animal, vegetable, or mineral; person or thing; thing or phenomenon) with which we order our perception of the world (and our place within it). In this way, the “wiht” of each riddle perches between identities and forces us to question the point at which a “creature” becomes a human or a living thing becomes inanimate.³⁵

Yet not all of these transformations occur in the natural progression of a creature’s life; so too, not all of them are wonderful or wondrous. In many cases, creatures and things only undergo transformation (usually at the hands of humans) when they are displaced from their natural environments; at times, these changes in identity are curious or (to the speaking thing, anyway) terrible.³⁶ Riddle 53 sees a tree “on bearwe”

³⁵ Patrick J. Murphy discusses the use of “wiht” as a formulaic element of the riddles in Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 8–11.

³⁶ Here, I have chosen riddles that make clear reference to the “life” of the thing before it was harvested or appropriated for human use, in order to compare the thing’s “original state” with its new identity.

(in the grove) (l. 1), apparently joyous and flourishing in its intended niche: “þæt treow wæs on wynne, / wudu weaxende. Wæter hine ond eorþe / feddan fægre” (the tree was in rapture, the wood flourishing. Rain and earth fed him pleasantly) (ll. 2–4), until it is felled to be used as a battering ram: “he frod dagum / on oþrum wearð aglachade / deope gedolgod, dumb in bendum, / wriþen ofer wunda, wonnum hyrstum / foran gefrætwed” (old in days, he came to another state of misery, deeply wounded, dumb in fetters, bound over his wounds, covered in front with dark ornaments) (ll. 4–8). In this case, the riddler builds a disconnection between the ideal, original state of the tree in the wood and its new, “distressing” state, captured in words illustrating the tree’s new subjection and captivity. Instead of “weaxende,” the tree is now scarred, fettered, bound, and covered; as it becomes an inanimate “thing,” the tree suddenly displays a voice of its own and a memory of its time on Earth. Moreover, the ram now performs its new work alongside human companions — “Oft hy an yste strudon / hord ætgædre” (often they in a storm (of battle) plundered hoards together) (ll. 10–11). Beyond this newly violated and constricted state, the battering ram is now connected to another individual: “he” is bound to his human operator, as they plunder “ætgædre.” Over the course of time, as the tree grows “old in days,” it is forced to leave its original place and to serve a new purpose. Within the space of contact with its human operators, the tree-ram takes on a new voice, identity, and motility, as they plunder “together.”

A second riddle, this text describing a spear, follows the structure of describing an organism (in this case, a young tree) flourishing in its natural environment, then deprived of that proper place and undergoing a transformation into another thing. The “spear” recalls,

Ic on wonge aweox, wunode þær mec feddon
 hruse ond heofonwolcn, oþþæt me onhwyrfdon³⁷
 gearum frodne, þa me grome wurdon,
 of þære gecynde þe ic ær cwic beheold,
 onwendan mine wisan, wegedon mec of earde,
 gedydon þæt ic sceolde wiþ gesceape minum
 on bonan willan bugan hwilum.
 Nu eom mines frean folme bysigo

(I grew up in the field, lived where ground and clouds of heaven fed me, until they changed me, old in years, then made me cruel, from that native (place) which I before alive possessed, changed my manner, carried me from the earth, caused that I should against my form, submit for a while to a killer's will. Now I am busy in the hands of my lord). (ll. 1–8)

Like the tree of the previous riddle, here the spear-tree recalls its early life in a field, nourished by ground and sky. Both “tree riddles” indicate the proper (and ecologically sound) place for a tree — either *in wudu* or *on wonge* — by the fact that the tree is fed by and in contact with both ground / soil and sky / rain. Thus, for these texts, the harvesting of the tree displaces it not only from where it can continue to receive nourishment and to physically grow, but also from a place where it seems suspended between and connected to both sky and soil. Like the tree of Riddle 53, here the spear of Riddle 73 is clearly unhappy, referring to the process of transformation as one where it is now governed (not self-governing any more) by a killer’s will and forced against its nature to become something different. Like the battering ram, the spear is bound again to a lord’s hands and a killer’s will. As the spear is “carried” from earth and “busy in the hands” of its human operator, again we find that the displaced thing, once in contact with a new human actant, becomes a new thing with a new purpose.

³⁷ The use of the term *onhwyrfdon* (infin. *onhwirfan*), used here to describe the change from tree to spear, often appears in descriptions of human exile, denoting the constant motion and turning of the wandering exile, an indication that this young tree is indeed far from home. See chapter four.

A description of a mail-coat in Riddle 35 follows some of this same pattern; the text begins with an early “memory” of ore being taken from the earth itself, followed by an account of how the metal was fashioned into an item of use to men. The “coat” recalls “Mec se wæta wong, wundrum freorig, / of his innape ærist cende. / Ne wat ic mec beworhtne wulle flysum, / hærum þurh heahcræft, hygeþoncum min” (the wet plain, wonderfully frozen, from its insides first brought me forth. By my thought I know I was not worked from wool fleece, from hair through high skill) (ll. 1–4), establishing its native place below the ground, followed by a progression of statements differentiating its method of production from textile weaving. Despite the fact that the coat knows “Wyrmas mec ne awæfan wyrda cræftum, / þa þe geolo godwebb geatwum frætwað” (worms did not me weave by skills of fate, those which adorn fine clothes with gold ornaments) (ll. 9–10), it claims, “Wile mec mon hwæpre seþeah wide ofer eorþan / hatan for hælepum hyhtlic gewæde. / Saga soðcwidum, searoþoncum gleaw, / wordum wisfæst, hwæt þis gewæde sy” (a man wishes, however, widely over the earth, [to] call me a pleasant garment for heroes. Say in truths, keen in wisdoms, shrewd in words, what this garment is) (ll. 11–14). In a turn from the progression we have observed in Riddles 53 and 73, the mail-coat does not explicitly state that it is now bound to or governed by a human owner, nor does it express joy or anger at its transformation. However, individuals “wise in words” will be aware that this garment is, by its nature and construction, fitted to a human form. Further, the coat defines itself based on a series of negatives (“I was not constructed in this way”), and by the fact that it is “a pleasant garment for heroes,” thus forming its identity in relation to human industry (specifically, textile working) and binding its identity to the high status of its bearer (the warrior).

What the three preceding riddles (ram, spear, mail-shirt) have in common is that they are instruments of war, yet we see two different “emotional” responses to their appropriation and transformations: both spear and battering ram are unhappy at being displaced and used for violence; the mail-shirt is proud. It seems that the things’ emotional states are shaded by the actions they perform, in that the ram and spear perform acts of violence in plunder and killing, but the mail-coat protects its wearer and has meaning even as a luxury or high status item. Yet they all remember an early life elsewhere, in nature, and these “memories” may also influence the emotional responses of the things: both tree and sapling are already visibly alive in the field and forest, and thus would seem to be unhappy to be felled and changed.³⁸ In contrast, the metal for the mail-coat, at least from a human perspective, would have no form until it is given one by the work of the smith. While from a practical standpoint, the riddles provide these accounts of their things’ early lives in order to provide more clues as to what is being described, a secondary result of our hearing about the early lives of these things is that we are reminded that these naturally-occurring phenomena have been removed from their original places. This creates a sense that even when (as in the case of the mail-coat), these things seem happy with their new identities, there remains a suggestion that they are out of place, bound to humans and “forced” to do something new (and sometimes terrible).

Looking to items unrelated to war, we find similar formulae in descriptions of instruments of writing. The water reed of Riddle 60 recalls its idyllic early existence:

Ic wæs be sonde, sæwealle neah,
æt merefaroþe, minum gewunade

³⁸ One might compare the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Dream of the Rood,” in which the True Cross recounts its beginning as a tree on the edge of the forest and its subsequent transformation into an object of torture and death. Severely unhappy at first at the idea that it has been felled and changed to a shameful thing, the tree eventually expresses pride at bearing the body of Christ.

frumstaþole fæst; fea ænig wæs
 monna cynnes, þæt minne þær
 on anæde eard beheolde,
 ac mec uhtna gehwam yð sio brune
 lagufæðme beleolc.³⁹

(I was by the sand, near the sea-wall, at the surging of the waves, remained fast in my first place; few of any of the kin of man beheld my dwelling in the waste, but before each dawn the dark flood lapped me with enveloping waves). (ll. 1–7)

Like the trees of Riddles 53 and 73, which live their early lives between earth and sky, here the water reed describes its existence in something of a liminal space: the reed grows at the meeting-point of earth and water, on the beach. Also interesting to note here is that the reed recalls being lapped by watery folds “uhtna gehwam” (every dawn). Like the space between tide and shore, the early dawn might be considered a liminal space, falling between night and day. As we have seen before, the liminal places where one thing meets another seem to be particularly suited for transformative experiences. As we might expect, the reed experiences a transformation, “wundres dæl” (a bit of wonder) (l. 10), into a reed-pen. The narrating “reed” of the riddle marvels at the process,

hu mec seaxes ord ond seo swiþre hond,
 eorles ingeþonc ond ord somod,
 þingum geþydan, þæt ic wiþ þe sceolde
 for unc anum twam ærendspræce
 abeodan bealdlice, swa hit beorna ma
 uncre wordcwidas widdor ne mænden.

(how knife’s point and the right hand, earl’s thought and point together, join me with things, so that I should boldly proclaim messages for us two

³⁹ Repeated mentions of dawn or of an awareness of one’s own solitude at daybreak also appear in “The Wanderer” and “The Wife’s Lament”; too, these texts associate exile with water. It is possible that, similar to the repeated use of terms relating to “hweorf” to indicate a turning motion as related to exile, the dawn hour is a conventional means of communicating exile or solitude in the Anglo-Saxon poems. For more discussion of these tropes, see chapter four. Moreover, it is interesting to suggest that the reed (a non-human entity) is “reflecting” on its own exile, loneliness, or displacement on earth.

alone, so that more men would not speak our words more widely). (ll. 12–17)

Clearly less bitter about its own “wondrous” transformation than the ram or the spear, the reed-pen realizes its new identity through the craft and ingenuity of a human comrade. And while the reed recalls being “fæst” in its watery home, it compares the solitude of this original place, where “few of any of the kin of man beheld my dwelling,” to its newly communal identity, with which “I should boldly proclaim messages for us two alone, so that more men would not speak our words more widely.” Additionally, we see a complex network of things linked to the reed in its new identity as reed-pen; this new form is created through contact with the point of a knife and a right hand, and the reed-pen performs through connection with the earl’s thoughts. Removed from its liminal place on the shore, the reed-pen’s new identity takes shape within this new constellation of connected things — knife, reed, hand, and thought.

In Riddle 88, an antler describes itself in anthropomorphic terms — as one of a pair of “brothers” — where “eard wæs þy weorðra þe wit on stoda, / hyrstum þy hyrra. Ful oft unc holt wrugon, / wudubeama helm wonnum nihtum, / scildon wið scurum; unc gescop meotud” (the earth on which we two stood was on that account worthier, ornamented on account of us. Very often the forest concealed us, a helm of forest-trees in the dark nights, shielded us from showers; us two the Creator shaped) (ll. 11–14). Seemingly accepting of the buck’s natural growth and shedding (casting) of antlers, the speaker continues, “Nu unc mæran twam magas uncre / sculon æfter cuman, eard oðþringan / gingran broþor” (now our excellent kinsmen shall come after us, two (great ones), younger brothers drive us out of our land) (ll. 15–17). Here, the antler develops an

interesting variation on the pattern of describing one's early life: his “natural place” is on the stag’s head, a ground that “grows worthier” with the ornamentation of the horns. Further, this “ground” is likened to human property, passing through inheritance to siblings and kin when the owner falls. Following this, the antler’s new status as an inkhorn seems a lonely, unfamiliar existence, in stark contrast to his previous life as a “warrior” at his brother’s side:

ne wat hwær min broþor on wera æhtum
 eorþan sceata eardian sceal,
 se me ær be healfe heah eardade.
 Wit wæron gesome sæcce to fremmanne;
 næfre uncer awþer his ellen cyððe,
 swa wit þære beadwe begen ne onþungan.

(I know not where in the lands of men, in the corners of the earth, my brother must dwell, he who before lived high, by my side. We two were united in the fight; never either of us showed his strength, unless we two both stood out in the battle). (ll. 23–28)

The antler / inkhorn thus takes its identity not only from its familial “ground” atop the buck’s head, but also from its role as a warrior and its place beside its twin. Even when separated, the antler attempts to retain its bearing as a fighter, standing firm, yet this brave language is laced with the absence of his sibling: “Nis min broþor her, / ac ic sceal broþorleas bordes on ende / staþol weardian, stondan fæste” (My brother is not here, and I shall brotherless on the table’s end occupy my place, stand fast) (ll. 20b–22). Now, the inkhorn is “slitað” (wounded) by “unsceafta” (monsters) that “wyrdaþ mec be wombe” (injure me in the stomach) (ll. 29–30). Even without its twin, the antler finds a new “place” and identity as an inkhorn, determined by its connections to the table’s end and the stabbing “monsters” (likely quills) that draw ink from the horn’s “stomach.”

In similar fashion, the antler of Riddle 93 calls the stag his “frea” (lord), noting the animal’s suitability to survive in what (to humans) might be a challenging environment:

wod,
 dægrime frod, deo... ..s,⁴⁰
 hwilum stealc hliþo stigan sceolde
 up in eþel, hwilum eft gewat
 in deop dalu duguþe secan
 strong on stæpe, stanwongas grof
 hrimighearde, hwilum hara scoc
 forst of feaxe.

(waded/moved, old in his number of days [...], sometimes would go up lofty cliffs, up in his homeland, sometimes afterwards departed into deep valleys, to seek glory, strong in step, dug frozen-hard stony plains, at times hoar-frost shook from his hair). (ll. 5–14)

Again, the “property” of the stag’s head falls to a younger sibling, as “ic on fusum rad / oppæt him þone gleawstol gingra broþor / min agnade ond mec of earde adraf” (I rode in nobility until my younger brother usurped that seat of joy and drove me from that ground) (ll. 14–16). As in Riddle 84, the antler’s ultimate fate as a tool for humankind is characterized by negative description; it is wounded by “isern” (iron), cut hard by “stiðecg style” (stiff-edged steel), and “ic aglæca ealle þolige, / þætte bord biton” (I suffer all miseries/enemies, which wounded a shield) (ll. 16, 19, 22–23). Even the transformation and new identity as an inkwell holds no peace for the antler, for after “ic blace swelge / wuda ond wætre, [...] Nu min hord warað hiþende feond, / se þe ær wide bær wulfes gehleþan; / oft me of wombe bewaden fereð” (I swallow black wood and water [...] Now a plundering enemy, he who once carried widely the wolf’s companion,

⁴⁰ At this point the manuscript is incomplete or illegible; John Porter suggests that the missing text read “deope streamas,” thus the stag “waded through deep streams.” See Porter, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles* (Norfolk, England: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1995; repr. 2003), 126–27.

possesses my hoard; often having emerged from my womb, departs) (ll. 24–30). In this second “riddle within a riddle,” the antler / inkhorn describes how a feather (which once carried the raven, one of the Anglo-Saxon beasts of battle and thus comrade to the wolf), “plunders” the horn and steals black ink from its belly. In all respects, these things’ and animals’ behaviors are described in anthropomorphic ways (and mimic human social behavior): the antlers serve the “lord” stag and pass their “inheritance” to younger brothers; the antlers identify themselves as warriors and brothers when in their native place and “feel” the loss of these identities when they are transformed; and they still use the language of battle and feel wounds and shame as a result of their new homes and purposes. Further, each antler’s / inkwell’s new place and identity is created (and knowable) through the assembly of other things that surround it: the blades that hollows it; the wood and water within it; the enigmatic quill that steals its hoards of ink.

Throughout the Anglo-Saxon riddles, we see the power of the metaphorical to justify and naturalize human social order, for “analogy with the nonhuman can give human social orderings the veneer of a divinely ordained or essentialized law.”⁴¹ Figurative language has the power to break down boundaries between humans and nature; in other cases, nature exercises power over human behaviors *or* can be called upon to justify or *naturalize* social constructions.⁴² Thus, the antler’s reference to the buck as his “lord” becomes analogous to the human relationship of a retainer to his lord. Though the audience is conscious that the riddle speaks about this relationship metaphorically, we begin to think that the link between retainer and lord is (perhaps) as natural as that between antler and deer. Speaking about the function of the metaphor in

⁴¹ Sarah Stanbury, “EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature,” *The Chaucer Review* 39 (2004): 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Middle English texts, Sarah Stanbury concludes that “in its performativity, metaphor drawn from nature may even fulfill ecocriticism’s mandate of unsettling the binary law that splits nature from culture, human from nonhuman.”⁴³

If, as Stanbury suggests, metaphor unsettles a conventional nature / culture dichotomy, we see not only that the retainer is bound to the lord as “naturally” as the antler to the buck, but also that the tree is bound to both soil and to its new, human bearer; metal ore is bound to the substrata as well as to the smith and to its wearer. Likewise, the reed is bound to the sandy soil and to the human writer who gives it voice, the antler is bound to the buck, its brothers, and to the constellation of things and agents (knife, feather quill, black ink, table top, human owner) that remake it and bestow a new identity upon it. In this expansive web of connections and interactions between people and things, we see a reflection of Jane Bennett’s concept of assemblages of vibrant matter: “While the smallest and simplest body or bit may indeed express a vital impetus [...] an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.”⁴⁴ So too in the riddles do we see a more complex structure than a simple binary between human and nature, subject and object: we see things in various stages of animation and agency, subject to and reactive to the things around them.

Through human agency, we believe that we create, control, and change things, and through words we can name their new identities and sort them out, thus “re-ordering” the world and returning things, people, and phenomena back into their proper places. All of this perceived power, however, must be balanced by the observation (and acceptance)

⁴³ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 21.

that change and transformation are inescapable aspects of our existence as we move through time and space on earth. As we move “far afield,” coming into contact with new individuals, environments, and things, we ourselves change and are changed by these things, making our original homes less familiar as we move through the world in search of new spaces.

Moving Through Time

As Anglo-Saxon gnomic poetry takes care to locate things and organisms in place in relation to each other, these texts also anticipate movement and transformation as necessary in the natural world, especially when things and phenomena meet in these liminal spaces. Recalling the opening images of *Genesis A*, even as God divides light from dark, day from night, He also concurrently binds them together in an eternal progression. Thus, this act of divine binding extends beyond the expanses of earth to include the measurement of time itself. In this binding, time and space merge to a point where the passage of time is perceived through observing one’s surroundings, one’s physical space. This overlap in temporal and spatial perception still holds today; though “daily living in modern society requires that we be aware of space and time as separate dimensions,” they must also be “transposable measures of the same experience.”⁴⁵ This transposition of spatial and temporal experiences is observable in the Anglo-Saxon worldview, as well, as poetic selections convey the passage of time through spatial and sensory language.

⁴⁵ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 118–19. Tuan also observes that “the readiness with which we confound spatial and temporal categories is apparent in the language. Length is commonly given in time units. [...] The passage of time, conversely, is described as ‘length’” (p. 118). See Tuan’s chapter “Time in Experiential Space” in *Space and Place*, 118–35.

Both sets of maxims utilize the visual evidence of the passing of seasons in order to signify the passing of time. In “Maxims II,” the movement from winter to spring to summer to autumn is cast in both visual and tactile terms:

winter byð cealdost,
lencten hrimigost (he byð lengest ceald),
sumor sunwlightegost (swegel byð hatost),
hærfest hreðeade gost, hæleðum bringeð
geres wæstmas, þa þe him god sendeð.

(Winter is the coldest, springtime is frostiest, it is cold the longest, summer is fairest with sunshine, the sun is the hottest, autumn is the most glorious, it brings men the year's produce, that which God sends to them).
(ll. 5b–9)

While each season is described with superlatives (coldest, frostiest, longest, fairest, most glorious), the descriptors themselves reveal tactile (winter cold, hot sun) and visual (spring frost, bright summer sunshine, autumn's abundant fruit) signs of passing seasons and time. Similar seasonal descriptions appear in “Maxims I,” as this text explains that God is responsible for the calendar's motion:

An sceal inbindan
forstes fetre felameahtig god;
winter sceal geweorpan, weder eft cuman,
sumor swegle hat, sund unstillle.

(One must unbind frost's fetters, most mighty God; winter must pass (by), (fair) weather come again, summer hot with the sun, the sea moving). (ll. 74–77)

Again, although here the passage of time is divinely directed, the end of winter is signified by the visual and tactile evidence of the retreat of frost, and spring / summer is characterized by the renewal of heat and sun.

Another segment of “Maxims II” juxtaposes the lingering emotional state of grief with visual evidence of the passage of time. As the poet has it, “wea(x)⁴⁶ bið wundrum clibbor. Wolcnu scriðað” (Woe is wondrously clinging; clouds glide by) (l. 13), contrasting the perception that time stands still when one suffers with the gliding clouds as a visual testament to the continual movement of the winds and clouds across the sky as time passes.⁴⁷ In this maxim, human experience is set in opposition to the constant motion of time and space; while the human perceives time as sluggish or still during a period of grief, physical evidence reveals that the world and seasons continue on their journey around the individual. A similar link between celestial movements and passing time occurs in “The Order of the World,” as the poem follows the movement of the sun across earth’s surface as day moves toward night:

ond þis leohte beorht
 cymeð morgna gehwam ofer misthleoþu
 wadan ofer wægás wundrum gegierwed,
 ond mid ærdæge eastan snoweð
 wlitig ond wynsum wera cneorissum;
 lifgendra gehwam leoht forð biereð
 bronda beorhtost [...]

Gewiteð þonne mid þy wuldre on westrodor
 forðmære tungol faran on heape,
 oþþæt on æfenne ut garsecgas
 grundas pæpeð, glom oþer cigð;
 niht æfter cymeð, healdeð nydbibod
 halgan dryhtnes. Heofontorht swegl
 scir gescyndeð in gesceaft godes
 under foldan fæpm, farende tungol.

⁴⁶ As Dobbie notes in his edition of “Maxims II” in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, the manuscript has “wea” (woe), which he amends to “weax” (wax). With this change, the line becomes “wax is wonderfully sticky,” perhaps a more sensible maxim. However, anyone who has suffered a traumatic loss would likely agree that the original sentiment, “woe is wondrously clinging,” is as clear and valid as the less profound observation about wax. See Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 6, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 175.

⁴⁷ Larrington observes that in this maxim, “the tenacity of misery is finely imagined, balanced by the sense of a measured perspective on grief in the second half of the line: the thought recalls the refrain of *Deor*: ‘Pæs ofereode; þisses swa mæg.’” See Larrington, *A Store*, 131.

(And this bright light comes every morning over misty cliffs, moving over the waves, wondrously adorned, and with early morning hastens from the east, radiant and beautiful for generations of men; to each of those living it bears forth light, brightest of flames [...] The very glorious star then goes with splendor into the western sky, journeys with a host, until in the evening it traverses the ground/foundations of the ocean, the second twilight calls; the night comes after, holds the holy command of the Lord. The heaven-bright sun, gleaming, hastens over God's creation before the earth's expanse, traveling planet). (ll. 59–65; 68–75)

Obviously, earthly time is determined by the motions of celestial bodies, so the poet's description of the sun's travel through the sky from morning to evening is not surprising.⁴⁸ Considered alongside the descriptions of gliding clouds and the tactile experience of changing seasons in the Anglo-Saxon maxims, the sun's circuit across the sky in this text shows the movement of time through observable space.

A probable solution to *Exeter Book* Riddle 22 provides another example of the visual (and, again, celestial) representation of the passage of time. The riddle, variously solved as "circling stars" or the constellation known by the Anglo-Saxons as "*carles wæn* / Charles's Wain,"⁴⁹ describes sixty men on horseback borne over the ocean in a great wagon. Speaking to the related and intersecting possible identities of the sixty travelers (as well as analogues among Aldhelm's *Enigmata*,⁵⁰ and other "time riddles"), Patrick Murphy observes,

These voyagers often embody days, nights, weeks, and months, or other less abstract signs of the passing of time, such as lunar months or the paths of the sun and moon. The movements of the celestial Wain would be another such sign of cyclical time for Anglo-Saxon stargazers, its circling positions in the dark sky marking out both the hours of the night and the passing of the year.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ruth Wehlau points out in "Rumination and Re-Creation," 68–71, that "The Order of the World" develops a variation on Psalm 18, which contains imagery of the sun running a circuit through the sky.

⁴⁹ Murphy, *Unriddling*, 113.

⁵⁰ Dieter Bitterli cites Isidore of Seville's *De Natura Rerum* as Aldhelm's source for his description of Charles's Wain. See Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 64.

⁵¹ Murphy, *Unriddling*, 114–23; this quote p. 122.

Like the sun and the recurrent frost and fruit of the maxims, this constellation's movement through the sky (and its preservation in a poetic riddle) point to a perception of time being demarcated by the visual evidence of change on earth and movement in the sky. Further, the preservation of this constellation's journey in the riddle indicates that the audience would be aware of cyclical and seasonal changes in the night sky, as well as the assured return of the Wain with each night and each year, even alongside conventional descriptions of the progressive waste and decay of *middangeard*.⁵²

Poetic ruminations on passing days and seasons (such as these) thus create a link between space and time, and the understanding of the movement of time through earthly and heavenly space. Even the Anglo-Saxon language suggests a perceived link between space and time (or, at least, in methods of measuring them), as Michelet observes that the two concepts converge in the term “rum.” Says Michelet of this convergence, “*rum* is the Old English term referring to space, and it has numerous cognates in other Germanic languages. Here too, notions of space and time are combined, for the word can be translated either as ‘space, dimensional extent’ or as ‘space of time’.”⁵³ This overlap in temporal and spatial measurement may not be unique to Anglo-Saxon or even to Germanic linguistics; Alfred Siewers points to a similar linguistic convergence in Greek translations of Scripture: “just as Creation means both event and continuing landscape, so the Greek *aion* in Christian Scripture, meaning created interval, can be translated both “age” and “world.”⁵⁴ As there would seem to be both poetic and linguistic precedent for

⁵² For further discussion of the relationship between the cyclical and the linear model of time, see chapter six.

⁵³ Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, 19.

⁵⁴ Alfred K. Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 38.

linking spatial and temporal movement in the Anglo-Saxon worldview (not to mention similar linkages in other Germanic languages and Greek translations of Scripture), “order” in space may be linked to “order” in time. Accordingly, we must view the Anglo-Saxon concept of an “orderly world” as one in which both time and things move consistently *through space*. This may even suggest a view of the world in which nothing is still or static; though things and organisms may be linked to each other and to their habitats, we should expect that these elements are always in flux and motion. Texts such as the riddles and the metrical charms address this expected state of movement, as they give voice to things that attempt to slip out of place or that are forced out of place by people, circumstances, or natural progression.

Orderly Performance

Alongside the riddles’ evident fascination with movement and change are texts that speak to a desire to re-orient and re-order the world — to bring order to chaos, to bring home what is lost. The metrical charms, hybrids of Anglo-Saxon and Latin, ritual and magic, poetry and performance, provide directions for healing the sick, finding lost property, and making barren land fruitful again.⁵⁵ To accomplish these ends, the charms also make reference to movement through space and the progression of time. A “charm for unfruitful land” found in the BL Cotton Caligula A.vii manuscript calls for the performer to take up “feower tyrf on feower healfa þæs landes” (four turfs in the four sides of the land) (l. 4) and to demonstrate some knowledge of agriculture and botany by

⁵⁵ The metrical charms are preserved in various manuscripts and are collected in Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 6, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 116–28. For a detailed study of the formulae and contexts of the charms, see Felix Grendon, “The Anglo-Saxon Charms,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 22 (1909): 105–237.

collecting “ælcas feos meolc þe on þæm lande sy, and ælcas treowcynnes dæl þe on þæm lande sy gewexen, butan heardan beaman, and ælcra namcupre wyrte dæl, butan glappan anon” (milk of each of the cattle which are on the land, and a piece of each species of tree which has grown on the land, except for hardwood trees, and a part of each well-known herb, except only buck-bean) (ll. 5–8). While part of the charm must derive power from this bringing together of a comprehensive inventory of the land’s growing inhabitants, the call to collect turfs from “four sides” also speaks to the power of an expansive geography; the performer must bring in material from each direction in which the land extends. As the charm continues, both Christian and pre-Christian elements are brought together; the aforementioned ingredients must be mixed with holy water and brought to a church where a mass will be sung over them; cross-symbols are carved into rowan and the four evangelists are called upon, the Benedictus, Magnificat, and Pater Noster are sung and prayers offered to Christ and Saint Mary. Interwoven with these Christian blessings and elements are calls to a possibly pre-Christian deity (“Erce”) and “mother earth” itself, as the performer blesses a single seed placed upon a plough in what seems to be a pre-Christian invocation of the generative powers of earth.

Directions for these syncretic invocations also suggest an awareness of the connection between spatial and temporal orientation. Once the performer has collected, blessed, and returned the turfs to their original positions, he or she is directed to “wende þe þonne eastweard, and onlut nigon siðon eadmodlice, and cweð þonne þas word: Eastweard ic stande, arena ic me bidde [...] Wende þe þonne *III* sunganges, astrece þonne on andlang and arim þær letanias” (turn you then eastward and bow nine times humbly, and then say these words: Eastward I stand, I ask favors for myself [...] Then turn

yourself round three times, moving with the sun, then prostrate yourself fully and enumerate the litanies there) (ll. 24–26, 39–40). While this particular invocation in its full form borrows heavily from Christian blessings, the performance directions demand an awareness of and involvement with the geography of the land and with the passing of time. On one level, the speaker’s initial Eastern focus and rotation may represent a symbolic “re-orienting” of owner to land, as well as a tribute to the rising sun as necessary for growing crops.⁵⁶ However, the motion of turning sunwise from East three times also connects spatial geography to time in a tangible way; as the performer follows the sun’s course from East - South - West - North - East, he or she makes a survey of the land in four cardinal directions, linking the movement of time to movement over earth. The charm proceeds and the performer asks that “the Ruler of all” provide the “Mother of earth” with

æcera wexendra and wridendra,
 eacniendra and elniendra,
 sceafra hehra, scirra wæstma,
 and þæra bradan berewæstma,
 and þæra hwitan hwætewæstma,
 and ealra eorþan wæstma.

(fields flourishing and thriving, increasing and strengthening, tall stalks, resplendent produce, and broad barley crops and bright wheat crops and all the produce of the earth). (ll. 53–58)

In this context, the earlier sun rotation takes on a larger, metonymic meaning. Now, the movement of the sun over earth in a single day becomes symbolic of the movement of seasons, from planting to growing to harvesting, as evidenced by the tangible, “thriving” and “resplendent” crops on earth. The entirety of the charm demonstrates a thorough blend of old and new, pre-Christian and Christian, plant and animal, near and far; thus, it

⁵⁶ There may also be an additional Christian significance, as Eden was thought to be located to the East.

is no surprise that it also verbally and physically links time and space in order to “re-order” a field and return it to productivity.

Additional charms meant to return stolen or lost property (often interpreted as cattle) to the owners involve a similar directional and rotational element. Directing the performer first to call upon Bethlehem as the birthplace of Christ (likely to “center” the world around this one observable, known, and fixed geographical point), the charms require the performer to invoke the Cross in each direction. Facing East, the performer shall state, “Crux Christi ab oriente reducað” (the Cross of Christ lead [it] back from the East); facing West, “crux christi ab occidente reducat” (the Cross of Christ lead [it] back from the West); facing South, “crux christi ab austro reducat” (the Cross of Christ lead [it] back from the South); and facing North, “crux christi ab aquilone reducað, crux Christi abscondita est et inventa est” (the Cross of Christ lead [it] back from the North, the Cross of Christ was taken and was returned).⁵⁷ Like the charm for unfruitful land, the “lost cattle” charms also bring together spatial and temporal orientation (for we usually most easily identify cardinal direction based upon the position of the sun). These texts again traverse space and time, invoking a destination far away (Bethlehem) and a sacred relic long lost (the True Cross), while the performer orients the world around him or herself in the present. Further, the lost cattle / property charms demonstrate an acceptance that things may go missing or be stolen, and that one may employ a verbal and poetic directive to aid them in “finding their ways” back home. Taken together, the charms for land and for lost property acknowledge that the performer may need to reorder his or her

⁵⁷ A variant “lost cattle” charm found in MS 41, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, alters these invocations slightly: to the east, “crux christi ab oriente reducat;” to the west, “crux christi ab occidente reducat;” to the south, “crux christi a meridie reducant;” and to the north, “crux christi abscondita sunt et inventa est.” See van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, 126. In all, van Kirk Dobbie provides three versions of the “lost cattle” charm: two in the Corpus Christi manuscript and one in MS Harley 585.

world from time to time; moreover, they require the performer to unite geographical and temporal space in order to do so.

There and Back Again

Although the maxims, riddles, and Creational texts suggest a continuing idea in Anglo-Saxon poetry that things, animals, and phenomena occupy “proper” places in relation to each other, it also appears that an “orderly world” also includes the movement and transformation of these things, animals, and phenomena to different places and identities. Like any other earthly thing, at any given moment the sun and stars appear fixed in particular places; however, stepping out of this momentary view reveals that they are in fact always moving.⁵⁸ The circuit of celestial bodies across the sky confirms the motion of time through space; as time moves in a sure cycle, day to day, year to year, so too must things move through time and space in their own orbits or circuits. While some maxims and riddles express an anxiety (explicitly, in the case of the “fashioned-object” riddles) over movement from one’s proper place and subsequent transformation, other texts suggest that the motion of earth and time are natural, catalogued, and expected. Further, if we view time and space as tethered together in a continuous, encircling progression of days, seasons, and years in Anglo-Saxon poetry, it is possible that all things will eventually return to their “proper” places. Clearly, there is no guarantee that everyone and everything will come home again (and therein lives the anxiety of humans, trees, and discarded antlers), but this cyclical world structure suggests an inescapable pull back to the place where one began. In the case of humans, we are called back to the

⁵⁸ See my discussion of “momentary view” in chapter four.

interconnected arms of the community and the protecting roof of the hall, though this earthly structure may only provide a temporary cover in the long lifetime of the soul.

Appropriately, the created world is conceived, at least in some poetic texts, as an architectural structure resembling a hall. Though this would seem to conflict with a view of the world as constantly in motion, this metaphorical *sele*-world allows for things and individuals to move in and out through space.⁵⁹ As discussed in chapter two, the accounts of Creation expressed in “Caedmon’s Hymn,” *Genesis A*, and *Beowulf* designate God the Creator as Master-Builder, erecting the world as a hall with “heofon to hrofe” (“Caedmon’s Hymn,” l. 6).⁶⁰ Citing the nested Creation lyrics in *Beowulf* (the poet praises Hrothgar’s creation of Heorot; inside Heorot, the *scop* praises God’s architectural Creation through the medium of poetry, then proceeds to create his own heroic poem) several scholars have noted how texts such as this forge a link between poetic, architectural, and divine construction.⁶¹

If poetry constructs the world as a hall, this *sele*-world, like an actual hall, is a structure that permits movement within and without, through interior space and through exterior openings. As we have also seen in chapter two, the physical hall likely functioned as a central point through which various economic and social exchanges occurred; thus, things, people, ideas, and other materials (tangible and intangible) moved in, out, and through the central space provided by the hall. As Michelet observes, focusing on the image of the doorway as conduit for movement: “the door of the hall is

⁵⁹ As mentioned in chapter two, Bede likens the length of one’s life to “the swift flight of a lone sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thanes.” See Kevin Crossley-Holland, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 159.

⁶⁰ Michelet discusses the trope of “Creation and Architectural Metaphors” in greater detail in *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, 52–55.

⁶¹ See Wehlau, “Rumination and Re-creation,” 65–77; Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, esp. 37–73; Garner, *Structuring Spaces*, 3–20.

the gateway through which one passes from one world to the other. Boundaries therefore have to do with separation, but also with liminality: they are the point where ‘us’ becomes ‘not us’.”⁶² The idea that the world is figured as a hall (and that halls must, to serve their proper purpose, provide doors and other openings), suggests that, as part of a well-ordered Creation, we will move through and outside of it, from center to margins, becoming disordered in the process.⁶³ Moving through and outside the world-hall, as Michelet says, “we” may become “not us”; the civilized human becomes wild in poetry of exile, while natural things change form, function, and identity in the riddles. Further, if the *sele*-world is interpreted as life on earth, movement through the door of this hall may indicate movement toward old age, death, and the heavenly homeland, as “the boundary between two worlds is permeable and never secure.”⁶⁴

⁶² Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, 25.

⁶³ In Norse mythology, the warriors’ “heavenly” hall of Valhalla has 540 doors, some wide so that a troop of 800 men may pass through them; others allow the gods to look out and survey the world(s). See “Valhall,” in *Cassell’s Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*, ed. Andy Orchard (New York: Cassell, 2002), 375.

⁶⁴ Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*, 25.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE PATHS OF EXILE

Just as literature and physical remains suggest that the Anglo-Saxon human *oikos* was located at the center of the human community with its attendant social ecologies, a significant number of texts from this culture address the experiences and challenges one faces when he or she *leaves* the human community and ventures out alone into the wild. These texts have been grouped together by modern scholars (though it is notable that many of them were originally collected and preserved together in the tenth-century *Exeter Book* manuscript) as “elegies,” “laments,” or, more thematically speaking, poetry of exile. As Stacy S. Klein observes, the Anglo-Saxon elegies and poetry of exile “bear a special relationship to place, for such texts chronicle its loss.”¹ We can see this loss and memory of one’s place in poems such as “The Wanderer,” “The Wife’s Lament,” and “The Seafarer,” all preserved in the tenth-century *Exeter Book*.² These pieces all feature narrators divorced from human society, separated from the material and emotional comforts of life, and existing in an inclement, powerful, and unpredictable space. Exile also emerges as a major theme in the soliloquies of Adam and Satan from the scriptural poetry of the Junius manuscript and the descriptions of the monstrous Grendel and his mother from *Beowulf* in the Cotton Vitellius A.xv manuscript. In many cases, the individual’s foray outside the protection offered by human society is not voluntary; in

¹ Stacy S. Klein, “Gender and the Nature of Exile in Old English Elegies,” in *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 115.

² The standard edition is George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 3, *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

other cases, such a foray is intended as a spiritually purifying experience through the hardships of isolation and exposure in a space far beyond society.

Not surprisingly, it is in these texts that readers and audiences experience the closest glimpses of nature in Anglo-Saxon England, though these images have traditionally been interpreted by scholars as being formulaic or belonging to conventions of representation that tell us more about the author or poet's emotional, mental, and spiritual states than about the natural world.³ Yet in each of these texts (and in numerous others) the conventional placement of the exile in a place outside the boundaries of human settlement requires us to consider the ways in which the human succeeds or fails to survive in the natural world, and how the medium of poetry emphasizes the varying levels of familiarity of these spaces. To give a full view of the experience of the Anglo-Saxon individual "in the wild," we must first explore the concept of exile and how the idea of the human as exile permeates the poetry and spiritual worldviews presented in the Anglo-Saxon corpus. Second, we must analyze accounts, both in poetry and in prose, exilic and otherwise, of humans venturing out of their homes, to determine whether or not they are able to find new places and identities, or if they fall out of place (and out of time). Third, throughout this (and the next) chapter, we must (re)consider the concept of nature as unfamiliar, the realism with which poets and authors present the wilds of Anglo-Saxon England, and examine the idea of the unfamiliar "wilderness" or "wasteland" as a static space.

³ As Jennifer Neville argues, "[representation of the natural world] acts as a literary device, used to define what were apparently more important issues: the state of humanity and its position in the universe, the establishment and maintenance of society, the power of extraordinary individuals, the proximity of the deity to creation and the ability of writing to control and limit information." See Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 18.

Exile as Universal

Looking to the Anglo-Saxon poetry that springs from a monastic Christian context, with its convention of adapting Scripture for sermons and verse, we see the emergence of the concept that human existence in its entirety is one of exile. The scriptural poetry of the Junius manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11)⁴ treats exile as a paramount and repeating theme in the spiritual history of the earth. In the manuscript's poetic account of *Genesis*, God expels Satan and his multitude, casting them into exile: "Sceop þam werlogan / **wrælicne ham** weorce to leane, / helleheafas, hearde niðas" (He created for the troth-breaker a **foreign home** in retribution for his deeds, howlings of hell, severe afflictions) (ll. 36b–38).⁵ In a subsequent portion of the *Genesis*-poem, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise is cast in similar exilic terms; the Lord says to Adam, "þu scealt oðerne eðel secean, / wynleasran wic, and on **wræc hweorfan** / nacod niedwædla, neorxnawanges / dugeðum bedæled; þe is gedal witod / lices and sawle"" (you shall seek out another homeland, a joyless habitation, and **wander about in misery (or exile)**, naked poor wretches, deprived of the majesty of Paradise; for you is the complete separation of body and soul) (ll. 927–31).⁶ Again, the future of humankind will unfold in an unfamiliar, new homeland, and this separation from humanity's original home will be a sorrowful experience.

In each of the aforementioned examples, the concept of exile is articulated using the term "wræc," which has the primary definitions of the modern cognate "wrack," as

⁴ The standard source for poetry from this manuscript is George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 1, *The Junius Manuscript* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931).

⁵ In this and all subsequent quotations, I indicate terms I wish to emphasize in bold type.

⁶ In "Christ and Satan," another scriptural poem preserved in this manuscript, Christ recounts the history of the Fall of humankind, observing that they were in a favored position, "oððæt eft gelamp / þæt hie afyrde eft feond in firenum" (until then it happened that they departed/were expelled, after the devil in [his] outrages) (ll. 476b–77).

well as misery or suffering, suffering that comes as a result of punishment, and specifically, when the punishment is exile or banishment.⁷ While this term can broadly indicate misery or foreignness (both often appearing in Anglo-Saxon poetry as characteristics of exile),⁸ it is most often translated simply to indicate the state of exile, with all of that concept's attendant emotional associations.⁹ Looking to the linguistic roots of "wræc" and related terms in Old Frisian, Old Saxon, and Old High German, while the etymology of the word is problematic, it likely derives from the Proto-Indo-European *wreg-* or *werg-*, which denote actions of pushing or driving something off.¹⁰ While, conceptually, the state of exile carries the weight of emotional misery and solitude, etymologically speaking, the concept of exile is rooted in a physical action: the act of separating or driving one from his or her proper place.

Fittingly, the state of existence for humans after Adam and Eve (and even for a being such as Satan) following their respective transgressions against God is characterized not only as a punishment, but more specifically as a departure from home, a life in a foreign land wracked with miseries both physical and emotional. In a later section of the text, known as *Genesis B*, Adam's anticipation of his expulsion from Eden

⁷ "wræc," in Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 1269. Related terms include *wracian* (to be in exile), *wracnian* (to be or travel in a foreign country; to be a pilgrim or a stranger), and *wracu* (pain, suffering, misery); all listed in Bosworth and Toller, p. 1268. Terms used to express additional facets of exile include *elpeodignes* (state of exile); *aflïemed*, *elpeodig*, *fordrifen*, *forwraened*, *forwrecan*, *ofadrafed* (exiled, banished); *eardwrecca*, *fliema*, *todrifen* (an exile); *fliema*, *nydfara*, *nydgenga* (a fugitive, wanderer); *hleapere*, *woriend* (vagrant, vagabond); *fleon* (to go into exile). See Jane Roberts and Christian Kay, *A Thesaurus of Old English*, vol. 1 (King's College London: Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1995), 572–73.

⁸ In his analysis of the poetic formulae most commonly used to construct exile in Anglo-Saxon poetry, Stanley Greenfield identifies four common characteristics of exile: status, deprivation, state of mind, and movement; misery and foreignness certainly parallel or fall into several of these categories. See Greenfield, "The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of 'Exile' in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," *Speculum* 30.2 (April 1955): 200–06.

⁹ See S. A. J. Bradley's translation of *Genesis*, for example, in his *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Everyman / J.M. Dent, 1995), 13.

¹⁰ "Wrikan," in *A Gothic Etymological Dictionary*, by Winfred P. Lehmann (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1986), 410.

and the living conditions on Earth reflect his awareness of what he fears humanity's place in the natural world will become. Says Adam,

Hu sculon wit nu libban oððe on þys lande wesan,
 gif her wind cymð, westan oððe eastan,
 suðan oððe nordan? Gesweorc up færeð,
 cymeð hægles scur hefone getenge,
 færeð forst on gemang, se byð fyrnum ceald.
 Hwilum of heofnum hate scineð,
 blicð þeos beorhte sunne, and wit her baru standað,
 unwered wædo. Nys unc wuht beforan
 to scursceade, ne sceattes wiht
 to mete gemearcod, ac unc is mihtig god,
 waldend wraðmod.

(How shall we two now live or be in this land, if wind comes here, from west or east, south or north? If darkness comes up, if a storm of hail comes up, hastens from the sky, comes mixed with frost, which is violently cold. Meanwhile from heaven this bright sun shines and flashes hotly, and we two stand here naked, unprotected by clothing. There is no thing before us two as protection against storms, no thing of provision to mark out food, but mighty God, the Lord is angry with us). (ll. 805–15a)

According to Scripture (and elucidated in the Anglo-Saxon *Genesis*), by their transgression against God Adam and Eve bring about this new hostility between the environment and its human inhabitants; this explains the apparent hardships of living in the natural world for Anglo-Saxon readers or auditors. Adam's litany of fears shares many features — images of harsh and punishing weather, constant loneliness, and a combined imprisonment and compulsion to wander, for example — with Anglo-Saxon poetry of exile, including texts like “The Wanderer,” “The Wife's Lament,” and “The Seafarer.” In these poetic constructions, according to Jennifer Neville, “the looming power of the natural world is represented specifically in contrast with Adam's (and all of humanity's) powerlessness; the depiction of nature's power, in fact, is the depiction of

humanity's powerlessness."¹¹ Neville furthermore observes, "as the first 'Anglo-Saxon' exile, Adam is the model for all following generations and suffers the archetypal miseries of exile [...] Adam's lament does more than establish an archetype; it sets out the human race's new place in the universe."¹² Yet, as Neville suggests, we can make a distinction between Adam's lament (provided previously; *Genesis* ll. 805–15a) and the actual punishment delivered by God, articulated in later lines:

ac he him to frofre let hwæðere forð wesan
 hystedne hrof halgum tunglum
 and him grundwelan ginne sealde;
 het þam sinhiwum sæs and eorðan
 tudorteondra teohha gehwilcre
 to woruldnytte wæstmas fedan.
 Gesæton þa æfter synne sorgfulre land,
 eard and eðyl unspedigran
 fremena gehwilcre þonne se frumstol wæs
 þe hie æfter dæde of adrifen wurdon.

(but he for their consolation yet allowed there to be thereafter a roof, adorned with holy stars, and gave them ample earthly riches; commanded each of those races of the seas and earth begetting issue to bear fruit for the worldly use of the wedded couple. They settled after that sin in a sorrowful land, earth and homeland more unfertile in each benefit than was the first seat (from) which they were driven out after that deed). (ll. 955–65)

In this description of the first couple's fate, a balance is struck between punishment and provision; while the humans must endure life as exiles, living in a "sorgfulre land," less productive and welcoming than Paradise, God also ensures that they will have some comforts: the cover of the sky, the stars, and dominion over all other living things. This complex relationship between humans and the world around them can be viewed as defining the descriptions of nature in much of Anglo-Saxon poetry; while

¹¹ Neville, *Representations*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19–20.

some texts emphasize the fruits and productivity of the environment in sustaining humankind (for example, the *Exeter Book* riddles), others remind us of our essential “foreignness” in a world that is by turns threatening and delightful.

The Poetry of Exile

Though Adam and Eve hold the distinction of being the first (and standard-setting) human exiles, the recitations of exilic suffering captured in the poetic voices of the *eardstapa*, the *wif*, and the seafarer more fully explore the psychological, spiritual, and physical dimensions of the exile’s experience. The texts now known as “The Wanderer,” “The Wife’s Lament,” and “The Seafarer” present emotionally charged and vastly different portraits of individuals forced to make their way in the world despite a lack of human society. Ironically, the titular *eardstapa* of “The Wanderer” does not literally traverse the earth but instead “geond lagulade longe sceolde / hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ” (long must row with hands over the waterway, the ice cold sea) (ll. 3–4), though in the very next line he must “wadan wræclastas” (traverse the paths of exile) (l. 5), indicating a trajectory over land as well as water.¹³ The cause of the wanderer’s exile is not completely clear, but at various times during the poem, the persona mentions “wraþra wælsleahta, winemæga hryre” (evil slaughters, deaths of dear kinsmen) (l. 7), and “goldwine minne, / hrusan heolstre biwrah” (the darkness of earth covered my liberal prince) (ll. 22–23), leading this wanderer to seek out another patron. In this case, the loss of a protector and a community drive the wanderer into a state of involuntary exile.

¹³ Mentions of *wræclastas* (paths of exile) are a formulaic way of expressing the suffering of the exile. See Greenfield, “Formulaic Expression,” 200–06.

For the “wife,” the speaking persona of “The Wife’s Lament,” exile is also involuntary and caused by a loss of (and/or betrayal by) her husband and his kinsmen. After her *hlaford* leaves on a sea-voyage, “ða ic me feran gewat folgað secan, / wineleas wrecca, for minre weaþearfe. / Ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan / þurh dyrne geþoht, þæt hy todælden unc” (then I departed, to go to seek service, friendless exile, on account of my misfortune. The kin of this man began to think that, through secret thoughts, that they would separate us two) (ll. 9–12). Seemingly betrayed or rejected by her husband’s family, the wife recounts, “het mec hlaford min her heard niman, / ahte ic leofra lyt on þissum londstede” (My lord commanded me to take up residence here, I had few friends in this region) (ll. 15–16), and later discovers her husband “mod miþendne, morþor hycgendne” (with a concealing mind, resolving upon murder) (l. 20). Ultimately, the wife is separated from her lord, forced to abide “on wuda bearwe, / under actreo in þam eorðscræfe” (in a wood-grove, under an oak tree in this cave-dwelling) (ll. 27–28), where she sits alone during the “sumorlangne dæg” (summer-long day) (l. 37), lamenting and cursing the loss of her mate.

The “backstory” of the seafarer is less clear than that of the *eardstapa* or of the *wif*, but the text reveals that this character, like the wanderer, voyages over the water in winter, suffering physically and emotionally “in ceole,” (in the keel [of a ship]) (l. 5), thus likening his own body to the ship that delivers him. The language of his misery evokes several familiar aspects of exile; he describes “hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ / winter wunade wræccan lastum, / winemægum bidroren” (how I, wretched, inhabited the ice-cold sea in the winter, in the paths of exile, bereft of friends and kin) (ll. 14–16),

directly communicating his state with the term “wræccan,” and indirectly by his admission that he has no kin.

For all three personae, exile is poetically constructed according to convention: the term *wræc* (or some variant thereof) appears multiple times in each text, the exile describes him- or herself as “wineleas,” (friendless) and the state of exile is characterized by constant motion over the earth. This third characteristic of exile — the concept of a person in constant motion — is central to the existence of the *eardstapa* and to the seafarer, and perhaps to the experience of the *wif* as well. Looking more widely at the Anglo-Saxon poetic canon, we see that the paths trod by exiles are repeated images in these poems: the *eardstapa* is fated “wadan wræclastas” (to traverse paths of exile) (l. 5), and “warað hine wræclast” (the exile path preoccupies him) (l. 32); the seafarer lives “wræccan lastum” (in the paths of exile) (l. 15), among those who “wræclastas widost lecgað” (follow the paths of exile most widely) (l. 57). Likewise, an unfortunate man in the text “The Fortunes of Men” from the *Exeter Book* must “tredan uriglast elþeodigra” (tread the damp track of exiles [or foreigners]) (l. 29).¹⁴

This construction can even be seen in *Beowulf*, as Hrothgar describes Grendel as a being that “on weres wæstmum wræclastas træd” (in a man’s form traversed paths of exile) (l. 1352). Indeed, the *Beowulf*-poet suggests a landscape populated by such monstrous beings, lurking in darkness. Although humans cannot tell where or how they move about, there is no question that these beings do exist: “men ne cunnon / hwyder helrunan **hwyrftum** scriþað” (men do not know whither hellish monsters wander in

¹⁴ Cf. Satan’s description of his own expulsion in *Christ and Satan*: “Cuð is wide / þæt **wreclastas** wunian moton, / grimme grundas” (it is widely known that we were compelled to inhabit the paths of exile, savage lands) (ll. 256b–58a).

circuits) (ll. 162b–63).¹⁵ Though, here, the language refers to the motions of “helrunan” (hellish monsters) and not human exiles, the use of the noun *hwyrft* is similar to the poetic use of the verb *hweorfan* to indicate “turning, that is, the sense of departure into and consequent movement in exile” cited by Stanley Greenfield as a conventional way of describing exile in Anglo-Saxon poetry.¹⁶ The idea persists that individuals — monstrous, diabolical, or otherwise — who are not welcome in human society move in circles around the central figure of the hall or home. This presents two threatening possibilities: as a circuit is a closed path, exiles moving in circuits would effectively close off anything (or anyone) at the center of the circle from the outside world; yet a circuit is also a path wherein any point along the circle is equidistant to the center — thus the exile walking that circuit never approaches or gets closer to the center and never moves farther away, but is trapped as though in an orbit around that central point of the home. From the perspectives of both individuals — inside and outside the circuit — this situation creates various threats. The individual in the home *may* be warm and safe, but may also be threatened by unknown dangers outside of that space and, paralyzed within the home by these dangers, must contemplate the horrific experience of living in exile; the individual

¹⁵ Despite the textual emphasis on Grendel as a loner, the poet also suggests that Grendel’s life is not necessarily one of complete solitude. Soon after Grendel’s introduction, the poet notes that “fifelcynnes eard / wonsæli wer weardode hwile” (the unhappy man for a while occupied a dwelling of a race of sea-monsters) (ll. 104b–05). Likewise, during his fight with Beowulf, “hyge wæs him hinfus, wolde on heolster fleon, / secan deofla gedræg” (his heart was ready to depart, would flee to his retreat to seek an assembly of devils) (ll. 755–56). Though Grendel is *wonsæli*, his “dwelling” in the wilderness seems also to be home to various other monsters and demonic beings.

¹⁶ Greenfield, “Formulaic Expression,” 203–04. Other possible meanings for *hwyrft* include “turning, circuit, revolution, motion, course, orbit: way out, outlet,” and when appended to the genitive noun *geares*, “anniversary.” “Hwyrft,” in *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. J.R. Clark Hall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960, reprinted 2002), 200. Thomas D. Hill notes that this phrase “hwyrftum scriþað” also appears in *Christ and Satan*, describing Christ’s punishment of the souls of the damned. Hill traces the idea of wretched creatures moving in circular paths to Psalm 11.9 (“in circuitu impij ambulat” (the impious walk in a circuit)) and patristic commentary on this line which suggests that this circular motion is “an image of the ceaseless, pointless toil of the wicked which can never end, precisely because its object is unobtainable.” See Hill, “‘Hwyrftum Scriþað’: *Beowulf*, line 163,” *Medieval Studies* 33 (1971): 379–81.

outside the home must exist in a perpetual state of movement, threatened by other lurking exiles (or beasts) in the wild.

I Wonder as I Wander

The concept of the exile as forever in motion, forever on outdoor footpaths, and forever alone haunts these texts. Yet “The Wanderer” complicates the association of exile with movement, as the poet builds a frozen world of winter around and within the *eardstapa*. In this frozen world, the wanderer’s physical and emotional movements are coupled with paralysis and the watery, wintry environment of the poem gives image and physicality to this complexity. Early in the text of “The Wanderer,” the *eardstapa* laments his fate of moving across an “hrimcealde sæ” (ice-cold sea) (l. 4), observes that “hreosan hrim ond snaw, hagle gemenged” (ice and snow fall down, mixed with hail) (l. 48), and recounts the loss of his place in society, after which “ic hean þonan / wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind” (I, wretched, went winter-sad over the binding of waves) (ll. 23–24). The construction *waþema gebind* appears again more than thirty lines later, when the *eardstapa* laments that “cearo bið geniwad / þam þe sendan sceal swiþe geneahhe / ofer waþema gebind werigne sefan” (care is renewed in the one who shall send forth very often a weary mind over the binding of waves) (ll. 55–57). Describing the capacity of a wave (by definition a moving expanse of water *or* the movement itself) as *binding* reveals the creative technique of the poet in linking two seemingly opposed ideas, and in continuing to develop images of a frozen, unmoving world even in the constantly shifting environment of the sea.¹⁷ Beyond contributing to the wintry tropes of

¹⁷ The standard *Bright’s Old English Grammar and Reader* suggests two possible translations for *waþema gebind*: “the binding of the waves,” which could be a kenning for ice, and “the collective mass of waves,”

the poem, the image of “binding waves” further suggests that even though the *eardstapa* seems in motion over the waves, he is unable to make any progress in that environment, trapped on the outside of human society.¹⁸

As the poem’s persona broadens his view to encompass the larger world, it seems that winter’s reach extends as far as he can imagine. The *eardstapa* observes “missenlice geond þisne middangeard” (here and there throughout this middle-earth) (l. 75) long-standing earthworks beset by the wintery phenomena of wind and frost: “winde biwaune weallas stonðap / hrime bihrorene hryðge þa ederas” (earthworks stand, wind-beaten, frost-covered, storm-beaten the buildings) (ll. 76–77). These wind-beaten and frost-covered walls, appearing immediately before a description of decaying wine-halls bereft of the lords and companies of men that once filled them, associate the cold and harsh conditions of winter with stillness, lack, and loss of life. This theme recurs in later lines, as the *eardstapa* returns to the idea of cold as “binding” and twists together the now-familiar concepts of winter, darkness, lack, and suffering: “hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð, / wintres woma þonne won cymeð, / nipeð nihtscua norþan onsendeð / hreo hæglfare hælepum on andan” (falling frost binds earth, the tumult of winter, then dearth comes, shadow of night grows dark, sends from the north a fierce hailstorm as a vexation for men) (ll. 102–05).

The external world of “The Wanderer” — a world consumed by winter — also functions as a mirror for the internal sufferings of the poem’s persona. Just as the poet employs a series of freezing and binding images to construct the *eardstapa*’s

possibly referring to the entire surface of the ocean. See F. G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler, eds., *Bright’s Old English Grammar and Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), 325.

¹⁸ I use the term “progress” here in something of a modern sense, to indicate forward motion through one’s life to some goal, whether it be a physical destination or another accomplishment.

environment, those images are turned inward to define the wanderer's attempt to disengage from emotional turmoil and recurring memories. The speaking persona calls it an "indryhten þeaw" (noble trait) (l. 12) for a man, "þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde, / healde his hordcofan" (that he bind fast his breast, hold his heart) (ll. 13–14), and continues in this vein, stating that "forðon domgeorne dreorigne oft / in hyra breostcofan bindað fæste, / swa ic modsefan minne sceolde [...] feterum sælen" (therefore those fame-eager often bind fast sadness in their breast-coffins, just as I must my heart/mind... bind with fetters) (ll. 17–19, 21). Though these lines suggest that the act of binding one's mind and moods is commendable and voluntary, the *eardstapa* further suggests that forces of "sorg and slæp somod ætgædre / earmne anhogan oft gebindað" (sorrow and sleep at the same time together often bind the wretched solitary being) (ll. 39–40). While all men — not only the exile with his "ferðloca freorig" (breast frozen) (l. 33) — can experience this state of "internal binding," the text suggests that the experience is only noble or valuable when it is voluntary, when the individual seeks to create a division between a hard, stoic identity and his too-easily-flowing emotions. For the exile, however, the state of inner bondage may be forced upon him in order to contain feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, and loss. In each case, the "binding" of one's heart, mind, or spirit, thematically linked in this text to the binding effects of cold upon the earth, creates a duality between the exile, seemingly "dead to the world," and his or her internal emotional turmoil.

In the section of the poem from lines 15–60, the persona of the *eardstapa* displays a dexterity in moving between images of binding or freezing (especially with regard to one's emotions) and memories of past joys and losses. After the *eardstapa* praises the

“domgeorne” (fame-eager) (l. 17) for binding sorrow within their “breostcofan” (breast-coffins), he observes that

swa ic modsefan minne sceolde,
 oft earmcearig, eðle bidæled,
 freomægum feor feterum sælan,
 siþþan geara iu goldwine minne
 hrusan heolstre biwrah, ond ic hean þonan
 wod wintercearig ofer wawema gebind.

(just as I — often full of sorrows, deprived of a homeland, far from dear kinsmen — must bind with fetters my heart/mind, after I, in former times, covered my gold-prince in the darkness of earth and I, wretched, went winter-sad over the binding of waves). (ll. 19–24)

Though this modern English translation rearranges several lines for the sake of coherence,¹⁹ the original text slips back and forth between memories and the need to bind one’s mind and emotion. From lines 19 through 21, the wanderer’s memories of his *eðle* and *freomægum* are enveloped within his greater assertion that he must “modsefan [...] feterum sælan” (mind/heart [...] bind with fetters). Again, immediately after the phrase “feterum sælan,” the text reverts to “geara iu” (former times) and the persona’s “goldwinne,” (gold-prince) now himself contained or bound under the darkness of earth, before the *eardstapa* once more returns to the freezing image of his winter-sorrow over the binding of waves.

We might view this technique as an illustration of the very act of “binding” that the *eardstapa* espouses, as the memories re-visited here are bounded and contained by descriptions of frozen hearts, minds, and waters. Yet continuing on in this text, this movement between the *eardstapa*’s “present” musings on his condition and his memories persists. Preoccupied by the “wræclast,” (exile path) (l. 32), the *eardstapa* alludes to the

¹⁹ Due to the conventions of poetic composition in Anglo-Saxon (e.g., the requirements of rhythm, alliteration, and the dense use of appositional phrases), it is a relatively common practice for translators to rearrange the lines to allow for readability in Modern English.

twisting nature of a path, characterizing this track as “nales wunden gold” (not at all twisted gold) (l. 32), then refers again to his “ferðloca freorig” (frozen breast) (l. 33)

before revisiting the image of gold in the very next lines:

Gemon he selessecgas ond sincþege,
 hu hine on geoguðe his goldwine
 wenede to wiste. Wyn eal gedreas!
 Forþon wat se þe sceal his winedryhtnes
 leofes larcwidum longe forþolian

(He remembers retainers and receipt of treasure, how his generous lord accustomed him in youth to feasting. All joy perished. Indeed he knows, he who shall long go without the teachings of his dear friendly lord). (ll. 34–38)

Despite the wanderer’s perceived ideal of an exiled existence unencumbered by emotions or memories, even reflection on his present state triggers painful memories. While this persona repeatedly returns to the concept of his frozen breast,²⁰ the poem creates the effect of a mind that will not be stilled; for example, here the notion of a gold-less track of exile brings to mind treasures received and gold-princes entertained in the past.

Immediately following this section of the text, the *eardstapa* reveals that he is powerless to stop his mind from wandering among the ruins of his memory even during sleep:

ðonne sorg ond slæp somod ætgædre
 earmne anhogan oft gebindað.
 þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
 clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecge
 honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær
 in geardagum giefstolas²¹ breac.

²⁰ Internal concepts of mind, thought, heart, and emotion tend to meld in Anglo-Saxon poetry, with terms for ‘soul,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘mind,’ and ‘heart’ used interchangeably. M. R. Godden observes that “as perhaps follows from its location in the heart, the mind is seen as both a faculty of thought and a faculty of feeling or emotion.” See Godden, “Anglo-Saxons on the Mind,” in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R. M. Liuzza (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 284–314. This quote p. 303.

²¹ The *giefstol* (gift-stool), discussed in chapter two, is here used synecdochally to indicate the entire ceremony of gift-exchange.

(When sorrow and sleep at the same time together often bind the wretched solitary being, it seems to him in his mind that he embraces and kisses his lord and on his knee lays hand and head, just as he once before in days of yore enjoyed the ceremony of gift-giving). (ll. 39–44)

Yet again, we find the term “gebindan” used to express the *eardstapa*’s emotional state; in this case, however, it seems that it is not the wanderer himself who is attempting to lock up his heart and mind against his own emotional turmoil, but the emotion of misery itself (as well as fatigue) that freezes him.

Throughout this text, the poet steadily builds the contradictory themes of freezing and binding (both external and internal) and the fluid and uncontrollable ebb and flow of memory and emotion. These concepts tumble over each other and ultimately overlap as the persona of the wanderer attempts to use the power of his mind to steel himself against *the power of his mind*.²² As mentioned earlier, the poet’s use of the playfully contradictory phrase “waþema gebind” at multiple points in the text begs the question of how waves of water can move and simultaneously freeze or bind. Moreover, this construction also exemplifies the kind of ambiguity that we observe in the *eardstapa*’s behavior: while he simultaneously freezes his heart and mind, this experience also sends him into turmoil. The paradoxical “binding of the waves,” as well as the watery, wintery landscape instantiate the *eardstapa*’s isolation and coldness. Here, the environment serves not only as illustration of the confusion and contradiction of the exile’s punishment, but is inseparable from the wanderer’s own body and experience, creating an intersubjectivity between the *eardstapa* and his environment.

²² Similarly, Godden argues that the “The Wanderer” in its entirety “dwells on the separation of self and mind. It speaks of the obligation to keep the mind captive, to fetter it, and also of the compulsion to send it over the sea; uncontrolled, the mind hallucinates and fantasizes.” See Godden, “Anglo-Saxons on the Mind,” 305.

In a segment in which the *eardstapa* muses on the sea-birds that accompany him, the poet constructs a contradiction between the movement of a weary mind (“*werigne sefan*”) and the binding of the waves (“*wapema gebind*”):

Sorg bið geniwad,
 þonne maga gemynd **mod geondhweorfeð;**
 [...]

 Cearo bið geniwad
 þam þe sendan sceal swiþe geneahhe
 ofer **wapema gebind** **werigne sefan.**

(Sorrow is renewed when the spirit passes through the memory of kinsmen; [...] Care is renewed in he who shall send forth very often a weary mind over the binding of the waves). (ll. 50–51, 55–57)

Interestingly, in this description of a wandering spirit/mind, “*mod geondhweorfeð*,” we find a compound of the verb *hweorfan* (infinitive *geondhweorfan*, meaning to turn or pass through; go about; traverse), conventionally used to conjure the incessant wandering and turning of the exile over the earth. In this case, the poet implicitly compares the restless motion of the *eardstapa*’s mind to the path he physically treads (or rows) on earth. Interior thus mimics exterior in this text, and just as the wanderer’s frozen emotions mirror the frozen landscape of the poem, so too does his wandering mind mirror his wandering body.

Looking to the environment of “The Wanderer” may also illuminate the paradoxical concepts of “binding waves” and binding one’s mind against itself. In the poem’s closing lines, the persona of the *snottor*, the wise man, identifies the companionship of God, “*þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð*” (where for us all stability lies) (l. 115), as the only antidote for the chaos and mutability of the physical world. Throughout the second half of this text, in fact, the poet explores these themes of chaos

and mutability, looking to the natural world and the human community for illustrations of change and decay. Beginning with the observation that “þes middangeard / ealra dogra gehwam dreoseð ond fealleþ” (this middle-earth on each of all days falls and fails) (ll. 62–63), the poet revisits and refashions this idea, reminding the audience “hu gæstlic bið, / þonne ealre þisse worulde wela weste stondeð” (how ghastly it will be when all the wealth of this world stands waste) (ll. 73–74), conjuring images of “winde biwaune weallas” (wind-beaten walls) (l. 76), frost-covered and storm-beaten buildings (ll. 77), decaying winehalls (l. 78), and “eald enta geweorc idlu stod[an]” (the old work of giants standing empty) (l. 87), until finally “eal þis eorþan gesteal / idel weorþeð” (all this foundation of earth becomes empty) (l. 110).

Interspersed within this “theme and variations” on the decay of the world, we find maxims concerning the inevitability of death, conventional and elegiac musings on the loss of kin, property, wealth, and station, and reminders of the value of age, wisdom, and moderation as emotional armor against the tribulations of life in this world. Nevertheless, the visual reminders of earthly decay are a dominant feature of this text, and have a strange relationship with the imagery of ice and binding that dominates the first half of the poem. Beyond the *eardstapa*’s circular mentions of winter and freezing, the early lines of the text famously establish that “wyrd bið ful aræd” (fate is fully determined) (l. 5) and, in the voice of the wanderer, “oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce / mine ceare cwīpan” (often I must alone at each dawn bewail my sorrow) (ll. 8–9). The nature of *wyrd* as “ful aræd” communicates an intractability in future events, a type of “frozen” timeline in which the world continues forward yet allows no room for movement or change. Similarly, the wanderer’s ritual of lamenting his lot “uhtna gehwylce” indicates a

continuous movement of time as each day follows night, yet the wanderer himself seems to be paralyzed in this one space of time — *uhta*, the time of night just before daybreak — performing the same activity at the same time day after day, belying any progression or change. In this one line, paradoxically, the poet indicates both a forward (and cyclical) notion of time as well as the *eardstapa*'s fixation (or paralysis) in this one moment.²³

The forward motion of time is evidenced in the smallest environmental details in this text. As the *eardstapa* chronicles the loss of companions and armies, he visualizes what remains after the *comitatus* disappears: “stondeð nu on laste leofre duguþe / weal wundrum heah, wyrmlicum fah” (walls wondrously high, decorated with serpentine forms, stand now after the beloved company) (ll. 97–98). Anglo-Saxon material culture provides some clues as to what these “serpentine forms” may be. Germanic interlace, a design element and stylized way of depicting tangled beasts with elongated, serpentine bodies and limbs, is found in metalwork, manuscript decoration, and stone-carving from the Anglo-Saxon period.²⁴ While it is likely that the description of the walls as *wyrmlicum fah* is meant to indicate carvings of intertwined serpents, perhaps mimicking

²³ In contrast, Klein argues that the *eardstapa* and the Seafarer “are also highly adept at temporal movement, their skills most visible in their capacity for traveling back into the past and dallying within the former bliss of heroic life. Just as his literal travels both enable and symbolize spiritual progress, the male exile’s mental journeys back to the heroic world are also productive, allowing him to recognize that *seledreamas* (hall-joys) are merely transitory delights parading in the guise of true and everlasting *dryhtnes dreamas*.” In the case of “The Wanderer,” however, though we eventually hear the spiritually wise worldview of the *snottor* in place of the lamenting *eardstapa*, this persona seems to be less adept than Klein would suggest. His temporal and physical movement are repetitive and cyclical instead of linear or progressive, and (as I have argued) there are several instances in the text in which his environment seems to have more influence over his wandering mind than he does. See Klein, “Gender and the Nature of Exile,” 120.

²⁴ For examples of this kind of decoration in stone sculpture, see *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture, AD 600–900*, ed. Leslie Webster and Janet Backhouse (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 147–55; for examples in metalwork and ivory, see Webster and Backhouse, *Making of England*, 167–83. For discussions of interpretations and functions of these designs, see Ernst Kitzinger, “Interlace and Icons: Form and Function in Early Insular Art,” in *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland*, ed. R. Michael Spearman and John Higgitt (Edinburgh: Sutton Publishers, 1993): 3–15. For a discussion of the use of interlace decoration in Insular carpet pages as a meditative aid, see also E. Pirotte, “Hidden Order, Order Revealed: New Light on Carpet Pages,” in *Pattern and Purpose in Insular Art*, ed. Mark Redknapp, et al. (Oxford: Oxbow, 2001): 203–08.

the worked embellishments of the long-lost warriors' weapons, there are other possibilities. This mention of serpentine forms may also conjure images of walls overgrown with interlaced greenery, or the veins and paths carved into a rock face by years of rain streaming down the wall's surface. In the absence of a company of warriors to stand by the wall, we are left with the flourishing of plants or of the steady disintegration of rock by natural processes. In an ecocritical reading of this half-line, the "wyrmlicum," serpentine patterns of the wall might also bring to mind the work of worms in the process of breaking down organic matter.²⁵ Though the dominant idea conjured in these two lines is the lack of warriors beside the wall, the details of the physical world they left behind remind the audience of the continuing cycles of growth and decay at work on earth, more powerful even than a substance as hard, still, and "eternal" as a rock wall.

The poem's many variations on the ambiguity of concurrent motion and stillness may be related to the manner in which we view the world around us. Throughout the text, the immediate environment serves as a basis for the *eardstapa*'s exploration of the changeability of one's life: the constantly moving waves and water, the seabirds flying in and out, the earth decaying and falling to ruin all serve as backdrop and trigger to this persona's shifting memories of his own history. Moreover, descriptions of decay in the second half of the text attest to an awareness that the environment is constantly changing.

²⁵ Fred C. Robinson notes that *wyrmlicum fah* may be a translation of the Latin *vermiculatus* ("inlaid so as to resemble the tracks of worms, vermiculated"), which, with its emphasis on this image of the "work of worms," would support an ecocritical reading of the passage. Victoria Thompson also points to grave-markers and other memorial monuments carved (and likely painted) with serpentine or "worm-like" patterns, as evoking the transformative, chthonic symbolism of *wyrmas* in Anglo-Saxon poetry and culture. See Robinson, "Review of *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays* by Robert P. Creed," *Speculum* 45.2 (1970): 287; also Thompson, *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2004), 143–48.

However, when viewed by an individual at any given time, an environment or landscape may appear to be still, unchanging, or frozen, thus creating an inherent contradiction between the progression of time and the “momentary view” that humans experience. For the *eardstapa*, this momentary view is one from which there is no escape; as we have seen in the previous chapter, a foundational characteristic of the “orderly world” is the continuous movement of things and beings through space and time. Trapped in a circle of distant memories and momentary views of an unchanging wintry world, this wanderer has fallen out of place *and* time.

Through shifts from this momentary view to a historical one and shifts from inside the *eardstapa*'s mind to outside his body, “The Wanderer” creates an experience of conflict and contradiction for the audience. Though, ultimately, the poet/persona seeks to reconcile the mutability of earthly existence with the constancy and eternity of the spiritual life, his contradictory notions of time also illustrate the complexity of the state of exile. Like the unknown wretches wandering in circles on the outskirts of society, the wanderer faces twin tortures of paralysis (emotional and social, as he is unable to move into a community) and unending motion; he is faced with a landscape of a winter that refuses to end. By marrying the concepts of constant motion and the aforementioned imagery of winter — exemplified by the phrase “wape ma gebind” — this poem builds the environment of the exile as one of separation from people and from comforts, and of the conflicting condition of being in motion while being prevented from making any progress. This duality of movement/paralysis, which exacerbates the suffering and turmoil of the outcast, can also be observed in “The Wife’s Lament” and “The Seafarer,” though the complication is used in different ways and to different effects. While these

poems serve as suitable comparison pieces to “The Wanderer,” their personae end their journeys in dissimilar locations and mental states, presenting unique accounts of exile in a world of nature.

The Song of Myself

In “The Wife’s Lament,” which complements “The Wanderer” due to its shared exilic themes but presents an account from a female speaker, we can observe similar trends in the treatment of the environment and of the experience of exile itself.²⁶ In the very first lines of the poem, the *wif* establishes a dark tone for the remainder of her piece, hearkening to some of the language typically used to describe the state of exile. The speaker begins: “Ic þis giedd **wrece** bi me ful geomorre, / minre sylfre sið” (I utter this song about me, very miserable, my journey) (ll. 1–2).²⁷ Here used to signify the utterance (or, more physically, the expulsion) of words, the verb *wrecan* is also suggestive of the *wif*’s situation, as a *wræc*, one driven out or expelled from her community. In this interesting moment, as the wife sings the “song of herself,” in the very act of speaking the character must literally expel her own life-story, and the text and the persona are exiled together. Over the course of her story, we learn that the life of this character has been taken up by exiles and journeys of different kinds; in line five of the poem she begins a catalog of “minra wræcsiþa” (my exile-journeys), using the term *wræcsiþa* to indicate not only exile but also movement over the earth. Her first suffering occurs when her *hlaford*

²⁶ Cf. “The Husband’s Message,” another *Exeter Book* text, which may serve as a companion-piece to “The Wife’s Lament.” In this poem, another persona creates a more hopeful portrait of life for the wife once she has journeyed over the water to join her mate.

²⁷ In the standard *Bright’s Old English Grammar*, Bright translates the term *sið* as “plight” or “fortune,” whereas here I translate the term as “journey.” I have chosen this alternate rendering to maintain consistency throughout this and the following chapter, where compound appearances of *sið* (such as *wræcsiðas*) are translated to indicate a journey or path. Further, I prefer the term “journey” here as it indicates both the literal and metaphorical voyage of one’s life.

departs “heonan of leodum / ofer yþa gelac” (away from his people over the tumult of waves) (ll. 6–7), and she describes her sadness and anxiety as “uhtceare” (dawn-sorrow) (l. 7). Her own journey begins at this point, as she leaves to seek her husband’s kin but remains a “wineleas wrecca” (friendless exile) (l. 10) whose situation worsens when the kinsmen plan to separate the *wif* and her *hlaford*. Her lord commands her to take up residence in a wood, and she is again betrayed when she finds him planning murder; she laments the loss of love between them, “bliþe gebæro ful oft wit beotedan / þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana / owiht elles; eft is þæt onhworfen, / is nu swa hit no wære / freondscipe uncer” (with cheerful demeanor, very often we two vowed that nothing else except only death would divide us two; hereafter is that changed, it is now as if our friendship never were) (ll. 21–25). Here again, she relates that “heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe” (a man commanded me to dwell in a wood-grove) (l. 27), though it is unclear whether this has happened anew or if she is recapitulating the earlier command of her *hlaford*.

From the moment when her lord abandons her (the first journey of the poem), the *wif* calls herself friendless and journeys to join his kinsmen; there, she finds herself again friendless and betrayed, and departs a second time to inhabit the woods alone. Perpetually an exile once she loses the companionship of her *hlaford*, this speaker suffers from a lack of community, so that even when she has joined her lord’s kin, she is an outcast. In addition to her two physical journeys (one across the sea and another into the woods), even when she finds herself dwelling in the earth-cave, the wife laments, “ic on uhtan ana gonge / under actreo geond þas eorðscrafu” (I alone at each daybreak walk under the oak-tree throughout this cave-dwelling) (ll. 35–36). As she continues her unending movement

within the confines of her cave, even in her exile, the *wif* knows no rest. In the next lines, while we find a suggestion of physical stillness, the wandering mind of the *wif* allows her no peace from her former torments: “þær ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg, / þær ic wepan mæg mine **wræcsiþas**, / earfoþa fela” (there I must sit the summer-long day, where I may mourn my journeys of exile, many hardships) (ll. 37–39). Here again, the term *wræcsiþas* emphasizes the state of exile as one of motion, reminding us not only of the present isolation of the *wif*, but also of the inescapable paths that she has traveled and must continue to travel.

Despite the *wif*'s history of journeys and the suggestion that, even in her static exile, she is in motion, the text contains language indicating a paralysis of emotion similar to what we find in “The Wanderer.” Though the persona of the *wif* does not attempt to bind her emotions as the *eardstapa* does, she repeatedly refers to her “longing,” seeming to be trapped in this emotional state. At the point in her story when the *wif* departs from her homeland to join her husband's kin and finds herself separated from him, she recalls, “wit gewidost in woruldrice / lifdon laðlicost, ond mec **longade**” (we lived as far apart as possible in the earthly kingdom, most unpleasantly, and I yearned) (ll. 13–14). The *wif* returns to the concept of yearning in her description of her new dwelling in the woods: “Eald is þes eorðsele, eal ic eom **oflongad**” (Old is this earth-hall; I am all longing) (l. 29), following this with a complaint over the dark and forbidding landscape, and the admission that “ful oft mec her wraþe begeat / fromsiþ frean” (very often here the departure of my lord seized me grievously) (ll. 32–33). At this point, the *wif* has become consumed by her emotional state, identifying herself *as* the feeling of longing itself, and uncontrollably “seized” or “taken” by the memory of her

lord's leaving. She refers to the inescapability of longing several lines later, lamenting, "forþon ic æfre ne mæg / þære modceare minre gerestan, / ne ealles þæs **longapes** þe mec on þissum life begeat" (because of this I may never rest from these sorrows of mine, nor from all these longings that have seized me in this life) (ll. 39–41). Whereas the *eardstapa* vacillates between suffering through his memories and binding them within himself, the *wif* expresses her emotions freely, making no effort to bind them; instead, she defines herself as bound, seized, trapped by longing.²⁸ Though these speakers describe different types of emotional paralysis, in each poem, the experience of paralysis is concurrent with constant motion, and each state is inescapable.²⁹

Looking at the temporal elements of these poems, just as the *eardstapa* finds himself repeating the same actions each day before dawn, so too is the *wif* trapped in a similar pattern. She describes how "ic on **uhtan** ana gonge / under actreo geond þas eorðscrafu" (I at each daybreak walk under the oak tree throughout this cave-dwelling) (ll. 35–36), daily repeating the action of walking around her new dwelling,³⁰ and at a time — *uhta* — that she earlier mentions in connection with suffering: "hæfde ic **uht**ceare / hwær min leodfruma londes wære" (I had dawn-sorrow over where my prince was in the land) (ll. 7–8). As discussed earlier, *uhta*, this space of time before dawn, is the time at

²⁸ Cf. Klein's reading of the Wife's "emotions as external forces that take hold of her, ceaselessly restricting her movement but never permitting real rest." Klein also comments on the repetition of "longing" in this section. See Klein, "Gender and the Nature of Exile," 121.

²⁹ In contrast, Klein argues that "for such men as the Wanderer and the Seafarer, exile is figured as a loss of place and consignment to perpetual movement; the female speakers of *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, by comparison, envision exile as being trapped in place and consigned to interminable stasis." Klein does not view examples of paralysis and repeated action in "The Wanderer" as static moments, nor (here) does she acknowledge the wife's journeys or rituals of movement in her earth-cave. While gender obviously influences the types of exile described in "The Wanderer" and "The Wife's Lament," I do not believe that we can equate male exile with movement and female exile with stasis; the situations imagined in these texts have more in common than what Klein suggests. See Klein, "Gender and the Nature of Exile," 115.

³⁰ Klein observes that "once installed in her new dwelling, the Wife is restricted to an endlessly repetitive cycle of movements dictated by her environment." See Klein, "Gender and the Nature of Exile," 117.

which the *eardstapa* practices his own rituals of suffering. Like the *eardstapa*, the *wif* is caught in a cycle that is forward moving, yet she takes the same actions (walking back and forth under the tree and through the cave and/or experiencing sorrow over her losses) at the same time each day, negating or refusing any progress. We can extrapolate on the reasons as to why these environmental (spatial and temporal) details recur in descriptions of exile. Both the *eardstapa* and the *wif* focus on *uhta* as a specifically sorrowful hour, perhaps due to the coldness or darkness of the end of the night, perhaps due to the fact that, without the light of day, a person is unable to see other people, objects, or parts of Creation, leading to a feeling that he or she is completely alone. Also possible is the idea that *uhta* represents a waking hour, a time when dreams (of former joys, maybe?) float away, leaving the dreamer in the coldness of reality, especially painful for one in exile.

Moreover, as in “The Wanderer,” the natural world in “The Wife’s Lament” inspires and instantiates the persona’s emotional distress. As the *wif*’s connection to her *hlaford* is severed, various aspects of her new location — the dark confines of the earth-hall (a mockery of the image of the idealized hall as home)³¹ in a wood (a place by definition overgrown and uncultivated) — serve to increase her loneliness and despair, as she can do nothing except rehash her old miseries. From her *eorðsele*, the *wif* describes this environment: “eal ic eom oflongad, / sindon dena dimme, duna uphea, / bitre burgtunas, brerum beweaxne, / wic wynna leas” (I am all longing; the valleys are dark, the hills high, the cities bitter, grown-over with briars, a town without joys) (ll. 29–32).

³¹ Among other critics, Klein notes that “the Wife’s *eorðsele* recalls the mead-hall, the heart of the heroic world; her endless walk around that space reenacts the ritualized, restricted movement of the good *hlæfdige* circling the hall to serve male guests.” See Klein, “Gender and the Nature of Exile,” 126. For a short discussion of the place of female characters such as the *wif* and Grendel’s mother within the “*eorð-sele*” see Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 92. See also Marilynn Desmond, “The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy,” *Critical Inquiry* 16.3 (1990): 572–90.

Immediately following her admission of longing, the *wif*'s description of the environment is clearly colored by her emotional state; she sees only darkness, forbidding heights and stinging briars, and towns characterized by her own joylessness and bitter mood.³²

Several lines later, just after she mentions her placement in the cave under the oak tree, this persona intimately links location and emotional state: “þær ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg, / þær ic wepan mæg mine wræcsiþas” (there I must sit the summer-long day, where I may mourn my exile-journeys) (ll. 37–38). In modern English, this construction of “þær... þær” could be translated to mean “there where such and such happened,” yet this quick repetition of the locational adverb at the beginning of two poetic lines — “*there* I must sit... *there* I may mourn” — emphasizes the importance of place in the *wif*'s complaint. Further, the poet's choice to evoke this place using the term *þær* instead of *her* [here] suggests distance; “here” is a place immediate and familiar, whereas “there,” the place the *wif* is forced to inhabit, is distant, far away from the familiar, perhaps indeterminate — what one might expect of a place of exile.

Although the environmental conditions described by the *eardstapa* and the *wif* are completely opposed (wind, water, and ice for the wanderer; a summer forest-cave for the wife) the *wif* later makes mention of a wet and wintery setting in relation to exile. In the poem's final conceit, the *wif* makes an observation, prediction, or curse, ostensibly concerning her lost love:

sy æt him sylfum gelong
eal his worulde wyn, sy ful wide fah
feorres folclondes, þæt min freond siteð

³² As Klein has it, “female elegists experience exile as a dissolution of the boundaries between their internal and external worlds. For them, the natural world is neither a necessary impetus nor a temporary comfort on the road to spiritual change but simply an externalization of their psychological torment.” See Klein, “Gender and the Nature of Exile,” 120.

under stanhlīpe storme behrimed,
 wine werigmod, wætre befloweren
 on dreorsele. Dreogeð se min wine
 micle modceare; he gemon to oft
 wynlicran wic. Wa bið þam þe sceal
 of langoþe leofes abidan.

(Let all his joy in the world be dependent on himself, let him be outcast in a remote folk-land, so that my friend sits under a rocky slope covered by a storm with hoar-frost, weary friend, surrounded by water in a dreary hall. Let my friend suffer great heart-ache so that he too often remembers a more joyous dwelling-place. Woe be to the one who shall wait for a loved one out of longing). (ll. 45–53)

Based on the *wif*'s evocation here of social isolation (*wide fah feorres folclondes*) and emotional deprivation (*micle modceare; he gemon to oft wynlicran wic*), even though the poet does not specifically use the verb *wrecan*, it is clear that she means for her companion to live in exile. Environmentally, this account of exile has much in common with the experience described in "The Wanderer." The image of a *stanhlīp* battered by storms and frost is as forbidding as "The Wanderer"'s rime-covered stone ruins. Moreover, the text's final image — *wine werigmod, wætre befloweren / on dreorsele* — returns to the idea of the exile sitting alone, surrounded by water.³³ Even this hall stands in opposition to the idealized hall-image; the compound *dreorsele* defines this hall, usually the idealized center of community in Anglo-Saxon culture, as dreary and desolate, a stark contrast to most other compound uses for the term *sele*. Once again, this poem creates a vision of exile in Anglo-Saxon culture as an individual confined alone in the dark, surrounded by wetness, winter, and cold.

³³ Expanding on her earlier assertion linking female accounts of exile with stasis — specifically, sitting down — Klein observes that "the Wife condemns her lover to an exile in which he will be forced not only to suffer but also to sit. In cursing her lover with a form of exile in which he must sit rooted, earthbound, and longing for his beloved rather than forging ahead in wandering or seafaring, the Wife enacts a feminization of her lover. [...] Her curse calls up the worst traits of feminine *and* masculine exile." See Klein, "Gender and the Nature of Exile," 128.

For both the *eardstapa* and the *wif*, this confusing experience of being frozen yet unable to keep still (if only figuratively) is illustrative of the ambiguous nature of exile. The exile is located in a specific place, *outside of society*; as Klein argues, Anglo-Saxon poetry of exile chronicles the loss of one's original place in human constructions (whether they be social or architectural).³⁴ The place of the exile is characterized more by what it lacks than by what or where it is, thus that place can be all places or no place. Moreover, exile is often characterized by cycles of constant motion — both wandering paths and walking in circles — in which one goes nowhere, and because there can be no rest, a person cannot find or create a home. The ambiguity inherent in the “exile's place” runs paradox to the ambiguity of the human spiritual condition in Anglo-Saxon culture: we are all exiles in our own home. At the same time, the landscape around the exile contributes to this ambiguity, for though seasonal change and growth provide evidence that time is indeed moving forward, our exiles find themselves caught in “momentary views” of the world, seeing only their own frozen misery reflected back upon them. As we observe the *eardstapa* and *wif* moving yet gaining no ground in their respective frozen and unchanging environments, we are reminded that the progress of man and woman through daily life is inconsequential until he or she can finally return to the heavenly homeland. In this way, though the body may occupy a physical space on earth (moving over the water or through the woods), the soul longs for its “proper place” in the hereafter.

³⁴ Ibid., 115.

Ofer hwæles eþel: the Whale's Home, the Human's Home

In “The Seafarer,” we see several thematic elements of “The Wanderer” and “The Wife’s Lament” — notably the maritime voyage, the wintry weather, the emotional lament over losses on earth — intersecting and recombining, creating a slightly different outcome and dramatically different tone than what we find in either of the previous poems. The text contains the conventional terminology of exile in “wræccan lastum” (paths of exile) (l. 15) and “wræclastas” (l. 57), as well as echoes of “The Wanderer” in the lonely and wintry suffering of the seafarer’s icicle-bedecked body. This poem features the persona of another lone voyager who suffers the miseries of a sea-trip during the winter, yet in this case, he eschews the instabilities and even the beauties and comforts of life on earth for the eternal life of heaven. The opening lines of “The Seafarer” contain a striking echo of “The Wife’s Lament,” as the poet also employs the term *wrecan* to indicate the telling (and expelling) of a story: “Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan, / siþas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum / earfoðhwile oft þrowade, / bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe, / gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela, / atol yþa gewealc” (I can relate the true story about me myself, tell of journeys, how I in days of toil, days of hardship, often suffered, have experienced bitter heart-care, in the keel [of the ship] experienced many dwellings of sorrow, the terrible surging of the waves) (ll. 1–6). As both poems were preserved in the *Exeter Book*, it is possible that the poet(s) had some awareness of both texts, or perhaps of a convention of beginning laments or poetry of exile in this way — of expelling the story from the speaker’s mind and body, just as the speaker has been expelled. Even this early in the text, we can also make a comparison between the construction *wapema gebind* — so central to “The Wanderer” — to the “yþa

gewealc” of “The Seafarer.” In this case, though the latter poem does contain multiple references to freezing conditions, the waves retain a motile (and still threatening) quality, surging instead of binding.

Although the titular speaker here is never directly named, like the *eardstapa*, as a land-dweller, the danger posed by surging waves and the sorrow of life “in ceole” begin to reflect his (and humankind’s) unfitness in this watery environment. Contrasting his lot in life to that of the land-dweller, he observes, “þæt se mon ne wat / þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð, / hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ / winter wunade wræccan lastum, / winemægum bidroren, / bihongen hrimgicelum; hægl scurum fleag” (the man does not know that, for whom it goes most agreeably on land, how I, wretched, inhabited the ice-cold sea in the winter, in the paths of exile, bereft of friends and kin, hung about with icicles, hail flew in showers) (ll. 12–17). Yet this movement along icy sea-paths of exile is set in opposition to the “fægrost” life “on foldan,” reminding the reader or auditor that humankind is in fact “most agreeably” suited to solid land.

This point is borne out in subsequent lines, after the seafarer remarks that he takes the “ylfete song” (swan’s song), the “ganetes hleoþor” (gannet’s cry), the “huilpan sweg” (curlew’s sound), and “mæw singende” (seagull singing) for much-missed laughter, singing, entertainment, and mead-drinking (ll. 19–22). Following this, the seafarer describes a scene illustrating the fitness of specific animals (in this case, sea-birds) within this environment: “Stormas þær stanclifu beotan, þær him stearn oncwæð / isigfeþera; ful oft þæt earn bigeal, / urigfeþra; ne ænig hleomæga / feascaftig ferð frefran meahte” (There storms pounded the rocky cliff where the tern, icy-feathered, answered them; very often the eagle, wet-feathered, screamed around it; no protecting kinsmen might comfort

the desolate spirit) (ll. 23–26). Here the tern and the eagle are insulated against the cold and spray, seemingly undaunted by icy or wet feathers *or* by the “storm” raging around them. Conversely, the seafarer immediately notes his lack of “protective kinsmen,” perhaps longing for the sea-birds’ protective insulation or the community that they seem to enjoy. Moreover, the repetitive mention of feathers reminds us that, if conditions become too dangerous, the birds can always escape on the wing, whereas wanderers and seafarers cannot escape the sea so easily. In fact, the “conversation” that the seafarer describes between the pounding of the storm against the cliff and the tern and eagle, which “answer” and “scream” in response, though obviously unrealistic, further demonstrates his perceived displacement in this environment. Even in extreme conditions, the birds remain in the storm and participate in a metaphoric “call and response” from which the seafarer is excluded, as he lacks kinsmen to comfort his “desolate spirit” with song, conversation, or simple company.³⁵

Comparable scenes that contrast the fitness of the speaking persona with the apparent fitness of other creatures to survive in an environment appear in “The Wanderer” and “The Wife’s Lament” as well. In all three texts, though the environment may be portrayed largely as empty and oppressive to the out-of-place human, plants and animals survive, interact, and even proliferate in these spaces. In these moments, we see that the environment may not seem so oppressive and empty for creatures suited to or at least familiar with these conditions. In one of the most famous images from “The Wanderer” (an image strikingly similar to the aforementioned bird-scene in “The

³⁵ In her analysis of the poet’s description of seabirds in “The Seafarer,” Margaret E. Goldsmith points out that in actual windy or stormy weather, birds may call or scream in excitement at the prospect of fish and other food churned up by violent waves. See Goldsmith, “*The Seafarer and the Birds*,” *The Review of English Studies*, n.s. 5.19 (1954): 229–30.

Seafarer”), a flock of sea-birds juxtaposed with images of departed kinsmen provides an opportunity to see this wintery and watery environment from a somewhat non-anthropocentric perspective. The wanderer wakes, “wineleas guma, / gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas, / baþian brimfuglas, brædan feþra” (friendless man, sees before him tawny waves, the sea-birds bathe, spreading their feathers) (ll. 45–47); after another mention of “hrim ond snaw” (ice and snow) (l. 48), the wanderer feels pain in revisiting past joys:

Sorg bið geniwad,
 þonne maga gemynd mod **geondhweorfeð**;
 greteð gliwstafum, georne geondsceawað
 secga geseldan. Swimmað eft on weg!
 Fleotendra ferð no þær fela bringeð
 cuðra cwidegiedda. Cearo bið geniwad
 þam þe sendan sceal swiþe geneahhe
 ofer **wapema gebind** werigne sefan.

(Sorrow is renewed when the spirit passes through the memory of kinsmen, greets with melodies, eagerly looks upon them, the companions of men swim often away, the mind of the floating ones never there brings many familiar songs. Care is renewed in him who shall send forth very often a weary mind over the binding of the waves). (ll. 50–57)³⁶

Initially, it seems as though the poet has merely juxtaposed the “brimfuglas” with his “maga” and “secga,” perhaps implying that the seabirds are not such good company. Soon after, however, the language turns more ambiguous, as the poet’s remembered kinsmen “swimmað eft on weg,” suggesting the ephemeral nature of thought (or of hallucination), but also comparing the motions of the seabirds as they move away over the waves to evanescent memories of kin. In the very next line, the “fleotendra ferð” is most likely the mind of the wanderer and others suffering similar fates, yet the placement

³⁶ As the Anglo-Saxon texts are unpunctuated in their original manuscripts, much is left to the editor’s discretion in punctuating modern versions of the texts. In my translation here, I have chosen not to abide by the punctuation inserted by the editor of the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*.

of this phrase recalls the literally floating birds, as well as the images of kinsmen that “swim” or “float” through the *eardstapa*’s consciousness.³⁷

Meanwhile, this conflation of seabirds with lost acquaintances draws attention to the respective places of birds and humans in the natural world. Unlike the *eardstapa*, whose very name indicates that he is designed to live on land, the sea-birds survive in these inclement conditions. Our wanderer observes, “Ðonne onwæcneð eft wineleas guma, / gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas, / baþian brimfuglas, brædan feþra, / hreosan hrim ond snaw hagle gemenged” (then he awakes again, friendless man, sees before him tawny waves, the seabirds bathe, spreading their feathers, ice and snow fall down, mixed with hail) (ll. 45–48). We see evidence of the birds’ fitness to live in these conditions; unlike the wanderer, who must traverse the waters, the birds perform the more leisurely activity of bathing. Moreover, whereas this poem’s imagery of binding and freezing suggests that a human must bind himself tightly to stay alive, the birds are naturally insulated by feathers, which they spread and clean while the wanderer watches. Even the placement of this description — the birds are enclosed on one side by “tawny waves” and on another by “ice and snow” — suggests their fit within this world. Beyond this, the sea-birds’ ability to fly allows them to escape cold climates and inhospitable conditions and to seek out warmer and calmer conditions, unlike the earth-bound wanderer. Thus, while the wanderer’s vision transposes a human community upon a maritime or avian one, the comparison of birds to humans foregrounds the fact that, while the wanderer suffers

³⁷ “þonne maga gemynd mod geondhweorfeð; / greteð gliwstafum, georne geondsceawað / secga geseldan; swimmað oft on weg” (when the spirit passes through the memory of kinsmen, greets with joys, eagerly looks upon them, the companions of warriors often swim away) (ll. 51–52). The comparable passage from “The Seafarer” explicitly compares the seafarer’s companion birds with former human companions. While there is some risk of reading this same meaning into the parallel lines from “The Wanderer,” it is clear that the comparison of sea-birds and drinking companions in “The Wanderer” is murkier; the poet puts more space between the descriptions of birds and the memorialized images of humans, and the verbs and participles (*swimmað*, *fleotendra*) are ambiguous.

outside his home, his “companions” are created to function in this environment better than he.

For the *wif* as well, her environment of exile — the unchanging and lonely forest — must be conventional and/or stylized to a point. Yet unlike the winter sea, at times this unchangeable and near-uninhabitable place shows evidence of ecological change and growth, and of the rich natural inspiration for these created landscapes. Though the wife has lost her social place, her new habitat is not a void. She is surrounded by trees, and observes “sindon dena dimme duna uphea, / bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne, / wic wynna leas” (the valleys are dark, the hills high, the cities bitter, grown-over with briars, a town without joys) (ll. 30–32). The wife is misplaced socially and ecologically, as, in order to function, she must have shelter, food, camaraderie, and a purpose, yet this does not negate the environmental, biological, and ecological values of the woodland in which she finds herself. Variety in the landscape (variations from valleys to hills) and conditions that lead to a proliferation of briars (alternately translated as “brambles”) — indicate that *something* is growing in this environment. Further, the wife does not report suffering through inclement weather; she sits under the oak tree “sumorlangne dæg,” during a time of growth and production. A contemporary ecocritical perspective emphasizes the mix of “positively valued” environmental images, like summer and overgrowth, with “negative” images, such as darkness, to demonstrate the necessity of even organisms and phenomena that have been negatively valued by humans as necessary to biological processes. Emphasizing the values of growth, reproduction, and diversity in the environment, especially in poetry that chronicles the individual’s loss of community and self-identity, may seem an inappropriate romanticizing of nature. Yet in their small

details, these texts provide evidence of growth, change, and decay, which must be recognized as part of an ecological process, even if they appear in Anglo-Saxon laments over dissolution and the world's inevitable march toward its end.³⁸

Though “The Seafarer,” like “The Wanderer,” places its titular speaker in a world of winter wherein he is not well suited to survive, the former text also breaks the hold of this frozen world to describe the processes of decay and the passage of time in positive and negative lights. Several of the same concepts seen in “The Wanderer” — being outwardly fettered by frost, inwardly suffering turmoil of emotions — appear here when the seafarer observes, “calde geþrunen / wæron mine fet, forste gebunden, / caldum clommu, þær þa ceare seofedun / hat ymb heortan” (pinched by cold were my feet, fettered by frost, by cold chains, while those anxieties sighed hotly around my heart) (ll. 8–11). As to the repeated mentions of ice and winter in these texts,³⁹ on an environmental level, winter generally is a period of dormancy and/or hibernation for organisms, a time during which we observe no growth or change of green plants, thus a lack of provisions for humans and animals alike. Further, the cold of winter could be linked to a lack of fire, of light, of warmth (attributes associated with the life of the hall) and the possibility of

³⁸ The collision of ecological and apocalyptic views of Anglo-Saxon literature will be examined in chapter six.

³⁹ See also lines 1–4 of the poem “Deor” in the *Exeter Book*: “Welund him be wurman wræces cunnade, / anhydig eorl earfoþa dreag, / hæfde him to gesiþþe sorge ond longað, / wintercealde wræce” (Weland knew of punishment by serpents(?), the firm man endured tortures, he had sorrow and longing as companions, winter-cold exile). Anglo-Saxon scriptural poetry even links the torments of winter with the tortures of Hell; in the poetic account of *Genesis*, nights in Hell were filled with “fyr edneowe” (ever-renewed fire), and “on uhtan” (at dawn) came “easterne wind, / forst fyrnum cald. Symble fyr oððe gar, / sum heard geswinc habban sceoldon” (an east wind and excessively cold frost. Constant fire or piercing cold, they had to experience some severe hardship) (ll. 315–17), and hell was filled “mid þam andsacum” (with those adversaries) (l. 320). In this “winterization” of Hell, not only is cold considered one of the worst torments for devils and humans alike, but the contradiction of coexisting fire and cold becomes a defining characteristic of the worst possible punishment in the worst possible place. As Hell is here described as a place of conflicting elements, it is possible that when we observe environmental conflict and ambiguity in the poetry of earthly exile, we may be seeing echoes of the ultimate torments of the final, infernal destination for spiritual exiles.

frostbite or death for one who cannot find warmth or shelter. Accordingly, as in “The Wanderer,” the world of “The Seafarer” is (at times) frozen, dark, and dormant: “Nap nihtscua, norþan sniwde, / hrim hrusan bond, hægl feol on eorþan, / corna caldast” (night-shadow darkened, it snowed from the north, frost bound the earth, hail fell on earth, coldest of grains) (ll. 31–33). Interestingly, the mention of hail as “corn” (grain) here may remind the audience of the environmental necessity of periods of dormancy and the grain’s (or seed’s) promise of growth and harvest to come.⁴⁰

This hint at future growth comes to fruition nearly twenty lines later, when we hear that

Bearwas blostmum nimað, byrig fægriað,
 wongas wlitigað, woruld onetteð;
 ealle þa gemoniað modes fusne
 sefan to siþe, þam þe swa þenceð
 on flodwegas feor gewitan.
 Swylce geac monað geomran reorde,
 singeð sumeres weard, sorge beodeð
 bitter in breosthord.

(Groves become beautiful with blossoms, adorn the cities, beautify the meadows, the world hurries onward; all those things urge the one eager of spirit on a journey, for the one who intends thus, goes far on the ocean-paths. Likewise the cuckoo urges with a sad voice, summer’s watchman sings, inspires bitter sorrow into the breast). (ll. 48–55)

Unlike the neverending winter of “The Wanderer,” the seasons continue their cycle in “The Seafarer.” Though the seafarer’s most emphasized sufferings are associated with a

⁴⁰ Bright suggests “kernel” for *corn*, which arguably carries the same associations with seeds and growth. This formulation is echoed in the Anglo-Saxon *Rune Poem* (once preserved in the 10th-century Cotton Otho B.x manuscript, now destroyed) which calls hail “hwitust corna” (whitest of grains) (l. 25), and in the Norwegian and Icelandic *Rune Poems* (preserved in later manuscripts), which refer to hail as “kaldastr korna” (coldest of grains) and “kaldakorn” (cold grain), respectively. The rune poems likely functioned as *abecedariums* for the runic alphabets, aligning each rune with a verse describing the name of the rune. The repetition of this “---est of grains” construction for the rune called “hægl” (hail) suggests that this is a well-known poetic formula, and the likening of hail-stones with grains or seeds is commonplace, at least in Germanic poetry.

cold journey over sea, as the poem progresses, these wintery images melt away into descriptions of spring (the blossoming groves, the lovely meadows) and summer (the presence of the cuckoo). Moreover, the increasing natural beauty of the world as time passes even urges the seafarer to return to his sea-journey, the memory of his icicle-laden face and lonely exile apparently behind him. Like “The Wanderer,” “The Seafarer” certainly explores a similar vein of worldly decay and the senselessness of materiality. In these moments, the poet reminds the audience, “dagas sind gewitene, / ealle onmedlan eorþan rices” (the days are departed, all the pomps of the kingdom of earth) (ll. 80–81), and later compares the aging of earth to the aging of an individual man:

eorþan indryhto ealdað ond searað,
 swa nu monna gehwylc geond middangeard.
 Ylðo him on fareð, onsyn blacað,
 gomelfeax gnornað, wat his iuwine,
 æþelinga bearn, eorþan forgiefene.

(the nobility of earth ages and withers just as now each man does throughout the world. Old age advances on him, the face grows pale, the grey-haired man mourns, knows his past friends, the children of princes, have been committed to the earth). (ll. 89–93)

Despite these ruminations, this poem evokes the change of seasons (and thus, the passage of time) as a joyful phenomenon, one that brings the traveler inevitably closer to continuing his sea-journey.

Though it has only a momentary appearance in the text, the presence of the cuckoo in this flowery description of spring brings some additional complexity to the seafarer’s yearnings. The trope of the cuckoo as harbinger of warmer months (and of sea-voyages) also appears in “The Husband’s Message,” another *Exeter Book* poem. In this text, the speaker appears to be a wood-carved missive sent from a husband to his wife, bidding her to join him across the sea. Though water separates the two spouses in this

text, the wife's future sea-journey is linked with relief and joy at the prospect of a reunion with her beloved: "heht nu sylfa þe / lustum læran, þæt þu lagu drefde, / siþþan þu gehyrde on hliþes oran / galan geomorne geac on bearwe" (now he himself has commanded that I gladly instruct that you stir the waters, since you have heard on the cliff's edge the miserable cuckoo singing in the grove) (ll. 20b–24), and "ongin mere secan, mæwes eþel, / onsite sænacan, þæt þu suð heonan / ofer merelade monnan findest, / þær se þeoden is þin on wenum" (begin to seek the sea, the sea-gull's homeland, take a seat in a sea-vessel, so that you, south hence over the sea-way, will find the man, where the prince is expecting you) (ll. 26–29). As both "The Seafarer" and "The Husband's Message" portray the sea-voyage as a generally positive experience (or, at least for the "wife," a journey with a positive outcome), these texts suggest a very different conception of water travel than what we see in other exile poetry.

Interestingly, though the cuckoo is characterized as conventionally miserable or sorrowful in both of these poems, its call is linked to a thought of hope or joy for the human speaker. In this moment of emotional disconnection between the animal and the human, we see a breakdown between the literary and conventional association with certain animals (i.e., the cuckoo with misery), the actual behaviors of these animals (i.e., the cuckoo, a summer migrant to Europe, producing a mating call in the spring or summer), and what the appearance of these animals at specific times and in specific places actually mean for the human community (i.e., summer is a milder time for travel than winter).⁴¹ As the cuckoo's call here signals both the passage of seasons on earth and

⁴¹ Alternately, A. P. Campbell suggests that the reason the cuckoo spurs the seafarer to travel is precisely because it is a migratory bird, "and when he arrives back home in spring, his voice brings hints of far lands he has recently left. [...] The mention of the cuckoo here strengthens the atmosphere of restlessness." See Campbell, "The Seafarer: Wanderlust and our Heavenly Home," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 43

the impending departure of the seafarer, this conventionally sad bird becomes something of a symbol for the duality of the seafarer's experience. While his journey takes him away from life on land and into harsh winter conditions, he is still anxious to set out.

Unlike the *eardstapa*, the seafarer here moves toward an acceptance and even impatience to return to the ocean. His language, like that of the *wif* for her lover, is that of longing and yearning; here, however, the seafarer's "heortan geþohtas" (thoughts of the heart) (l. 34) urge that he set out to experience "hean streamas, / sealtyþa gelac" (deep currents, the salt-waves' tumult) (ll. 34–35) and to seek "elþeodigra eard" (a land of foreigners) (l. 38), quite the opposite of what we might expect the *eardstapa* and the *wif* to yearn for. Instead, the seafarer says of himself and his fellow voyagers that there should be no greater desire, "nefne ymb yða gewealc, / ac a hafað longunge se þe on lagu fundað" (except for the surging of the waves, yet ever shall have that longing, he who sets out on the sea) (ll. 46–47). Given these contexts, the "yða gewealc" — the surging waves — of "The Seafarer" take on significant meaning, for unlike the binding waves of "The Wanderer," the sea here is more often linked with movement: the "pull" of the ocean, travel toward a distant land, and the passage of seasons leading up to the seafarer's voyage. Thus, the cuckoo's call, as well as the seafarer and the text itself, express equal parts sorrow (for the hurrying years) and joy, as the arrival of summer indicates that the seafarer's day of departure is near.

Following the lovely description of the seasonal change from spring to summer, the seafarer describes the circular motion of his thoughts and desires — moving from his inner self, over the surface of the earth and sea, and back to himself:

(1973): 244. For another example of detailed knowledge of the cuckoo's behaviors in a literary text, see *Exeter Book* riddle nine, which relies on an audience's knowledge that many species of cuckoos are brood parasites (laying their own eggs in the nests of other species of birds).

Forþon nu min hyge **hweorfeð** ofer hreþerlocan,
 min modsefa mid mereflode
 ofer hwæles eþel **hweorfeð** wide,
 eorþan sceatas, cymeð eft to me
 gifre ond grædig, gielleð anfloga,
 hweteð on **hwælweg** hreþer unwearnum
 ofer holma gelagu.

(Therefore now my thought journeys beyond my breast, my mind roams with the ocean tide, journeys widely over the whale's home, over the surfaces of the earth, and comes again to me avid and greedy, the lone flier cries and incites the heart irresistibly along the whale-path, over the sea's expanses). (ll. 58–64)

Again the conventional “hweorfeð,” used in “The Wanderer” and “The Wife’s Lament” to describe physical and mental peregrinations, appears here, indicating the movement of the seafarer’s mind to the place he wishes to go, “over the whale’s home.” Nevertheless, though the seafarer longs to traverse the waves, the audience should remain aware that the sea is *not* the seafarer’s home, nor, as he has remarked, is he well-suited to live there; the sea is the *whale*’s home, and the seafarer can only pass *ofer hwæles eþel*, *ofer holma gelagu*. Despite his language of longing, the seafarer’s wishes to travel over deep currents, surging waves, and expanses of sea to seek “elþeodigra eard” (a land of foreigners) (l. 38) warn of the vast and powerful scope of the ocean, as well as its separation of the familiar from what might lie on the other side.

In order to reach any “land of foreigners,” the geographical nature of Great Britain as an island ensures that voyage over water will almost always be necessary. Citing differences in the depictions of the “island England” in sixth-century Celtic author Gildas’s *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (*On the Conquest and Ruin of Britain*) and Bede’s eighth-century *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*An Ecclesiastical History*

of the English Nation), Catherine A. M. Clarke illustrates these authors' contradictory perceptions of the water's edge:

the sea which surrounds the island does seem to have a rather different meaning for Gildas and Bede overall, and contributes to a key contrast between their uses of the island image. For Gildas the island is a defensive form with the connotations of a fortress, whereas for Bede the water surrounding the land suggests a potential for communication and contact.
42

As we observe in “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer,” the ocean is a space of layered danger and promise, delineating the boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon homeland. Frequent mentions of water in tales of exile make sense if we think of bodies of water as boundaries separating humans from each other, and in the case of oceans, the absolute limit of the land that can be cultivated. Moreover, water, like inhospitable weather, represents a clear threat to humans in that a person can cross a body of water *if* he or she has access to a boat or a bridge, but if not, the water can be an impenetrable and dangerous horizon. For one with a clear trajectory and a new place to inhabit, the water is also a conduit by which a person can move quickly from one space to another. Yet even if one ventures out onto the ocean, once land is out of sight, the vastness of water on all sides ensures that even “forward progress” on the water might not appear to be progress at all. Thus, the experience of the ocean-voyager might not seem to be so different from that of the exile on land, who constantly treads the paths of exile yet gets no closer to home or to an end of the journey.

On an environmental level, an actual sea-journey represents a risk (more so in winter than in summer) to the individual, who places him- or herself in an unfamiliar space to which he or she is not biologically suited. Emphasizing the extreme danger of

⁴² Catherine A.M. Clarke, *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700–1400* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 19.

such a journey, Nicholas Howe questions the reality of a landscape such as those described by the seafarer or the *eardstapa*: “what Anglo-Saxon ever sailed alone in a ship, especially in winter? As we know from the sagas, not even the Vikings willingly ventured alone to sea in winter.”⁴³ Howe suggests that the poets’ chosen settings of wintry seas are more psychologically expressive than realistic in these texts,⁴⁴ yet the sea-journey also has more esoteric significances in this literature. On a figurative level, the sea-journey in Anglo-Saxon culture is also a metaphor for the soul’s journey through the tumult of the earthly world and its final destination in heaven.⁴⁵ The text of “The Seafarer” evokes this metaphorical meaning, as this persona has a fascination with the life beyond that on earth: “me hatran sind / dryhtnes dreamas þonne þis deade lif, / læne on londe” (for me, the joys of the Lord are warmer than this dead life, fleeting on land) (ll. 64–66). A clear comparison of the soul’s journey through earthly life to a sea-journey also appears in the *Christ* poems of the *Exeter Book*. The second of these texts includes the conceit,

⁴³ Nicholas Howe, “The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England: Inherited, Invented, Imagined,” in *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe*, ed. John Howe and Michael Wolfe (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), 104.

⁴⁴ Howe observes that “the struggle to express interiority in Old English poetry is so acute, and places such great strain on the psychological as well as poetic vocabularies of the culture, that it yielded this seascape beyond the conventions of the merely realistic. In its departure from the customary maritime prudence of the Anglo-Saxons, the poem imagines a seascape by which to evoke an interior condition that cannot otherwise be expressed.” See Howe, “The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England,” 104–05.

⁴⁵ As Frederick Holton points out, the sea has myriad associations: in classical and Anglo-Saxon sources, death is envisioned as a voyage over the sea; in patristic sources, life on earth (specifically, humankind’s postlapsarian state) is likened to a voyage over the sea; in Anglo-Saxon sources (i.e. *Beowulf* and the *Physiologus* poems), the sea contains evil creatures, including serpents and whales; in Christian belief, the sea also has baptismal associations. See Holton, “Old English Sea Imagery and the Interpretation of ‘The Seafarer’,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 12 (1982): 208–17. Campbell earlier remarked on this multitude of possible interpretations of the sea in “The Seafarer”: “Not ready to see a sea voyage as a sea voyage, some writers have posited a voyage of life, a voyage of death, a voyage of voluntary exile, or even no voyage at all.” Campbell, “The Seafarer: Wanderlust,” 236. In my reading of this text, I accept the sea-voyage as a richly multilayered and complex concept that may evoke any or all of these meanings. However, what is crucial here is that we also read the physical and environmental details of the sea-voyage and the life on land in order to better understand humankind’s relationship to the natural world.

Nu is þon gelicost swa we on laguflode
 ofer cald wæter ceolum liðan
 geond sidne sæ, sunhengestum,
 flodwudu fergen. Is þæt frecne stream
 yða ofer mæta þe we her on lacað
 geond þas wacan woruld, windge holmas
 ofer deop gelad.

(Now it is most like this, as though we travel on ships on the waves, over cold water, over the wide sea, carried in wooden ships, sea-horses. That sea is perilous, excessive the waves on which we here contend through this weak world, windy the waves over the deep water-way). (ll. 850–56)

As this comparison concludes, the poet positions Christ as the pilot who will guide our spiritual boats back to a safe port: the heavenly homeland. As we see, the journey over water in poems such as “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer” evokes this trope of life as a sea-voyage, and the heavenly *epel* as the final destination. In this way, these poems of individual exile remind us of our (humanity’s) communal status as exiles on earth, driven off from our true spiritual home.

Paths Without End

That “The Seafarer” casts its speaker out over the ocean in answer to his deep, inexplicable longing for travel hearkens to larger conventions in Anglo-Saxon culture: humanity’s exiled state on earth, and the metaphorical journey we must take over the tumult of years and earthly trials. Yet if we regard the sea not only as symbolic of life, death, and turmoil but actually consider what this environment might mean for the exile, the traveler, and the poet, this literary landscape takes on additional significance. From the perspective of the voyager, the sea presents a dangerous environment in which the human cannot survive, and perhaps also an unending, unchanging landscape of water and sky in which progress is difficult to measure (by the naked eye, anyway).

For the winter wanderer, this progress is doubly difficult to measure. While the text of “The Seafarer,” with its surging waves, cycling seasons, and irresistible pull of the ocean, advances its lone voyager ever closer to the spiritual peace of “*ecan eadignesse, / þær is lif gelong in lufan dryhtnes, / hyht in heofonum*” (eternal blessedness, where life is present in the Lord’s love, hope in the heavens) (ll. 120–22), such peace of progress eludes the *eardstapa* and the *wif*. In his cocoon of winter, the *eardstapa* also journeys over water, but, as evidenced by the poem’s language of physical, mental, and emotional binding, cannot move forward in time nor can he move toward a new homeland or community. Likewise, the *wif* is perpetually confined in her summer earth-cave, lamenting her dawn-sorrows and cursing her lost love. She too can find neither peace, nor progress, nor acceptance by a new people. In these cases, the exiles have fallen out of place and time, moving in figurative orbits around the central facets of their former existences — the warmth and safety of hall and family — never able to return to nor to escape from the memories of these centers.

For the *eardstapa* and the *wif*, the environments described in their texts reflect and intensify their suffering, complicating the notion of exile beyond a simple “driving off” of the individual. While separation from home and family is certainly a dominant and painful aspect of exile, the individual’s displacement to an environment in which he or she has no place or function is of paramount importance in these texts. In “The Wanderer” and “The Wife’s Lament,” texts that construct exile as an experience of concurrent motion and stillness, time and timelessness, this experience of exile is placed in a landscape wherein time progresses and ecological processes continue in normal fashion. As evidenced by the worldly ruin of “The Wanderer” and the summer growth of

“The Wife’s Lament,” these environments decay and erode, change and bloom. Without mates, the isolated *eardstapa* and *wif* cannot take part in the earthly cycles of reproduction; while their environments thrive, the exiles must live sterile existences, eliminating their chances of creating new human communities. Further, for the seabirds of “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer,” even the binding waves and the storm surging against cliffs provide opportunity for entertainment and community; not so for the human exiles of these texts, who have been displaced from their previous social ecologies. We can see an additional level of alienation, beyond that of rejection from human communities, as the exile witnesses plants and animals thriving and interacting in these harsh environments, while he or she appears “frozen out” of these comforts.

In the scriptural poetry of the Anglo-Saxon canon, humanity’s existence on earth is a sentence both of punishment and provision; Adam and Eve are given a life in “sorgfulre land,” (a sorrowful land) yet with some “frofre” (consolation): a roof adorned with stars, the fruits of the sea and of the earth, and each other.⁴⁶ Within the greater, spiritual exile of the human race, individual accounts of exile from earthly communities evoke this balance of punishment and provision. The *eardstapa* and the *wif*, both bewailing their sorrows before dawn, have heaven, adorned with holy stars, as a roof. Around them they witness the growth and decay of the species of sea and earth, though the exiles themselves feel alienated from the animal and plant life around them. Yet unlike the first human exiles, the wanderer and the wife have no human companions. While this may be first and foremost of their miseries — this expulsion from hall and community — the torture of the exile expands beyond the initial loss of home to encompass a complex experience of concurrent motion and stillness, a compulsion to

⁴⁶ Anglo-Saxon *Genesis*, ll. 955–65.

wander over paths that have no end. Unlike the myriad things and beings in the riddles which find themselves moving through space and time and coming to rest in new places with new functions and identities, these human exiles endure a greater weight of loss. As the *eardstapa* and *wif* wander their circuitous paths, their experience of exile is distinct and unending, for they have fallen out of the orderly measuring of space and time. In these poems of exile, texts which provide us with close glimpses of the “natural world” in Anglo-Saxon culture, the details of these environments conspire with the poet to magnify the timeless and boundless torment of exile.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTO THE WILD

In the Anglo-Saxon exilic laments known as “The Wanderer,” “The Wife’s Lament,” and “The Seafarer,” we are introduced to two different avenues of exile: voluntary separation and involuntary expulsion. While the *eardstapa* and the *wif* each recount losses of community, kin, and protectors that forced them into unwanted circumstances of displacement, the sentiment of yearning for a voyage in “The Seafarer” and the concluding lines of “The Wanderer” also allude to the spiritual experience of voluntary exile. Throughout the majority of “The Wanderer,” the speaker moves back and forth between descriptions of a wintery journey, memories of past joys and despair, and existential maxims; line 111, however, finds a shift in voice and tone suggesting a larger “frame” enclosing all that has come before in the poem. This last section introduces the *snottor*, the wise man (possibly a separate persona, possibly an older, wiser version of the wanderer himself) who reflects upon the suffering and ruminations of the *eardstapa*, concluding that the only constant and consolation in the universe is God:

Swa cwæð snottor on mode, gesæt him sundor æt rune.
 Til biþ se þe his treowe gehealdeþ, ne sceal næfre his torn to rycene
 beorn of his breostum acyþan, nemþe he ær þa bote cunne,
 eorl mid elne gefremman. Wel bið þam þe him are seceð,
 frofre to fæder on heofonum, þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð.

(So says the one discerning in mind, sat apart in meditation: Good is he who holds his faith, a man must not ever make known his anger, convey from his breast, unless he knows the remedy first, a man knows how to bring it about with strength. It will turn out well for the one who seeks glory, consolation from the father in heaven, where for us all stability lies). (ll. 111–15)

Whether the *snottor* is meant to be the *eardstapa* finally come to rest, or another individual entirely, the suggestion here is that through solitude and an awareness of the changeability of the world — brought about by the actual experience of exile or by reading the poetic account of the wanderer — one realizes that true peace and comfort can only be found in the divine. This exercise of removing one’s self from the world of people and living in a harsh environment in order to develop a stronger connection to God is reminiscent of the type of voluntary exile practiced by early Christian “desert fathers” and recorded in Athanasius’s fourth-century *Vita Antonii*.¹ Gillian Rudd provides a link between the sea voyages of the *eardstapa* and the seafarer and this hermetic, contemplative life, though her analysis focuses on Middle English texts. She observes that “voluntarily going to sea, frequently in rudderless boats, in order to display their trust in God was the northern European equivalent of undertaking a sojourn in the desert,” citing Adomnán’s sixth-century *Life of Saint Columba* for “repeatedly using what seems to be a recognized literary trope equating the sea with the desert.”²

The harsh environment of the sea, seemingly bounded only by the horizon, may serve as an analogue to the biblical desert, which is equally vast, boundless, and dangerous to the lone human wanderer. Even though these landscapes may appear antithetical to each other — the watery sea versus the arid desert — the inhospitableness and danger of these environments for human travelers ensures that, despite the wealth of life existing below the water’s or ground’s surface, they are largely empty, desolate,

¹ The fifth-century Mary of Egypt, patron saint of penitents, undertakes a similar pilgrimage to live a solitary, ascetic life in the desert of Palestine.

² Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 134. The eighth-century *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot* (*Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*) offers another example of the penitent taking to the sea for religious discovery. See “Brendan the Navigator,” in David H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

deserted by human life. For the purposes of scriptural and spiritual poetry, the actual location and landscape of a desert are perhaps less important than the fact that it is void of people (and perhaps other life as well), usually as a result of inhospitable (for humans, anyway) environmental conditions. Accordingly, the concept of the desert is associated with other types of landscapes in Anglo-Saxon culture as well. In the poetry and scriptural texts of Anglo-Saxon England, the biblical “desert” is translated as *westen*, a word that could mean “a desert,” but also “a wilderness” and etymologically related to the verb *westan*, meaning “to lay waste,” “to devastate,” or “to desolate.”³ In his *Grammar and Glossary*, in a section of correlations between Latin and Anglo-Saxon terms for trees and landscape-related terms, Ælfric provides the gloss, “desertum oððe heremus westen,” equating the Latin terms for desert and/or wasteland with the term *westen*.⁴ Further, a search of the online *Dictionary of the Old English Corpus* reveals that the word *westen* appears periodically in scriptural poetry (*Genesis*, “Exodus,” and “Daniel”), in more broadly spiritual poetry (“Elene,” “The Phoenix,” and “Soul and Body”), but infrequently in landscape descriptions in “The Ruin” and *Beowulf*. Much more often, however, the term appears in translations and glosses of Scripture and psalms (Anglo-Saxon psalters and the Gospels regularly glossed the Latin nouns *desertus* and *solitudines* [desert, wasteland, wilderness] as *westen* or some spelling variant thereof),⁵ prose and poetic versions of homilies, hagiographies, and martyrologies, as well as in an

³ Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 1211.

⁴ Julius Zupitza, trans., *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar I. Text und Varianten*, by Ælfric, Abbot of Eynsham (Berlin, Weidmann, 1880), 312.

⁵ Depending on the regional dialect reflected in the manuscript, *westen* may appear as *westen*, *westyn*, *woestern*, or *uoestern*. Texts glossing *desertus* or *solitudines* (in any of their declensions) as *westen* include the Cambridge Psalter, Eadwine’s Canterbury Psalter, the Arundel Psalter, the Tiberius Psalter, the Vespasian Psalter, the Salisbury Psalter, and the Lindisfarne and Ruthworth Gospels, among others. See Antonette diPaolo Healey, with John Price Wilkin, and Xin Xiang, *The Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus*, Dictionary of Old English Project, 2009, <http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/simple.html>.

Anglo-Saxon translation of Orosius's *Historiarum Adversum Paganos* (*A History Against the Pagans*), which features descriptions of the geography of Europe (including Britain).⁶

The prevalence of this term in Anglo-Saxon religious texts suggests that, when appearing in translations of biblical sources, the *westen* correlates to the specific landscape of the Middle Eastern desert inhabited by Sts. Anthony and Mary, among other penitents; when appearing in philosophical or homiletic texts, it may evoke this desert, or it may evoke a more metaphorical setting shaded with the religious significance of Christ's or the Israelites' exiles in the desert.

Texts describing the landscape of Anglo-Saxon England, however, tend to employ a different terminology to designate deserted spaces. Looking to non-literary sources, Della Hooke notes several occurrences of land designated *nanesmonnesland* (no-man's-land) or some variant thereof, surviving either as a place name itself or recorded in an English charter. In the examples she cites, the "no-man's-land" falls near or across a parish or county boundary or along a road, and may be heath, uncultivated common land, or land that had "remained unclaimed or its ownership contested long enough" to become known as a no-man's-land.⁷ Similarly marginal, uninhabited, or uncultivated spaces are recorded often in the eleventh-century *Domesday Book*. Composed in Latin instead of the Anglo-Saxon vernacular, this vast catalog of English landscapes provides a purely

⁶ Results of search for fragments "westen" and "westyn" in *Dictionary of Old English Corpus*. See diPaolo Healey, *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus*, <http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/simple.html>.

⁷ Hooke specifically mentions a twelfth-century record of the landholdings of Evesham Abbey in Worcestershire, which locates *nanesmonnesland* at the boundary of three different parishes; a plot of heath now called "No Man's Heath" on the border of Warwickshire and Leicestershire; and similarly named areas across parish boundaries in Cornwall. See Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), 78–79. Hooke cites P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968). Further, two charters to Crowland Abbey (one from King Bertulf of Mercia in 851 and the second from King Edred in 948) mention an area known as "namanslandhirne" — possibly a variant of *nanesmonnesland* — in their drawing of the boundaries and resources of the abbey. See documents 461 and 872 in W. de Grey Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 3 vols (London: Whiting & Co., 1885–1899; reprinted London: Johnson Reprint Co., 1964), I: 50 and II: 20.

economic and political perspective on Anglo-Saxon “desert spaces.” Due to the purposes for which *Domesday* was undertaken and assembled — to record rents, taxes, populations, natural resources, and current landholders under William I (William the Conqueror) — what must have been varied landscapes are categorized according to several broad landscape types (woodland, meadow, pasture), each with a specific economic purpose.⁸

Lands uninhabited, uncultivated, and/or unclaimed fall under the somewhat vague Latin designation of *wasta* or *vasta* (waste), an “umbrella term” covering lands that do not render dues to the crown, perhaps because said lands are unproductive or cannot be easily classified. Not surprisingly, some counties boast more *wasta* than others — the term appears much more often in the records for Yorkshire than in the entries for Oxfordshire or Cambridgeshire, for example.⁹ Even in the entries for the areas of Ely, Thorney, and Crowland (which, as this chapter will show, contained landscapes associated with wilderness, wasteland, and even the Anglo-Saxon “desert”), there is little mention of inhospitable land. Instead, these holdings are classified in terms of the economic value of the land itself and the produce of the marshes, generally measured in reeds, fish, or eels.¹⁰ This disparity may be explained by the varied geographies and

⁸ Though across the entire document, surveys of each county tend to follow slightly different formulae, within each county the entries are normalized. For example, in the entries for Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire, landscape descriptions will indicate the size of a meadow according to the number of ploughs or oxen it can support, likewise pasture for livestock, woodland for pigs (or other purposes, like supplying wood for fences or houses), marsh for eels or fish; alternately, an entry may indicate the area (usually in hides) or amount of rent or produce due from each type of landscape. According to the survey of Ely, surveyors were to ask landholders specifically about names, ownership, hides, ploughs, inhabitants, specific types of landscape (woodland, meadow, pasture), and value. *Inquisitio Eliensis*, first paragraph. Cited in John Morris, ed. and trans., *Domesday Book: Oxfordshire* (Chichester, UK: Phillimore, 1978), introduction.

⁹ Morris, *Domesday: Oxfordshire*; Alexander Rumble, ed., *Domesday Book: Cambridgeshire* (Chichester, UK: Phillimore, 1981); John Morris, ed. and trans., *Domesday Book: A Survey of the County of Yorkshire* (Chichester, UK: Phillimore, 1986).

¹⁰ Rumble, ed., *Domesday Book: Cambridgeshire*.

qualities of landscapes across the country, though historians argue that the frequent mentions of waste(land) in York and northern England may indicate undesirable or unclaimed (thus untaxable) marginal agricultural land, plots of land from recently reorganized manors that simply had not yet been put to use, or perhaps land devastated (and uninhabited) after William's invasion and subsequent uprisings (at least in Yorkshire).¹¹ Thus, the language of *Domesday* can be ambiguous in denoting wild and deserted spaces; clearly, there are landscapes that we might consider wild, wilderness, uncultivated, or unsettled, but these are assigned monetary / economic value as though they were being used for other purposes. Further, *Domesday* evidences intermittent areas of waste across the Anglo-Saxon (now Anglo-Norman) landscape, but the term "waste" functions economically and legally to denote land that may truly have been deserted, unclaimed marginal space, or devastated by war or violence, yet these locations may also have been deemed valueless and not taxable for geographical, political, or legacy reasons.

Though the *westen* and the *wasta* may each be glossed as "desert" and "wasteland," there is a disparity in the ways that these terms are used, the sources in which they appear, and the functions they appear to serve. While the *westen* indicates a literal or metaphorical desert, likely with biblical associations, the *wasta* actually denotes the wild spaces of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England, though the administrative term is ambiguous in its description of the actual landscape and its levels of cultivation,

¹¹ See Robin Studd, "Recorded 'Waste' in the Staffordshire Domesday Entry," *Staffordshire Studies* 12 (2000): 121–33; W. E. Wightman, "The Significance of 'Waste' in the Yorkshire Domesday," *Northern History* 10 (1975): 55–71; J. J. N. Palmer, "War and Domesday Waste," *Armies, Chivalry, and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France: Proceedings of the 1995 Harlaxton Symposium* (1998): 256–75. In the Yorkshire entries, surveyors typically note the size of the land designated as waste and how many ploughs *could* work on the land, or whether it's taxable. Also in some cases there will be a designation of "waste, except for # of villagers or other inhabitants." These entries suggest that spaces designated "waste" may not be entirely deserted or may be intended for farming at some point in the future. See Morris, *Domesday Book: Yorkshire*.

production, and habitation. Yet the two geographies captured by these terms come together in texts concerning voluntary exile, as for early medieval monks, the ascetic act of wandering in the desert became a self-imposed exile into unsettled areas of wilderness.¹²

Perhaps the best known “voluntary exile” to inhabit the Anglo-Saxon desert is the seventh-century figure Guthlac, a one-time soldier, monk of Crowland Abbey in Lincolnshire (East Anglia), and eventual saint. He is also the subject of Felix’s eighth-century prose *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* and two Anglo-Saxon poetic adaptations of Felix’s hagiography, both contained in the *Exeter Book*.¹³ Primarily, the Guthlac poems are concerned with the martial qualities of Guthlac’s victories over his demonic adversaries in the wilderness and his conquest and purification of new land for the Christian kingdom. As such, these texts provide multiple mentions of the landscape of Guthlac’s retreat, though the environment described in these instances tends to be unrealistic or formulaic and lacking in detail. Speaking broadly about the habitations of anchorites, the poet of the text known as “Guthlac A” observes, “sume þa wuniað on **westennum**, / secað ond gesittað sylfra willum / hamas on heolstrum. Hy ðæs heofoncundan / boldes bidað” (some inhabit the wastelands, seek and settle of their own will homes in dark places. They await the celestial dwelling-places) (ll. 81–84). Here, *westen* is one of the

¹² For a discussion of the adoption of this tradition in medieval Irish culture, see Alfred K. Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Siewers also comments on the similarity of the wanderer’s journey over water to the Irish *immram* (“rowing about”) tradition; see Siewers, *Strange Beauty*, 4.

¹³ The standard edition is edited by George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 3, *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936). In a fifteenth-century hagiographic version of the Middle English romance of *Sir Gowther* (contained in National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1) Gowther is identified as Guthlac. In the romance, Gowther is a monstrous and violent figure who is ultimately redeemed through acts of humiliation and penance. In another Middle English connection to this study of the “westen,” the thirteenth-century romance of *King Horn* has as one of its settings the land of Westernesne, a destination reached only by boat.

few terms used by the poet to describe Guthlac's choice of home. In this hagiography, the qualities of the *westen* are less important than the "celestial dwelling-places" awaited by Guthlac and his fellow warriors-for-Christ; so too is the reality of Guthlac's environment less important than his ability to transform this desert into a spiritual oasis. As we have observed, the Anglo-Saxon "desert" is the very opposite of the conventional Middle Eastern desert; instead of a dry, rocky environment, this new desert is a wet, swampy landscape, with shifting waters instead of shifting sands. However, even spare mentions of the *westen* are weighted with the term's layered meanings — a space uncultivated, *deserted* by humans but certainly not empty; a waste, a wilderness, a wild space shaded by somewhat antithetical images of the dry, rocky desert of Scripture.

The special case of Guthlac serves as a point of intersection in the *westen* / *wasta* conundrum. Guthlac, alone among all other wanderers in Anglo-Saxon poetry, has a *very specific* location for his exile, yet here the fens of Crowland are consistently called the *westen* and the *Exeter Book Guthlac* poems provide little more than conventional details — trees, hills, greenery — to describe this landscape. Clearly, the lexical choice of *westen* to describe Guthlac's new home recalls scriptural antecedents, notably the Israelites' flight from captivity in Egypt and Christ's temptation in the desert, a landscape also sought out by the aforementioned desert fathers.¹⁴ But Guthlac's Crowland is not a "desert" in the traditional sense of the word; this is instead a green landscape that is simply unsettled and uncultivated. The question thus arises: what is the reality of Guthlac's *westen* — a desert, a wasteland, a wilderness? In her analysis of history,

¹⁴ The Israelites' exodus is also retold in the Anglo-Saxon poem "Exodus" from the *Junius* manuscript; the term *westen* is used in this text to indicate the desert. The standard edition is George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 1, *The Junius Manuscript* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931).

memory, and dwelling in Anglo-Saxon poetry, Patricia Dailey defines the *westen* as a space that is liminal, interior and exterior, living and historical, and a location ripe for the religious conversion of those who enter it.¹⁵ As a meeting-point of opposites and fertile ground for spiritual change, the *westen* of poetic sources might seem to be a figural and ephemeral space. Guthlac's sojourn in this landscape, however, merges the figural and the actual, creating a location laden with scriptural significance yet firmly plottable on the Anglo-Saxon map. Given the mix of environmental images attributed to this one word, the characteristics of Guthlac's abodes (both textual and actual) beg our attention, and raise further questions as to how his particular experience of exile is shaped by (and, in turn, shapes) his environment.

Guthlac's Westen

Throughout the text of "Guthlac A," in addition to identifications of the land as waste or wilderness, we find several mentions of hills, greenness, groves or forests, and inland "islands." We find that "he ana ongan / beorgseþel bugan" (he alone began to inhabit a hill-dwelling) (ll. 101–02), "þæt him leofedan londes wynne, / bold on beorhge" (that the joy of the land, the house on the hill, became dear to him) (ll. 139–40), and that "meotud onwrah / beorg on bearwe, þa se bytla cwom / se þær haligne ham arærde" (the Lord revealed the hill in the grove when the builder came, who raised up a sacred home there) (ll. 147–49). Further sections of the text return to this idealized portrait of a "home on the hill": "He wæs on elne ond on eaðmedum, / bad on beorge, (wæs him botles need)" (he lived in strength and in humility and stayed on the hill, he was pleased with

¹⁵ Patricia Dailey, "Questions of Dwelling in Anglo-Saxon Poetry and Medieval Mysticism: Inhabiting Landscape, Body, and Mind," *New Medieval Literatures* 8 (2006): 175–214, esp. 187–93.

his dwelling) (ll. 328–29), and later, “he eft gestag / beorg on bearwe” (he again ascended the hill in the grove) (ll. 427–29). Guthlac’s choice to settle on a hill may have been a necessity in order to escape the low-lying wetlands of Crowland, but the poet’s repetition of this land feature also has iconic significance.¹⁶ This saint’s settlement on the hill is scripturally meaningful, casting him in the form of Christ during the sermon on the mount of Matthew 5–7, or in the form of St. Anthony himself. In Athanasius’s *Vita Antonii*, after journeying for three days and three nights in the desert, the hermit saint finally discovers a “very high hill” surrounded by water, plains, and date palms, making it his refuge in the wilderness.¹⁷ Additionally, Guthlac’s choice of the hill has military significance — he chooses to “occupy the high ground” — given that his ensuing spiritual battles take on a distinctly martial tone.

The perspective offered by this poem widens a bit when the hermit begins to be tested by diabolical adversaries, and we are reminded that his heretofore idyllic-seeming hill is located in the waste. Guthlac is “þam þe feara sum / **mearclond** gesæt. þær he mongum wearð / bysen on Brytene, siþþan biorg gestah / eadig oretta, ondwiges heard” (one of a few who settled the borderland. There he became a model to many in Britain, after he ascended the hill, blessed warrior, hard in resistance) (ll. 173–76). The *mearcland*, taking its root from the noun *mearc*, translated as a ‘limit,’ ‘boundary,’ or ‘period of time,’ is used to indicate a “border-land, waste land lying outside the

¹⁶ Laurence Shook argues that *beorg* should be translated as “barrow” or “tumulus.” See Laurence K. Shook, “The Burial Mound in Guthlac A,” *Modern Philology* 58 (1960): 4. Shook, among others, speculates that Guthlac’s hill was in fact a burial tumulus of the native Britons. Further, Alfred K. Siewers observes that the grove on or around Guthlac’s barrow may harken to Insular and Germanic traditions of sacred groves. See Siewers, “Landscapes of Conversion: Guthlac’s Mound and Grendel’s Mere as Expressions of Anglo-Saxon Nation-Building,” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 34 (2003): 1–39; reprinted in Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey, eds., *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 211, 246–47.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 46–47, 74.

cultivated,” and also in some cases the sea-coast.¹⁸ Thus this land is enigmatic; it is defined not necessarily by its own environmental features, but by its separation from land that has been claimed and cultivated. Guthlac is later described as having angered the demonic spirits haunting this wasteland when “he for wlcence on westenne / beorgas bræce” (he, for glory in the wasteland, broke the hills) (ll. 208–09) where they had been permitted to rest. The image of the desert appears again “þonne he to eorðan on þam anade / hleor onhylde” (when he bent down his face to the earth in that wasteland) (ll. 333–34).¹⁹ Prior to Guthlac’s claim, this land is “idel ond æmen, eþelriehte feor” (empty and desolate, far from hereditary right) (l. 216), yet after his conquest, “sceoldon **wræcmæcgas** / ofgiefan gnornende grene beorgas” (murmuring, exiled wretches would have to give up the green hills) (ll. 231–232), and “beorg ymbstodan / **hwearfum wræcmæcgas**” (exiled wretches [demons] stood around the hill in crowds) (ll. 262–63). A final aspect of the saint’s landscape appears in the text known as *Guthlac B*, a continuation of the poetic hagiography. In this text, concerned primarily with the saint’s death, we find that at Guthlac’s passing, “beofode þæt ealond, / foldwong onþrong” (that island trembled, the flat earth moved) (ll. 1325–26). In addition to the formulaic references to hills, green groves, and desert spaces, this text acknowledges an island — or at least a plot of raised ground surrounded by water or swamp — as part of the saint’s chosen home.²⁰

¹⁸ Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 673–74.

¹⁹ “anade” (*ánád*) is defined by Bosworth and Toller as “solitude” or “a desert”; see *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 38.

²⁰ Catherine A.M. Clarke observes a distinction between the Anglo-Saxon term *ealond* and the Latin *insula*, “generally agreed to derive from ‘land in itself’ or a similar construction”; conversely, *ealond* “embraces the two elements of water (*ea*) and land (*lond*) [...] While the Latin focuses only on the land, the Old English term gives equal importance to the water and does not necessarily imply dichotomy or opposition,” instead suggesting the entirety of the *ealond* Britain as a land dotted and crossed with bodies of water. While Guthlac’s *ealond* is most likely a raised plot of land in the fen, the appearance of the term *ealond*

With its conventional and relatively nondescript terms, the Anglo-Saxon text provides sparse elucidation of the *mearclond* landscape; for more detail, we can turn to the source material of the Latin *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*. In this text, the landscape sought out by Guthlac is again termed a *vastissimi heremi* (“vast desert”),²¹ and is described in some detail:

Est in mediterraneis Britanniae partibus immensae magnitudinis aterrima palus, quae, a Grontae fluminis ripis incipiens, haud procul a castello quem dicunt nomine Gronte nunc stagnis, nunc flactris, interdum nigris fusi vaporis laticibus, necnon et crebris insularum nemorumque intervenientibus flexuosis rivigarum anfractibus, ab austro in aquilonem mare tenus longissimo tractu protenditur.

(There is in the midland district of Britain a most dismal fen of immense size, which begins at the banks of the river Granta not far from the camp which is called Cambridge, and stretches from the south as far north as the sea. It is a very long tract, now consisting of marshes, now of bogs, sometimes of black waters overhung by fog, sometimes studded with wooded islands and traversed by the windings of tortuous streams).²²

Curious about this vast, wild place, Guthlac engages Tatwine to guide him, and they (with Christ as a spiritual guide) travel via boat through the fenland:

Arrepta piscatoria scafula, per invia lustra inter atrae paludis margines Christo viatore ad praedictum locum usque pervenit; Crugland dicitur, insula media in palude posita quae ante paucis propter remotioris heremi solitudinem inculta vix nota habebatur.

(taking a fisherman’s skiff, made [their] way, travelling with Christ, through trackless bogs within the confines of the dismal marsh till he came to the said spot: it is called Crowland, an island in the middle of the marsh which on account of the wildness of this very remote desert had hitherto remained untilled and known to a very few).²³

here also brings to mind the semi-marine nature of the Crowland fens, a landscape neither exclusively water nor land. See Catherine A.M. Clarke, *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700–1400* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 20.

²¹ Bertram Colgrave, trans., *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 86.

²² *Ibid.*, 86–87.

²³ *Ibid.*, 88–89.

Though, as Colgrave points out, these passages borrow from descriptions of underworld voyages in Virgil's *Aeneid*,²⁴ the watery nature of Guthlac's chosen home is attested by numerous subsequent references to his *insula* (a description of the island's barrow in chapter 28; the island trembling in chapter 36; the introduction of the island's mischievous jackdaws in chapters 38 and 40; two brethren hiding flasks in the island's marshy sand in chapter 44) and the fact that he travels by boat within the fen (when recovering a document from the jackdaws in chapter 37). In fact, the manuscript iconography (though considerably later than the Latin life or the Anglo-Saxon poems) depicting Guthlac's journey to Crowland shows him travelling by boat over a landscape of adjoining water and land, with one roundel depicting trees growing right out of the water (see figures 1, 2). Beyond this, we find additional environmental details in another segment of the *Vita*; in an episode where the fen-demons torment the saint, they pull him from his cell and "adductum in atrae paludis coenosis laticibus immerserunt. Deinde asportantes illum per paludis asperrima loca inter densissima veprium vimina dilacerates membrorum compaginibus trahebant" (plunged him into the muddy waters of the black marsh. Then they carried him through the wildest parts of the fen, and dragged him through the dense thickets of brambles, tearing his limbs and all his body).²⁵ Though the Latin source adds several colorful details to our portrait — notably, black marshes and dense brambles — we are still left with a spare vision of Guthlac's fenland.

As repetitive and conventional as the language used to describe this landscape may be, so too is the language applied to Guthlac's adversaries. In the sections of *Guthlac A* that deal with these previous inhabitants of the saint's retreat, we encounter

²⁴ Ibid., 88.

²⁵ Ibid., 102–03.

aspects of exile similar to what was discussed in the previous chapter. Shadowy figures that are at times identified as demonic and at times seem to take the form of native Britons, these enemies are “*wræcmæg*as” (exiled wretches) (ll. 231, 263), and in Guthlac’s own words, “*wid is þes westen, wræcsetla fela, / eardas onhæle earmra gæsta / sindon wærlogan þe þa wic bugað*” (wide is this wasteland, many places of exile, concealed dwelling-places of wretched spirits, [they] are troth-breakers who inhabit those dwelling-places) (ll. 296–98). The very words used to define these beings and their movements — *wræc* and *hwearfum* — we recognize as conventional ways of indicating a state of exile.²⁶ In an earlier section of the poem, their spiritual state and history are elucidated: “*þær ær fela / setla gesæton þonan sið tugin / wide waðe, wuldre byscyrede, / lyftlacende*” (beforehand [they] settled many seats there; from that place, [they] roamed on journeys, widely in wandering, flying through the air, separated from glory) (ll. 143–46). These enemies’ link to Guthlac’s chosen abode in the wilderness is explained still later, and we find further evidence that these spirits are tortured in their perpetual state of homelessness:

þær hy bidinge,
 earne ondsacan, æror mostun
 æfter tintergum tidum brucan,
 ðonne hy of waþum werge cwoman
 restan ryneþragum, rowe gefegon;
 wæs him seo gelyfed þurh lytel fæc.
 Stod seo dygle stow dryhtne in gemyndum
 idel ond æmen, eþelriehte feor,
 bad bisæce betran hyrdes.
 To þon ealdfeondas ondan noman,
 swa hi singales sorge dreogað.

²⁶ As discussed in the previous chapter, *wræc* indicates a person in exile or the state of exile itself and is derived from a Proto-Indo-European term denoting the actions of pushing or driving something off; *hwearfum* (noun *hwearf*) may be related to the adjective *hwearf* and verbs *hwearfan* or *hweorfan*, all indicating the act of turning or moving in a circuit, which is a formulaic way of describing exile in poetry.

Ne motun hi on eorþan eardes brucan,
 ne hy lyft swefeð in leoma ræstum,
 ac hy hleolease hama þoliað,
 in cearum cwipað, cwealmes wiscað,
 willen þæt him dryhten þurh deaðes cwealm
 to hyra earfeða ende geryme.

(wretched adversaries, formerly were allowed at times to make use of abodes there after punishments, when they came weary from wanderings to rest for a space of time, rejoiced in the quiet; this was allowed to them for a short time. This secret spot stood in the Lord's mind, empty and desolate, far from hereditary right, it awaited a visit from a better guardian. After that the old foes were afraid, just as they continually endure sorrows. They are not allowed on the earth to enjoy a dwelling-place, nor does the air lull their limbs to rest, but they, without shelter, lack homes, bewail in sorrows; they wish for death, desirous that the Lord yield to them, through the finality of death, an end to their miseries). (ll. 209–25)

Just as this text offers Guthlac as a “voluntary exile,” so too does it provide an opposing view of involuntary exile in the exempla of the wandering demons. For all of these refugees, the Anglo-Saxon *westen* becomes the location for their experience of exile. The demons demonstrate the ultimate punishment of exile: even the most far-flung, uninhabited and wild space of landscape cannot provide a home for them; their existence is characterized by restlessness and homelessness. Guthlac, by contrast, is able to make a home for himself even on the margins of the known landscape. In their arguments with the saint, the demons point out the various impediments to human habitation in this landscape. They ask,

Bi hwon scealt þu lifgan, þeah þu lond age?
 Ne þec mon hider mose fedeð;
 beoð þe hungor ond þurst hearde gewinnan,
 gif þu gewitest swa wilde deor
 ana from eþele.

(On what will you live, even if you possess the land? No man will feed you here with morsels; hunger and thirst will be strong enemies to you if

you depart alone, like the wild animals, from your native home). (ll. 273–77)

Beyond their observation that this marginal land will not provide sustenance for him,²⁷ the demons also point out that Guthlac will become “swa wilde deor” — like the wild animals — if he abandons his proper place in society. This idea that wild animals must roam solitary and homeless, “ana from eþele,” speaks to the civilizing effect that society has upon its inhabitants, and the “wilding” influence of nature upon the exile.²⁸

The image of Guthlac roaming alone and without sustenance in this environment brings to the foreground several familiar elements of exile. To some degree, the exile’s actual location is unimportant; he or she must be placed outside of social systems and cycles so that finding food, shelter, and protection is difficult, if not impossible. Thus, this literature still places the human community, with its included systems of exchange and production, at the center of human experience and as almost necessary for survival. Yet at the same time, as seen in “The Wanderer,” “The Wife’s Lament,” and “The Seafarer,” the environment performs the crucial function of giving image, form, and physicality to the exile’s misery. Moreover, the exile’s disorientation and “unfitness”

²⁷ Shook suggests that we might read *mose* as an inflected form of *mos* (bog, marsh), and thus the line becomes: “No man will feed you here in the marsh.” See Shook, “The Burial Mound,” 5.

²⁸ Cf. the dream of Nebuchadnezzar in the poem *Daniel* (*Junius* ms), wherein Daniel interprets the king’s dream:

Se ðec aceorfeð of cyningdome,
and ðec wineleasne on wræc sendeð,
and þonne onhweorfeð heortan þine,
þæt þu ne gemyndgast æfter mandream,
ne gewittes wast butan wildeora þeaw,
ac þu lifgende lange þrage
heorta hlypum geond holt wunast.

(He will cut you down from royal dignity and send you, friendless, into exile, and then will change your heart so that you do not remember human revelries, nor will you have knowledge except for the manner of wild beasts, but you will be accustomed to living for a long time around the forest in the leaps of the deer) (ll. 567–73).

within the environment will demonstrate his or her loss of place and loss of a sense of time even if the environment itself seems to be very much alive, productive, and in flux.

As we have noted, the case of Guthlac is unique in that the location of his exile provides an intersection between the symbolic (a sojourn in the desert, here the *westen*) and the actual, as we can pinpoint the fen-landscape where he took up residence. Though his location is known and tangible, both poet and hagiographer describe the space in spare, unrealistic, and conventional terms, most likely to avoid setting the landscape of his hagiography apart from others of the genre of saints' lives, usually set in generalized, Eastern locales. Yet do the authors' choices to conventionalize, stylize, and remove detail from Guthlac's landscape indicate that that landscape was truly deserted, empty, or unknown? Beyond this, if landscapes such as the forest, the ocean, and the fen-*westen* are seen as suitable locations for exile in Anglo-Saxon culture due, in part, to the fact that they are uninhabited, what effects do the actual environments of these spaces have upon the poetic constructions of exile? To begin to answer these questions, we must gain a better understanding of the fen-*westen* than what is provided by the poetic Guthlac texts.

A Wilderness of Wanderers

While Guthlac holds the specific area of Crowland, the generalized "fenland" environment becomes the setting for many other accounts of exile or unhappy separation in other poetic texts. The enigmatic poem known as "Wulf and Eadwacer" (also found in the *Exeter Book*), features a lament by an apparently female speaker,

Ungelic is us.
 Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre.
 Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworpen.
 Sindon wælreowe weras þær on ige.

(Unlike are we. Wulf is on an island, I on another. Fast is that island, surrounded by fens. Savage men are there, on that island). (ll. 3–6)

In this case, the fen landscape functions as a perfect manifestation of the persona's complaint. The two fen-islands, outcroppings of land enclosed by water or swamp, serve as holdfasts (as well as prisons) for the separated "lovers," with the impassable landscape ensuring that each remains alone. Beyond this, the text reveals the presence of "savage men" on at least one island of this fen, suggesting that the dangers posed by such a landscape are not only the impassibility or unpredictability of the environment, but also the unsavory characters who might make their homes in the fen.²⁹

Perhaps the most famous of unsavory characters to inhabit the fen and similar "wasteland" areas are the Grendel-kin of *Beowulf*. Though the Grendels are arguably monstrous (and thus outside the realm of the actual), their status within the narrative as exiles and their placement in the fen speaks to a pattern of evoking the fen or the wasteland as a suitable and possibly conventional habitat for exiles.³⁰ As stated in the previous chapter, the poem often employs a motif of "wandering in darkness" to mark the Grendels. In other instances, Grendel is "mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold, / fen ond fæsten" (a well-known march-haunter, he who inhabited the moors, fen and stronghold) (ll. 103–04). As the text progresses, identifications of Grendel with these varied environmental niches actually outnumber the associations of Grendel with darkness.

²⁹ Cf. Kelley Wickham-Crowley's reading of this poem, in which she argues that the fen-landscape and the lovers' feelings for each other dissolve bodily and physical boundaries. She also argues that the mention of the "wælreowe weras" on the island further strengthens the bond between the lovers, as they have an external enemy against which to form a union. See Wickham-Crowley, "Living on the *Ecg*: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts," in *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 95-96.

³⁰ Though I will not deal with *Beowulf*'s dragon here, the dragon is also associated with the wilderness in that poem; the beast lives "on þære westenne" (in the wasteland) (l. 2298).

Early in the narrative he “sinnihte heold / mistige moras” (held night after night the misty moors) (ll. 162b–63a); later, Grendel “mearcað morhopu” (marks the moor-swamps) (l. 450) with the blood of his victims, then bore God’s anger “of more under misthleoþum” (from the moor under misty cliffs) (l. 710). Following his besting by Beowulf, “mynte se mæra, þær he meahte swa, / widre gewindan ond on weg þanon / fleon on fenhopu” (the famous one thought where he might go whither and on his way thence, flee to his fen-retreat) (ll. 762–64); subsequently, Grendel is forced “feorhseoc fleon under fenhleoðu, / secean wynleas wic” (life-sick, to flee under the fen-coverts, to seek a joyless dwelling place) (ll. 820–21), and Hrothgar identifies the two great exiles as “micle mearcstapan moras healdan” (large march-walkers inhabit(ing) the moors) (l. 1348). Through repetition and variation of these terms, fens and moors, mists and swamps become intimately connected to the Grendel-kin, marking them as outsiders (at least, outside the human community).

Looking to the modern lexicon, we find that definitions for “fen” and “moor” have historically been and remain intertwined. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers several possible definitions for *fen*. Definitions for the earliest uses of the term, traced to instances of the word in *Beowulf* (as we have seen), the writings of Alfred, and the *Old English Chronicle*, include “low land covered wholly or partially with shallow water, or subject to frequent inundations; a tract of such land, a marsh” or “certain low-lying districts in Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, and some adjoining counties” or “mud, clay, dirt, mire, filth.”³¹ Taken together, these denotations of “fen” emphasize changeability in

³¹ “fen, n.1,” *OED Online*, last modified June 2012, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.library.wmich.edu/view/Entry/69207?rskey=n3sMME&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

the environment; as a low-lying area of land, water may move in and out, creating marshland, mud, a mire, and certainly an uninhabitable area, due to its instability.

Lexically, the “fen” and the “moor” are not so different. In their definitive dictionary of the Anglo-Saxon language, Bosworth and Toller list ‘marsh,’ ‘mud,’ ‘dirt,’ and, unhelpfully, ‘fen’ as possible translations for the Anglo-Saxon *fen*.³² For the term *mor* Bosworth and Toller provide “a moor, waste and damp land” as modern equivalents.³³ For “moor,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* locates the earliest appearances of the term in *Aldhelm’s Glosses*, the Old English *Hexateuch*, Felix’s *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, and Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, and provides the original definition of “a marsh; marshland, fen” and more modern definitions of “any of the flat, low-lying areas of Somerset, England, which were formerly marshland” and “a piece of unenclosed waste ground; [...] uncultivated ground covered with heather; a heath.”³⁴ Again, the “moor” may be characterized by its low topography and propensity to flood, and like the fen, may be considered “waste” and left uncultivated because of its changeability (or perhaps because it is inaccessible or historically empty).

Though not a description of English moorland, a description of moors in Norway from Alfred’s translation of Orosius’s *Historiae Adversum Paganos* speaks to the challenges posed by this kind of landscape. As Alfred retells the voyages of the

³² Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 275. A search of the *Online Middle English Dictionary* reveals that “fen” or a related term appear briefly in descriptions of landscapes in texts such as Laȝamon’s *Brut*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. Often, the term appears paired with another (usually alliterative) landscape-term, such as “feld and fen” (field and fen), “fen and flod,” (fen and flood), and “frith and fen.” The last of these is an interesting pairing, as a *frith* could be translated as a park, preserve, woodland, or meadow, but essentially an enclosed (and probably cultivated area), suggesting a contrast with the wild *fen*. See “fen, n. 1,” *Middle English Dictionary*, last updated 18 December 2001, [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/libproxy.library.wmich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED15577](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/libproxy/library.wmich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED15577).

³³ Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 697.

³⁴ “moor, n. 1,” *OED Online*, last modified June 2012, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/libproxy.library.wmich.edu/view/Entry/121964?rskey=wBQANP&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

Norwegian traveler Ohthere, he describes the mutual war-making of Finns and Norwegians across the moors, as well as the presence of freshwater lakes within the moors that require the use of small, portable boats carried over land by each army in order to attack the other.³⁵ While not impossible to traverse (if one is willing to risk a swim), this semi-marine landscape poses a physical challenge for humans to cross without proper equipment. Even then, according to Ohthere's account, the land is contested by two different groups, with the lakes providing avenues by which they can attack each other and that (possibly) hinder escape, adding to the instability and danger of the landscape. Fens and moors are thus *both* marked in literature as wild and unstable places, nearly uninhabitable by humans for their watery changeability.

An additional poetic text which provides a comparable mention of the fen is the collection of maxims preserved in the Cotton Tiberius B.i. manuscript (and described in some detail in chapter three). This congregation of gnomic observations about the natural world and behaviors for individuals places everything in its proper place in the Anglo-Saxon world. Alongside poetic assertions that “hafuc sceal on glofe / wilde gewunian, wulf sceal on bearowe, / earm anhaga, eofor sceal on holte, / toðmægenes trum” (a hawk must be on the glove, the wild thing remain, the wolf must be in the forest, miserable solitary one, the boar must be in the wood, strong in the force of his tusks) (ll. 17–20), we find that “þeof sceal gangan þystrum wederum. þyrs sceal on fenne gewunian / ana innan lande” (the thief must go forth in dark weather. The demon must dwell in the fen, one alone in the land) (ll. 42–43). Though the mysterious term ‘þyrs’ could be translated as ‘demon,’ ‘giant,’ ‘specter,’ and ‘spirit,’ to name just a few, it must indicate an otherness,

³⁵ “Ohthere's Voyage to the White Sea,” in *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*, trans. Kevin Crossley-Holland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 65–66.

a non-human presence. This pairing of the thief in the dark and the demon in the fen isolates each one as set apart from human civilization; each is “Other,” though for different reasons. Moreover, as the hawk finds its “proper” place on the glove, the wolf in the forest, and the boar in the wood, the demon / spirit / monster belongs in the changeable and uncultivated fen.

Such a fluid and unstable environment is ideal for the non-human, monstrous *byrs*. However we translate the term, this being straddles boundaries of human, animal, and spiritual realms, falling within Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s definition of monstrosity in his seven theses of “monster culture”: “they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.”³⁶ Refusing or resisting neat categorization, the “monster” is a source of human anxiety because it calls into question the natural order and reminds the human audience that our own bodies are malleable, changeable, and fluid (literally *and* figuratively), as well. Thus, the *byrs* is suited to the fen because they are each unstable: the beast is neither this nor that; the fen is not exclusively land nor water. Similarly, the status of the exile must inspire similar anxiety in a human audience, for just as the marsh and fen are mutable and unstable, so too is the exile’s life in the wilderness, and thus also the life of the individual, always subject to the whims of fate and chance.

In these poetic sources, a lack of specificity in describing the fen environment allows the audience to consider it as mysterious, changeable, or dangerous without shedding much light on its environmental reality. Instead, at times the fen seems to

³⁶ Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6. Interestingly, the dual-natured (human and divine) Christ also resists systematic structuration, and thus would be similarly suited to exist in the liminal spaces of desert or fen.

function more as a mirror for human anxieties about the fixedness of our own lives and bodies. As such, the suitability of the monster or exile to the “poetic” fen seems a logical match: a strange and unstable home for a strange and unstable (or unacceptable) inhabitant. However, the reality of Guthlac’s residence in the fen directs us to consider the actual geographical location and landscape for his hermitage, and to ask whether it indeed fulfills our expectations of the Anglo-Saxon desert / wasteland / wilderness.

“A Hideous Fen of a Huge Bigness”

Describing the environmental reality of the Anglo-Saxon fen accurately is a challenge. Though there have been numerous ecological and archaeological studies of the East Anglian fen over the past several decades,³⁷ it is still difficult to envision the actual landscape inspiration for Guthlac’s fenland, as the land has undergone radical changes (including draining and cultivation) since the medieval period. In many cases, researchers quote the Felix / Colgrave famous description of a “hideous fen of a huge bigness” in the introductory materials to their reports, in order to establish the fenland’s long history as well as the perceived danger and ugliness of the region. At the same time, the repetition of this single (though memorably translated) line reveals the lack of detailed accounts of the Anglo-Saxon fenland landscape from which researchers can draw. Neither archaeology, geology, hagiography, nor poetry alone can provide a full portrait of the fen, yet culling details from each of these sources may bring us as close as possible to understanding that landscape and the relationship of its inhabitants to it.

³⁷ Notable among these publications are the reports of the work of the Fenland Research Committee, founded by Harold Godwin in 1932 to study the ecology and history of the Cambridgeshire wetlands.

The eastern fenland, a pocket of land cradling an incursion of the North Sea on England's east coast, is actually a flood-plain bounded by the cities of Lincoln to the north, Peterborough to the west, and Cambridge to the south, and is crossed by a multitude of rivers.³⁸ Geologically, this plain is surrounded by chalk to the north and south and Jurassic rocks to the west, and has an uneven surface with projections of land rising above the landscape to become the "islands" of Ely, March, and Crowland (see fig. 3), among many other raised sites with place names ending in "eg" (island) around Ely.³⁹ Approaching the shore, the land contains deposits of silt and clay; as one moves inland, the land contains large areas of peat, formed when tidal inundations met inland river water, thus water-logging the entire area, aiding in the formation of shallow lakes or "meres,"⁴⁰ and turning fen vegetation into layers of peat.⁴¹ To a modern observer, this landscape boasts "an interminable flatness relieved only here and there by the gentle emergence of low islands of gravel where the fen floor pokes upward above the general water-level."⁴² Similarly, according to medieval sources, in the past the fenland consisted of wide swathes of marsh or swampland, undulating slightly in altitude to provide low-

³⁸ Harry Godwin, *Fenland: its Ancient Past and Uncertain Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1. Among these rivers, Godwin lists the Witham, Welland, Nene, Great Ouse, Little Ouse, Lark, and the Nar.

³⁹ H.C. Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Newton Abbot, UK: David and Charles, 1940/1974), 1; Della Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1998), 175. Margaret Gelling observes that the "eg" "most frequently refers to dry ground surrounded by marsh when it occurs in ancient settlement-names. It is also used of islands in the modern sense." See Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London: J. M. Dent, 1984), 34–70. This quote pp. 34–35.

⁴⁰ As Godwin has it, these are "the great Fenland meres such as those of Whittlesey, Ramsey, and Streatham, most of which were to persist until the era of steam-assisted drainage of the Fens." See Godwin, *Fenland*, 108.

⁴¹ Godwin, *Fenland*, 5. This peat, widely used for fuel, ranged in thickness from inches to several feet (though levels may have been thicker prior to the draining of the fens in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries). See Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 2; Darby, *The Draining of the Fens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), esp. 104, 231.

⁴² Godwin, *Fenland*, 1.

lying waters and inland “islands,” and supporting distinct ecosystems difficult to recreate.⁴³

As with any landscape, the fens of this region were subject to environmental change; however, due to their location and the ensuing patterns of flooding by sea and by rivers, the fenlands were perhaps more changeable than other locations. The usefulness and stability of the fens varied by location, with some areas flooded to the point of forming “great lakes,” others “fairly dry during ordinary years; the islands themselves were but little different from the surrounding upland,”⁴⁴ and still other areas changed with the seasons; for example, the southern peat fens flooded in winter but dried out enough to be used as pasture in the summer.⁴⁵ Interestingly, seasonal changes could cause shifts in the landscape even in areas of fen that did not flood in winter, for these areas “were subject to an annual heaving motion as the swelling peat absorbed more and more water.”⁴⁶ Taking a long view, from the Roman period to the Anglo-Saxon period, the fens experienced a notable environmental change caused by a “gradually increasing water table leading to further peat formation and true fen conditions in many regions” and “increasing wetness [that] may have caused widespread devastation.”⁴⁷ A challenging environment to be sure, but this landscape was not completely unsettled prior to and during Guthlac’s time. Aerial photography of the fenland has revealed evidence of tilled

⁴³ While we cannot recreate the medieval fenland, there are several areas of fen in Britain that escaped draining and development, and may now be the closest approximation of the original fenland ecosystem. Among these is the Wicken Fen National Nature Reserve near Ely: <http://www.wicken.org.uk/>.

⁴⁴ Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 22.

⁴⁵ David Hall and John Coles, *Fenland Survey: An Essay in Landscape and Persistence*, English Heritage Archaeological Report 1 (London: English Heritage, 1994), 3. Hall and Coles acknowledge, however, that “whether or not winter floods would have made all the low-lying islands and ridges, where occupation is attested, wholly unattractive and unsuitable for winter activities must remain a problem [...] There is a difference between unattractive (to us) and unsuitable.” See *Fenland Survey*, 91.

⁴⁶ Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 16.

⁴⁷ Hooke, *Landscape*, 171.

fields from the Romano-British era (50 BCE to 450 CE), and archaeological studies have shown that Roman settlements on the fen-edges and on high ground in the silt-lands continued to be occupied by Saxon settlers.⁴⁸ In the archaeological and environmental analyses of Hall and Coles, from what they term the “Middle Saxon” period (650–850), increasing wetness in the silt-fen and fen-edges encouraged an abandonment of settlements in those places, leading to a nucleation of settlements around inland towns.⁴⁹ Toward the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, in the ninth and tenth centuries, the presence of a constructed “Sea Bank” around the Wash (see fig. 3) may be evidence of the inhabitants’ realization that the landscape was getting wetter and that they needed firmer protection against the encroaching seawater. In another example of human adaptation to this landscape, from the eighth century and after, the fenlands were made more accessible (or at least passable) and more useful by a network of canals that provided “communication routes between inland settlements and to coastal estuaries and the sea.”⁵⁰

Despite the difficulties for travel and settlement posed by a changeable swamp environment, the fenlands provided ample resources to attract settlers and to sustain local economies. As we have seen, the “wild” and isolated spaces of the Anglo-Saxon fenland increasingly attracted individuals and religious orders wishing to establish religious houses, with Guthlac’s eight-century establishment of Crowland, Etheldreda’s founding of Ely, and the use of the island of Thorney as a refuge for hermits, the latter two occurring in the seventh-century CE.⁵¹ These religious houses continued in existence for

⁴⁸ Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 122.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵⁰ Duncan Sayer, “Medieval Waterways and Hydraulic Economics: Monasteries, Towns, and the East Anglian Fen,” *World Archaeology* 41.1 (2009): 138.

⁵¹ Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 10; see also book 4, chapter 19 of Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, in *Opera Historica*, vol. 1 (London: Sumptibus Societatis, 1838, repr. 1964), 290–94; Thomas

centuries, and “the Fenland began to be famous as a home of monastic foundations,” as even after the Viking invasions of the tenth century, Ely and Thorney were restored in the 970s, and a nunnery at Chatteris was founded in 980 CE.⁵² It is likely, moreover, that the fen supported more rootless inhabitants, as “a frontier region between East Anglia and Mercia [...] it was the resort of brigands and bandits,”⁵³ and monastic records (including those from Ramsey and Ely) report the workings of poachers and “fen slodgers,” who hunted for birds, eggs, reeds, and sedge for their own profit.⁵⁴ We can find evidence for how individuals traversed this landscape looking for produce, as well. As late as the seventeenth century, William Camden reports that, although the peat was treacherous and thick enough that a man could “‘thrust a pole down right thirty foote deepe’,” fen-inhabitants were still able to “stalke” through the mires with stilts.⁵⁵ Further, many supernatural “fenland legends” have survived, attesting to the superstitions and fears that this landscape may have conjured for travelers or non-natives.⁵⁶

of Ely, *Liber Eliensis: Ad Fidem Codicum Variorum*, ed. David James Stewart, 2 vols (London: Bentley and Sons, 1848), I: 26; also R.H. Warner, *History of Thorney Abbey* (Wisbech, 1879), 18.

⁵² Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 13. Though located on the opposite side of the country from Guthlac’s East Anglian fens, the marshlands of the Somerset Levels present similar challenges to passage and cultivation, as they were low, flat, and “regularly subject to inundations from both freshwater rivers and high tidal floods, especially in the winter months.” See Hooke, *Landscape*, 178. A Somerset stronghold of the ninth-century King Alfred, *æþelingas ieg* (“the island of princes”) is an island that rises 12 meters / 39 feet above the surrounding wetland, and “which is surrounded on all sides by very great swampy and impassable marshes, so that no one can approach it by any means except in punts.” Hooke, *Landscape*, 178; Hooke cites Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents, vol.1: c. 500–1042* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 273. Hooke notes that Alfred built a monastery not far from this site in the late ninth-century, connected to dry land via a bridge. Other monasteries and sacred sites (at Muchelney and at Glastonbury) were built in the Somerset area centuries prior. See Hooke, *Landscape*, 178.

⁵³ Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 9.

⁵⁴ Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 155–56. Hall and Coles report that the use of the term “fen slodger” (an individual living in or off the produce of the fens) is attested by 1856 (the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists its earliest written use in 1827) but its origin is unknown.

⁵⁵ William Camden, “Leicestershire, Rutland and Lincoln,” in *Britain, Or a Chorographical Description of the Most Flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London, 1637); available at http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/text/chap_page.jsp;jsessionid=18596C0D2F58928E7C40D33553A0B323?t_id=Camden&c_id=19

⁵⁶ Christopher Marlowe, *Legends of the Fenland People* (Yorkshire, UK: EP Publishing Ltd, 1976). Further, in Alison Taylor’s analysis of pre-medieval, apparently religious or cult items discovered in the

While the wilder aspects of the fenland may have had a missionary appeal to individuals seeking an Anglo-Saxon desert, undoubtedly the natural resources of the fens were also attractive to these founders of monastic houses. Chief among the resources provided by this marine landscape were fish and other aquatic creatures; accordingly, in the tenth-century foundation charter of Ramsey Abbey, King Edgar makes reference to fisheries in the nearby manor of Welles (Wyllan), from which the monastery could expect a gift of 60,000 eels annually,⁵⁷ and Bede describes the monastic house of Ely as “enclosed [...] either with marshes or with waters, and therefore it has its name from the great plenty of eels taken in those marshes.”⁵⁸ In this region, eels functioned as currency — debts could be paid in eels and rentals and tithes were measured in terms of “sticks” of eels,⁵⁹ evidenced in a property assignment to Thorney Abbey which lists “fæennes hyre æt Fordham 7 æt Hyllingye,” (the rent of the fen at Fordham and at Hilgay) of several thousand eels and *snasa* (“sticks”) from various weirs and watercourses.⁶⁰ Aside from fishing, the fens also provided resources of rushes, reeds, and birds, including “anseres

southern fen edge of Cambridgeshire, she observes that “bogs and rivers were holy places in Iron Age times and it is not surprising that we should find that the fen-edges where rich farmland pushed right up to the treacherous wild Fenland, should inspire particular veneration.” Although Taylor is dealing with pre-medieval material and cultural practices, it is conceivable that, if the fenlands did inspire veneration (or superstition) prior to Anglo-Saxon settlement, echoes of these associations may have lingered. See Taylor, “Prehistoric, Roman, Saxon and Medieval Artefacts from the Southern Fen Edge, Cambridgeshire,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 74 (1985): 1–52. This quote on p. 46.

⁵⁷ In the foundation charter of 974, King Edgar grants to the monastery the profits from the manor of Welles, from which twenty fisherman would provide the brothers with an annual gift of 60,000 eels: “viginti homines piscatores, sexaginta miliaria anguillarum singulis annis debentes ad usum fratrum praedictorum.” See W. H. Hart and P. A. Lyons, eds., *Cartularium Monasterii de Ramesia*, 3 vols (London: Rolls Series, 1884, 1886, 1893), II (1886): 55. See also A.J. Robertson, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 101 (charter 48).

⁵⁸ See book 4, chapter 19 of *Historica Ecclesiastica*: “Est autem Elge in provincia Orientalium Anglorum regio familiarum circiter sexcentarum, in similitudinem insulae, vel paludibus, ut diximus, circumdata, vel aquis, unde et a copia anguillarum, quae in iisdem paludibus capiuntur, nomen accepit; ubi monasterium habere desideravit memorata Christi famula, quoniam de provincia eorundem Orientalium Anglorum ipsa, ut praefati sumus, carnis originem duxerat.” Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 294. See also Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 7, 14.

⁵⁹ Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 31.

⁶⁰ Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, 256–57 (document 9).

innumerae, fisedulae, felicae, mergae, corvae aquaticae, ardeae et anetes, quarum copia maxima est” (numberless Geese, Fisedulae, Coots, Dabchicks, Watercrows, Herons, and Ducks, of which the number is indeed great) as well as their eggs,⁶¹ salterns along the shore, hay, turves and peat for cutting, and finally, land for seasonal stock-rearing, grazing and farming on the islands and the inland boundaries of the fens.⁶² In *Domesday Book* entries for the holdings of the Abbey of Ely alone, the abbot’s taxable resources range from woodland, field, and meadow for livestock grazing and ploughing, fisheries providing fish and thousands of eels, and wood and reeds for cutting.⁶³ Guthlac’s “groves” likely would have consisted of the region’s native trees, including alder, bog oak (used for timber planks), and willow (used in making baskets, cords, and panels) in the wetter areas, as well as ash (used in handle-making and for axe-hafts), beech, yew (used for bows), and hazel (rods used for hurdles) in the drier uplands and fen-edges.⁶⁴ Though recorded after the Anglo-Saxon period in the twelfth century, a monk from the Peterborough monastery (attributed as “Hugo Candidus”) made observations about the ecology and economy of the environment surrounding Ramsey, Thorney, Ely, and Crowland:

⁶¹ Stewart, *Liber Eliensis*, 232, translated in Darby, *The Medieval Fenland*, 36.

⁶² Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 22; also Hooke, *Landscape*, 173. In the seventeenth century, Camden reports the activities of stock-rearing, fowling, and fishing in Crowland, describing how the town inhabitants travelled by boat to milk their cows: “Howbeit, the towne is well enough peopled with inhabitants, who have their cattaile a great way from the towne, and when they are to milke them they goe in little punts or boats that will cary but two apeece (which they call Skerries). Yet the most gainfull trade they have is by taking fish and catching of water foule, and that is so great that in the moneth of August they will spred a net and at once drawe three thousand mallards and wild ducks and such like together, and these pooles or watery plots of theirs they use to terme their Corne fields, for they see no corne growing in five miles any way.” See Camden, *Britain, Or a Chorographicall Description*, http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/text/chap_page.jsp;jsessionid=18596C0D2F58928E7C40D33553A0B323?t_id=Camden&c_id=19.

⁶³ “The Land of the Abbey of Ely,” in *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation*, ed. Ann Williams and G. H. Martin (London: Penguin, 2002), 522–26.

⁶⁴ Hall and Coles, *Fenland Survey*, 39.

Ex inundatione enim, vel ex superfluitione amnium stans aqua inaequali terra profundam paludem efficit, atque ita inhabitabilem reddit; praeter quaedam loca altiora [...] Est autem eadem palus hominibus per maxime necessaria, quia ibi accipiuntur ligna, & stipula ad ignem, & foenum ad pabula iumentorum, & coopertorium ad domos cooperiendas, & plurima alia necessaria, & utilia, & est ferax avium & piscium. Sunt enim ibi diversi amnes, & plurimae aquae, & maxima stagna piscosa; estque regio in hiis rebus abundantissima.

(From the flooding of the rivers, or from their overflow, the water, standing on unlevel ground, makes a deep marsh and so renders the land uninhabitable, save on some raised spots of ground [...] This marsh, however, is very useful for men; for in it are found wood and twigs for fires, hay for the fodder of cattle, thatch for covering houses, and many other useful things. It is, moreover, productive of birds and fish. For there are various rivers, and very many waters and ponds abounding in fish. In all these things the district is most productive).⁶⁵

In fact, when one considers that this “mixture of winding rivers, deep pools, marshes, reeds and waterways provid[ed] not just birds and fishes but some of the richest agricultural land in England,”⁶⁶ it becomes clear why such an environment might be dually attractive and forbidding.

Turning our eyes back to literary sources for a moment, the preceding data about the liminal environment of the fenlands, a place where water and earth meet and overlap to create a landscape of dangerous abundance, may serve as the setting for one of the *Exeter Book* riddles. Here, the harvest of reeds and other plant material available in the marshes are attested not only by archeological and historical records, but also by the poetic corpus. More than this, the “reed’s” perceptions of its world and the place of humans in that world further illustrate the ambiguous relationship of humans to

⁶⁵ Joseph Sparke, ed., *Historiae Anglicanae Scriptores Varii, e codicibus manuscriptis nunc primum editi*, 2 vols (London: Gul. Bowyer, 1723), II: *Historiæ Coenobii Burgensis scriptores varii*, 2. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*,

<http://find.galegroup.com.libproxy.library.wmichu.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=lom_wmichu&tabID=T001&docId=CW103237615&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>. Translated in Darby, *Medieval Fenland*, 21.

⁶⁶ Sayer, “Medieval Waterways,” 135.

productive wild spaces, like the fens. In Riddle 60, commonly solved as a reed, reed pen or rune-stick, the speaking reed details its existence, evoking aspects of a possible fenland “home”:

Ic wæs be sonde, sæwealle neah,
æt merefaroþe, minum gewunade
frumstaþole fæst; fea ænig wæs
monna cynnes, þæt minne þær
on anæde eard beheolde,
ac mec uhtna gehwam yð sio brune
lagufæðme beleolc.

(I was by the sand, near the sea-wall, at the surging of the waves, endured fast in my first place; few of any of the kin of man beheld my dwelling there in the waste, but before each dawn the dark flood lapped me with enveloping waves). (ll. 1–7)

The details of this reed’s early life match what we might expect in the fens: mentions of sand, a “sea-wall” (Sea Bank?), and description of its home as *on anæde*, a typical term for desert or wasteland. Moreover, the reed’s place *by* sand, *near* sea-wall, and not *in* the water but in a place where the waves surge to meet land, ensures that it touches earthly and watery environments but does not exist exclusively in either. Instead, as discussed in an earlier analysis in chapter three, it is in these liminal spaces where sea touches land, sky touches earth, that things like the reed become ideal candidates for transformation and movement. Tellingly, the reed claims that few men are aware of its existence, indicating an obscure or uninhabited environment, yet it is eventually harvested to be used for a pen or a rune-stick, as detailed in lines 8–17 of the text. In this way, the riddle may reveal something of the ambiguous nature of people moving through the fens: the reed is both removed from human eyes by virtue of its location, yet it *is* also cut and transformed into a cultural object, so this environment is clearly hidden and, at the same time, traversable and open for harvest. Even if the environment described in this text is

not meant to evoke the fenland, the reed nonetheless grows in a “wasteland” where land meets water, by definition *on the margins* of each, uninhabited or uncultivated, yet still rich with produce. Though only one riddle among many (and not definitively describing the East Anglian fen), this text echoes Guthlac in describing the *anad* (desert) as a semi-marine environment perhaps ill-suited for human inhabitants, yet it also supports the evidence culled from environmental and historical records, showing the wealth of resources to be found in the “waste.” Beyond this, the speaking reed exemplifies the transformative possibilities that such a liminal and changeable environment creates; as the reed becomes a new and vibrant thing — both a speaking subject of the text and an object that creates text itself — so may we expect to see an equally transformative effect when Guthlac comes into contact with the fen of Crowland.

Centering the Margins

Though the conditions of the Anglo-Saxon fen have been lost to history, we can use these fragments of information about the inhabitants, economy, and ecological changes of Guthlac’s fenland to draw broader observations about this kind of landscape. First, because the fen produced harvestable resources (birds, fish, plant material for thatch, and peat), people are likely to have been moving in and out of this landscape in pursuit of those products. While a number of those individuals were presumably inhabitants of nearby communities or monastic houses, it stands to reason that not all of these hunters and gatherers were “above board,” that there was also an unpredictable element looking for produce and profit in the fens. The landscape itself — swampy, foggy, thick with plant matter and varying in altitude — was an ideal place in which less

savory characters could hide, squat, or become lost. However, as is suggested by the poetry, these very characteristics also *encouraged* rumors of dangerous inhabitants or led to fear and misunderstanding of the fen among those not familiar with this environment. Second, as we gather from the account of Guthlac's conquest, the fenland presented a challenge to those hoping to build there, especially as one approached the coast. With the exception of the islands, the land was low-lying and thus prone to flooding; even if one did choose to settle on a site of higher altitude, at certain times of year, areas of surrounding land would have been isolated and difficult to navigate without the use of boats or canals. On a larger scale, the fen posed obstacles to establishing larger communities (though monastic houses found success in this area), in part due to the geographical variability of the landscape and the variability of the land over the course of the seasons. Taken together, these elements — a changeable landscape, a general lack of settlement, abundant natural resources as well as an abundance of misunderstanding and mystery linked to the region — create an environment perfectly suitable for blessing and habitation by Guthlac the saint and exile.

Balancing the literary portrait of the fen against historical and ecological information, the fen itself seems to teeter between, on the one hand, a dangerous, threatening, and uncontrollable place, full of monstrous or criminal inhabitants, and on the other, a place of great resources, able to be cultivated by hermits and monastic houses. Difficult to pin down, in different areas, the fen can swing between these two extremes and at times falls somewhere in the middle. As a landscape that defies expectations and definition, the fen becomes a “catch-all” for exiles, monsters, and martyrs, a liminal space in which creatures and things which defy categorization are

suiting to roam. These contradictory identities also make the *fen / westen* an excellent illustration of God's creation of earth as a land of punishment *and* provision (and everything in between), as suggested by the *Genesis* texts. In the case of Guthlac's corner of the fen, the saint is able to create a new center of provision for himself. In one of the text's most famous sequences, Guthlac's sanctifying presence brings about a renewal of life in the wilderness,

Smolt wæs se sigewong ond sele niwe,
 fæger fugla reord, folde geblowen;
 geacas gear budon. Guþlac moste
 eadig ond onmod eardes brucan.

(Peaceful was the field of victory and the hall new, fair was the voice of birds, the earth blossoming; cuckoos proclaimed the year. Guthlac, blessed and steadfast, was able to enjoy his dwelling-place). (ll. 742–45)

Greater even than this miraculous event is the fact that Guthlac himself becomes a provider of food and joy to the birds and animals, and takes pleasure in their society:

Sigehreðig cwom
 bytla to þam beorge. Hine bletsadon
 monge mægwlitas, meaglum reordum,
 treofugla tuddor, tacnum cyðdon
 eadges eftcyme. Oft he him æte heold,
 þonne hy him hungrige ymb hond flugon
 grædum gifre, geoce gefegon.
 Swa þæt milde mod wið moncynnes
 dreamum gedælde, dryhtne þeowde,
 genom him to wildeorum wyne, sippan he þas woruld forhogde.⁶⁷

(Victorious, the builder came to the hill. Many species blessed him with mighty voices; the offspring of tree-birds made known by signs the return of the blessed man. Often he held food for them and then they, hungry, flew greedily around his hand, ravenous, gladdened by his help. So that mild spirit, divided from the joys of mankind, served the Lord, took joy for himself from wild animals, since he rejected this world). (ll. 732–41)

⁶⁷ Cf. chapter 38 of the *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, in which birds, beasts, and fish obey his commands.

Clearly, this moment resonates on a symbolic level, as the “cleansing” of the landscape reveals Guthlac’s spiritual victory, and his “re-Creation” of the land from chaos. As Catherine Clarke has it, “the Edenic, paradisaical landscape which Guthlac’s virtue restores on the *beorg* is an external representation of his attainment of a pure spiritual state, and his cultivation of this wilderness location into a delightful garden reflects the cultivation and refinement of his soul.”⁶⁸ Coupled with this spiritual victory, scholars have also read Guthlac’s cleansing of the hill as a major politico-religious move: by claiming this barrow, Guthlac signifies the Christianization of the region and conquest of formerly British lands by the new monastic houses. Kelley Wickham-Crowley argues, for instance, that a defeat of the fen-haunters and march-walkers “may be an exercise of religious control over more than ghostly echoes: it asserts real power over the land, over the past, and over the imagination.”⁶⁹ This is one possible reading of diabolical presences in the fens and moors of Anglo-Saxon cultural and literary tradition; the *þyrs*, Guthlac’s demons, and the Grendel-kin may all represent vestiges of conquered peoples or the lost history of Britain’s landscape.

Yet this moment should also be read as signifying a change in the relationship of the exile to his environment. In a complete reversal of situation for an exile, Guthlac himself *becomes a new home* for the wildlife around him; he reorients the year and world to his ideal, controlling a nearly uncontrollable environment. Although living in the *mearclond*, by virtue of his spiritual victory, he turns the marginal into the central (at

⁶⁸ Catherine A. Clarke, “The Allegory of Landscape: Land Reclamation and Defence at Glastonbury Abbey,” in *On Allegory: Some Medieval Aspects and Approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 87–103. This quote p. 99.

⁶⁹ Wickham-Crowley, “Living on the *Ecg*,” 99; see also Siewers, “Landscapes of Conversion: Guthlac’s Mound and Grendel’s Mere as Expressions of Anglo-Saxon Nation-Building,” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 34 (2003): 1–39; reprinted in Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey, eds., *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 199–257.

least for himself) and establishes himself as provider and protector for his society of birds and beasts. Given this transformation, the question arises: can we still call Guthlac an exile if he has made himself a new home? Is his residence in the “waste” enough to consider him an outsider? Linguistically and conventionally, we have seen that one of the foundational aspects of exile is constant *motion*. Typically, the landscape of the fen makes constant motion necessary, for where the earth is half liquid, half solid, the exile / *eardstapa* / *þyrs* cannot establish a home, cannot stop moving. For Guthlac, however, the motion away from society and into the wild stops when he reorganizes the spiritual map of Crowland around himself; in his new home, he is builder and provider for the “community” of wild beasts. As a resident of the ambiguous area that is both *westen* / *wasta* and the fen that is simultaneously land and water, Guthlac himself becomes a nexus of opposites. Through his “voluntary expulsion” and reclamation of the fens of Crowland, Guthlac is exiled from his native community (and, as a human, from the heavenly *epel*), yet newly at home in a sanctified space that he has recreated as a Paradise on Earth. Suitably, as a figure who inhabits a landscape of contradictions in the fen, Guthlac himself becomes a contradiction: the exile at home.

Wilderness and Exile

Just as Guthlac “rewrites the map” of the Crowland fens, a similar re-mapping of the wasteland occurs in *Beowulf*, following the hero’s victory over Grendel’s mother and the Danes’ reclamation of her mere and its environs. As the retainers move toward the mere in pursuit of Grendel’s mother, the audience observes,

Lastas wæron

æfter waldswaþum wide gesyne,
 gang ofer grundas, þær heo gegnum for
 ofer myrcan mor, magoþegna bær
 þone selestan sawolleasne
 þara þe mid Hroðgare ham eahtode.
 Ofereode þa æþelinga bearn
 steap stanhliðo, stige nearwe,
 enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad.

(The tracks were over woodpaths wide seen, a track over the grounds where he/she went straight over dark moor, carried the best of retainers, lifeless, of those who with Hrothgar watched over their home. The sons of nobles moved over steep rocky slopes, narrow paths, narrow single-person paths, unfamiliar trail). (ll. 1402–10)

The *uncuð gelad* is, of course, described from the perspective of the human traveler; this trail is not unfamiliar to Grendel nor to his mother, solitary walkers on *single-person paths*, perhaps another poetic nod to the paths trod by exiles, the *wræclastas* mentioned in “The Wanderer,” “The Wife’s Lament,” and “The Fortunes of Men.”⁷⁰ However, following Beowulf’s victory at the mere, “ferdon forð þonon feþelastum / ferhþum fægne, foldweg mæton, / cuþe stræte” (they went forth from there on the foot-tracks, glad in their hearts, measured the path, the known ways) (ll. 1632–34). Here we see a final reversal in the monstrous exile’s power: what were once “unfamiliar trails” become “known ways,” as the wilderness of the poem, the marshy haunts of demons, are demonstered, mapped, cleansed, and colonized by the kingdom of men.⁷¹ Interestingly, the ultimate defeat of the monstrous exile comes from walking his path; by mapping unfamiliar worlds (whether environmental, mental, or spiritual), humans assert order onto a wilderness of chaos, creating new margins toward which to push the monsters. With

⁷⁰ For discussion of this literary trope, see chapter four.

⁷¹ Fabienne Michelet also notes this shift from unknown to known pathways in *Beowulf*, and comments further on the use of the terms *tredan* (to tread), *steppan* (to stride), *maetan* (to measure), *straet* (street), and *last* (track) in *Beowulf* and in the poem *Judith* (contained in the same manuscript) to note the conquest of wild or enemy territories. See Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 109–13.

each new margin that is created, however, we are reminded that, in reality, land on the Anglo-Saxon island is finite. As the margins of claimed or cultivated land are pushed further outward from the center, the “wild” land between what is settled and the water’s edge grows ever smaller, bringing “civilized” humans and spaces into greater contact with wild spaces and rejected individuals.

Landscapes of exile are, at first, uncultivated and uninhabited, making them ideal locations into which poets may cast unwanted and unlucky characters. However, as with any parcel of land in Anglo-Saxon England, these landscapes are subject to a normal level of change and flux: “wild” plant life moves to encroach upon farm land just as water may move into previously dry habitats; what was once richly cultivated land is abandoned or devastated; humans encroach and settle in what was previously considered “waste,” transforming *mearclond* to claimed land, as we have seen in the narratives of Guthlac and *Beowulf*. Moreover, though we may think about *mearclond* as land that gives shape and definition to cultivated land simply by bordering it, in the case of the fens, these landscapes are intimately connected, for Guthlac’s *mearclond* clearly provided sustenance as well as boundaries for the monastery’s cultivated lands. Thus, even if these landscapes are subject to constant environmental change, this does not necessarily make them unsettleable nor undesirable, as demonstrated by the establishment of monasteries, the draining, cultivation, and creation of canals in and around Crowland and the East Anglian fens.

Watery landscapes where one can tread on dry land, but where this land may flood or shift during the course of a year or as the weather changes, are ideal spaces to foreground the experience of instability and a rootless existence. The very fact that the

fen can flood makes real the poetic trope of life as a sea voyage (as discussed in the previous chapter), reminding readers of these texts as well as the actual inhabitants of fenland monasteries of the ephemerality of life on earth.⁷² For these audiences, as the fen floods, earth itself disappears (and, symbolically, the “firm footing” we experience in our earthly lives), and what was the human’s home suddenly becomes the *fisces* or *hwales eþel*. Despite this, the fen’s ability to shift between land and water, thus turning the human’s home into the whale’s home, also ensures fertile lands for grazing and growing, an influx of fish and other fruit of the sea into waterways, and protection from invaders or people without boats. From a poetic standpoint, the fen reminds us of the threat of a watery displacement on earth. From an economic view, the waters also bring life and sustenance, as well as connection and conduits to other parts of the Anglo-Saxon world.

Moreover, a landscape which is itself contradictory — alternating between solid ground and shifting water — leads to a contradictory experience traversing that land. Though one might be able to walk over dry land quite easily, when that land appears in the form of an inland “island” and is surrounded by water, that individual will be limited by the water’s boundaries. Further, if one can swim or has a boat, water provides a fast means of travel, yet can be impassible if frozen or if clogged with thick sedge, reed, and other plant material. Thus, the very changeability between wet and dry ground in the fens complicates passage over that land in ways that we would not see in an entirely earth-bound or entirely maritime voyage. The difficulties in navigation posed by this landscape

⁷² Wickham-Crowley suggests a similar reading of the eighth-century *Anonymous Life of Saint Cuthbert* (a monk of Lindisfarne and Farne Island), in which Cuthbert “confronts and exorcises the demons of the island, but not before they test his spiritual strength; they personify his triumph over his chosen landscape and his adaptation of it to his personal needs. Even more, the water- and landscape are the physical signs of his spiritual struggles and identity, of his still-readable mental map of self.” See Wickham-Crowley, “Living on the *Ecg*,” 95. She also reads Guthlac’s incursion into the fenland as spiritually significant, but suggests more of a historical blending of past and present in the mutability of water and land in these environments. See Wickham-Crowley, 96–102.

echo the contradictory experiences of the exile — constant and concurrent motion and paralysis. At the same time, the liminal space where water and earth overlap also provides a place of possibility, where a reed can speak and an exile can become the center of his own world.

The miseries endured by exiles — a lack of community, station in life, and foundations and objects around which to orient one's self — may lead to a drift in one's sense of time and place. In the poetry of exile, ambiguity runs rampant: “The Wanderer” and “The Wife's Lament” each play with concepts of time and timelessness, place and placelessness; in each case, the speaking persona demonstrates a clear awareness of his or her temporal and physical environment (winter, summer, dawn, ocean, forest). However, these speakers are frozen in time and space, unable to progress from these momentary views and momentary settings, thus mentally and emotionally paralyzed while forever circling around the communities they previously inhabited. For Guthlac and his fellow fen-dwellers, we observe a comparable blend of impediments to and allowances for motility, caused by an alternately wet and dry environment. In the texts of Guthlac and *Beowulf*, moreover, the difficult and changeable environments seemingly “reserved” for exiles are broken open and even settled by humans, suggesting that (in some special and supernatural cases) the *westen* and the *mearclond* can be subject to change and reclamation.

Viewing these landscapes from a literary perspective, Gillian Rudd observes that the wilderness is “a place where humans are not and where it is felt they are not supposed to be [...] Permanence and wilderness are mutually exclusive in human terms.”⁷³ As a result of this incompatibility between permanent human residents and the wilderness

⁷³ Rudd, *Greenery*, 91.

landscape, “once settled, [...] the land is no longer a wilderness, even if the terrain is remarkably similar to that through which the wanderers have travelled.”⁷⁴ In Guthlac’s hagiography, his chosen habitat is described as wilderness, waste, desert — until, of course, he settles there and miraculously reorients the land and its resident animals around himself, creating a new “center” in this seemingly marginal space. Although this reorientation and settlement suggest an end to both his exile and to the wild nature of his new home, the reality of the fen environment complicates this transformation. Unique among the *wif*, *eardstapa*, seafarer, and other anonymous Anglo-Saxon exiles, Guthlac is both legendary spiritual leader *and* historical figure, inhabiting both an actual geographical location (the fen) and a metaphorical destination (the *westen*). While the text testifies to his transformation of the metaphorical desert into a paradise, the historicity of his life and the geographical grounding of his miracles remind us that the *wasta / fen* remains on the map, as enigmatic as ever.

As Rudd has it, the wilderness is characterized in part by impermanence, and though Guthlac may cast out the fen’s previous haunted residents, he cannot change the fen itself. This landscape remained, in the Anglo-Saxon literary imagination as well as in reality, a changeable environment of alternating land and water, providing resources for inhabitants as well as punishing those ill-equipped to traverse it. Even as Guthlac claims mastery of his *ealond*, typically translated as a hill amid the swamps, we are reminded that the Anglo-Saxon *ealond* (*ea*, water, and *lond*, land) may speak not to the dichotomy between earth and water, but to the conjoining of the two within the island of Britain.⁷⁵ Thus Guthlac’s conquest is, on one level, a successful habitation within a water-land, a

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Clarke, *Literary Landscapes*, 20.

literal manifestation of the worldly exile sought by “The Seafarer” and by the monastic houses in the marshlands. The impermanence guaranteed by a shifting landscape (in this case, shifting water and land instead of desert sand) makes the fen an ideal site for the various exiles we encounter in these poems. Thus the saint, the monster, the separated lover, the *þyrs* — all who know the fleeting nature of pleasures, wealth, love, and even one’s home on earth — become figures who reflect the precariousness of our own fortunes, and humanity’s plight as a race exiled to a changeable and impermanent world.

Figures

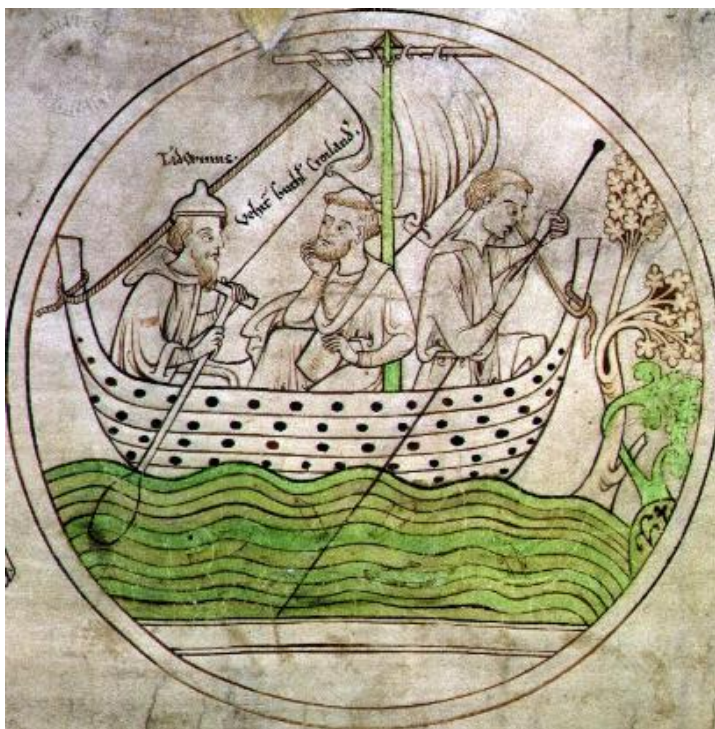


Figure 1: Guthlac and Tatwine travel by boat. From Harleian Guthlac Roll Y.6.



Figure 2: Guthlac and Pega. From Harleian Guthlac Roll Y.6.

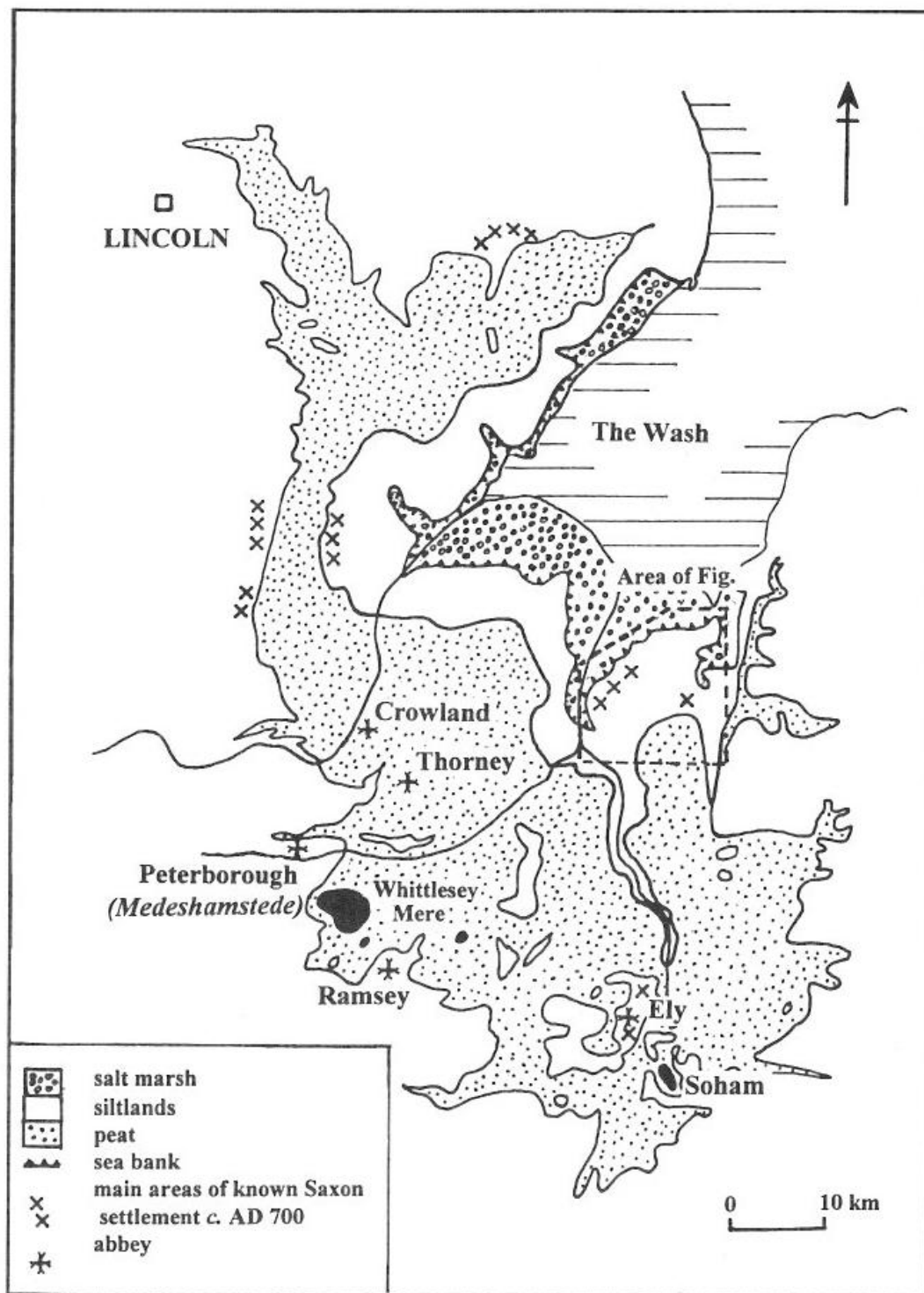


Figure 3: East Anglian fenlands. Taken from Della Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 172, based on the work of Hall and Coles.

CHAPTER SIX
FINAL DESTINATIONS

As we have seen in previous chapters, much of Anglo-Saxon poetry serves as a reminder of the transient, temporary nature of earthly life and of the continual seasonal change we observe as we wend our ways through the world. One ecosystem in particular — the “wasteland” of the fen, shifting between solid ground and inundation — reminds readers and auditors of the uncertainties of our journeys through life. As we navigate in and around the central point of “home,” sometimes searching for new places, sometimes trying to return after long absences, we all move inescapably toward our final destination on earth, *in* the earth. The quickly closing distance between one’s present existence and the embrace of death is a theme common in Anglo-Saxon texts; much of the poetry warns against greatly valuing the life on earth, as the only eternal concepts are one’s reputation and the heavenly homeland.¹ The observation in “The Wanderer” that “þes middangeard / ealra dogra gehwam dreoseð and fealleþ” (this middle-world every day fails and falls) (ll. 62–63) stands as one of the most famous and concise statements of the present ruination of the world and of the continuous nature of worldly decay. In a world failing and falling, even immortality gained through fame cannot stave off the slow creep of death; as Beowulf reminds Hrothgar, “ure þghwylc sceal ende gebidan / worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote / domes ær deaþe” (an end to the life of this world must await each of us; let he who may earn glory before death) (ll. 1386–88). The *Exeter Book*’s “Guthlac A” provides a more descriptive and almost tangible account of incremental decay:

¹ Christine Fell, “Perceptions of Transience,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 172–89.

Ealdað eorþan blæd æþela gehwylcre
 ond of wlite wendað wæstma gecyndu;
 bið seo sipre tid sæda gehwylces
 mætre in mægne. Forþon se mon ne þearf
 to þisse worulde wyrpe gehycgan

(Earth grows old in each of its noble flowerings and the species of its fruit turn away from beauty; this later season of each seed is more inferior in strength. Therefore a man does not need to study this world for improvement). (ll. 43–47)

Recognizing humans as temporary residents of this progressively deteriorating world, Anglo-Saxon poets tied disintegration on a macro-level — the ruination of that world — to disintegration on the micro-level, namely, the aging process and the decay of the individual body, resulting ultimately in death.² For example, in the Exeter Book “Guthlac” poems, the poet gives special attention to Guthlac’s sickness and death, developing his battle with death as one of the poem’s principle themes. Speaking to a horde of devils in “Guthlac A,” the titular character notes, “ne mæg min lichoma wið þas lænan gesceaft / deað gedælan, ac he gedreosan sceal, / swa þeos eorðe eall þe ic her on stonde” (Nor may my body, on condition of this ‘loaned’ existence, part from death, but it must fall, just as this entire earth on which I here stand) (ll. 371–73). The equation in line 373 of Guthlac’s mortality with the widespread mortality and decomposition of the world makes clear that the two are intimately connected; as inhabitants of a “temporary” world, we must abide by its rules and processes. Too, the concept of human existence and the body itself as “on loan” in the b-line of 371 reveals an understanding of the temporary

² The classical tradition of the *cursus aetatis*, or the “Ages of Man,” a concept uniting the physical and temporal structure of the universe with the human body and life-cycle, would have been known to Bede and other Anglo-Saxon scholastics. As J. A. Burrows has it, “the order of time, like the order of nature upon which it largely depends, issues from the hand of God; and God does nothing arbitrary or random. He fashioned man as a microcosmos or little world; so what could be more natural than to seek out the analogies — surely God-given — between the ages of man and divisions of time in the larger world?” See Burrows, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 55.

condition of our existence on earth, as opposed to the more permanent existence of the divine in heaven.³

Though in each of these statements, we may read earthly decay as symbolic of human moral failings or of the ultimate fruitlessness of worldly endeavors, this view of a progressively deteriorating world becomes a material and physical concern for Anglo-Saxon poets and homilists. The lament of “The Wanderer” that “this world every day fails and falls” is more than a simple observation about the physical harshness of life on Earth; the sentiment can also be interpreted as an instance of nature representing “the moral degradation continuing since the Original Sin.”⁴ In this Christian vision of erosion and change, Earth and its inhabitants are in a continual process of physical, moral, and spiritual ruin, as they move further and farther away from the heavenly ideal, a process that continues even after an individual’s death. This motion will only stop at the time of Christ’s return and Last Judgment. In this Christian view of the world, its history, and its future, there is no literal return of energy in earthly rebirth; there is only a process of decay. However, as we have seen in the previous chapters, Anglo-Saxon poetry presents a more complex and somewhat contradictory take on this process of decay than what might appear at a first reading.

Generally, the poetry dealing with death in Anglo-Saxon England subscribes to this dominant Christian worldview, portraying aging and death as a process of violent and gruesome decay, only to be stopped and reversed at the moment of Christ’s return. At the same time, repeated tropes in these poems and in Anglo-Saxon homilies construct death

³ See Fell, “Perceptions of Transience,” 174–75, for a longer discussion of the concepts of life on earth as “læne” (on loan) and life after death as “ece” (eternal).

⁴ Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50.

as a return “home” for the body (though perhaps a less ideal home than one would hope), and the physical decay of the body as a return to the foundational source of earth. Indeed, this cyclical path is established early Scripture, as God pronounces to Adam in the Anglo-Saxon translation of Genesis 3:19 that “oð ðæt ðu gewende to eorðan / of ðære ðe ðu genumen wære, / for ðan ðe ðu eart dust / ond to duste gewyrst” (until you return to earth, from which you were born, for you are dust, and to dust you shall become). Taking into account the cyclical nature of time described in both poetry and in some Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Latin scientific sources, as well as the process of Creation described in the enigmatic texts of riddles and dialogues, we are left with a literary corpus that espouses two seemingly contradictory ideas. First, these sources promulgate the Christian worldview of earth and humankind in a process of decay until the moment of the Resurrection; second, they suggest that our return to the grave in death is a return to a “home” of sorts in the earth, and that this return to the ground is part of a larger cycle of creation, destruction, death, and re-creation. As we have observed in other sources, while these two views of the body and of the world would seem to be at odds with each other, their coexistence in the textual legacy of Anglo-Saxon England creates a concurrence, an ambiguity in which the poets seem to revel and play, as they posit multiple meanings for home in life and in death.

Bodily Breakdown

Homiletic Sources: A Progression of Decay

Of principal concern to the homilists of the Anglo-Saxon era was the relationship of the earthly to the ethereal. As temptations satisfied and sins committed by the earthly

form would rebound upon the immortal soul, the homilies provide valuable information about how mortality and the earthly experience affect both body and soul in Anglo-Saxon England. What remains of the corpus of homilies survives in several collections, including the Blickling manuscript and the Vercelli Book, both dated to the late tenth century. Though the eighteen sermons that comprise the Blickling Homilies speak to a range of spiritual, moral, and social issues, the themes of earthly death and the fate of the soul intertwine throughout the collection. In Blickling IV, the homilist addresses the decay of the world and of the body, establishing that

seo fægernes þe he her on worlde lufade, swylc þes blowenda wudu ond þas blowendan wyrta [...] Swa þonne gelice bið þære menniscan gecynde þæs lichoman þonne se geogofhad ærest bloweþ ond fægerost bið, he þonne raþe se wlite eft gewiteþ ond to ylde gecyrreþ.⁵

(the fairness that one loved here in this world, such are the flowering trees and the blooming herbs. [...] So this is like the nature of human bodies, when the state of youth first blooms and is fairest. Then, quickly the beauty afterwards departs and turns to age).

Death proceeds apace after the indignities of old age, closing down the body's functions one by one, and transforming the body into an object of disgust and loathing: "se lichoma þonne on þone heardestan stenc ond on þone fulostan bid gecyrred, ond his eagan þonne beoþ betynde, ond his muþ ond his næsþyrlo beoþ belocene, ond he þonne se deada byð uneaþe ælcon men on neaweste to hæbbenne"⁶ (the body then into the hardest and foulest stink will be turned, and its eyes then will be shut, and his mouth and his nostrils will be closed, and then the dead will be difficult to keep in the presence of any person). As the progressive decay of the world is a commonplace in Anglo-Saxon poetry and, as we see,

⁵ Richard J. Kelly, *Blickling Homilies* (London, GBR: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), 104–05. E-book. Available at <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/wmichlib/Doc?id=10488209&ppg=105>

⁶ Kelly, *Blickling Homilies*, 104–05.

homilies, this similarly progressive view of the failure of the senses and of the body to contain itself must also be conventional to these sources.

The same kind of elaboration on the gradual failure of the body appears in the homily known as Vercelli IX, taken from the Vercelli manuscript (also home to the poems “Soul and Body” and “The Dream of the Rood”).⁷ In Vercelli IX’s characterization of death, “he betyneð þa eagan fram gesyhðe 7 þa earan fram gehyrnesse 7 þa weloras fram spræce 7 þa fet fram gange 7 þa handa fram weorce 7 þa næsðyrelu fram stence” (he [Death] shuts the eyes from seeing and the ears from hearing and the lips from speech and the feet from walking and the hands from working and the nostrils from odor).⁸ This “cataloguing” strategy seems to serve several purposes; stylistically, in a homily, we might expect to see information in this kind of list form, as the homilist assembles variations on a theme to increase the dread and power of his message.⁹ Yet the list also works to establish the power and horror of death, as it destroys these most basic of bodily functions.¹⁰ Finally, and perhaps most intriguing for my purposes, the list turns our attention to human reliance on extremities and sensory organs — eyes, ears, lips, feet, hands, nostrils — and establishes that, in death, a person will be completely disconnected from and insensible to the world. In this way, the body is completely severed from any

⁷ Victoria Thompson points out that the homilies in this manuscript “were collected by someone with a great interest in death, burial and judgement,” themes also explored in the manuscript’s poetic content. See Thompson, *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), 47. Thompson cites D. Scragg, “The Compilation of the Vercelli Book,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 2 (1973): 189–207; Paul Szarmach, ed., *Vercelli Homilies, IX–XXIII* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), xxii.

⁸ Szarmach, *Vercelli Homilies*, 166. Translation mine.

⁹ Charles D. Wright cites an Irish tradition of using lists and catalogues to explain an idea as one inspiration for this rhetorical strategy in Vercelli IX. See Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. 105.

¹⁰ The horror of visualizing death is explicated by Julia Kristeva in her discussion of the “abject.” Kristeva’s concept of the abject (specifically, the vision of the corpse) as an experience in which the beholder confronts the “Other” within one’s self and one’s inseparability from mortality, death, and earth, is a modern way to understand what may be occurring within these texts. See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

notion of identity, place, or home, and unable to interact with its environment to stop the processes occurring to and around it. Despite this deathly disconnection between sense and reality, however, Anglo-Saxon homilists and poets made sure to inform their audiences as to the indignities and horrors to which the body will be subjected.

Poetic Sources: Consumed by Earth, Consumed by Worms

In the second of the hagiographical “Guthlac” poems, Guthlac contrasts the ultimate fates of his body and of his soul: ““ðeah min ban ond blod bu tu geweorþen / eorþan to eacan, min se eca dæl / in gefean fareð, þær he fægran / botles bruceð””

(Though my bones and blood likewise both turn to earth, my everlasting part passes into joy, where it will possess a beautiful dwelling-place) (ll. 380–84). Interesting to note, here, is that Guthlac does not state that his body will be *committed* to the earth (though, of course, this is implied), but that his body will *turn to* or *become* earth — *geweorþen eorþan*. Though split over a line break, the final two syllables of the words form a near-rhyme (only slightly off due to the different final vowels), thus embedding the final fate of Guthlac’s body — as earth — within the transformative verb itself.

The physical process of decay and transformation into “earth” evokes a fascination and horror for Anglo-Saxon poets (and, likely, for their audiences). Though Guthlac gives few details about the actual process of his body’s breakdown, other personae are not so tight-lipped. In death, the body becomes a meal (and in some cases, almost a playground) for worms, and homilists and poets imagine this process with what seems to be a mixture of disgust and fascination. The fate of the body receives a short mention in the poem “Juliana,” a tenth-century *Exeter Book* saint’s life of the biblical martyr. In a conversation between Juliana and the devil, the latter shares with her that

“Ic þære sawle ma / geornor gyne ymb þæs gæstes forwyrð / þonne þæs lichoman, se þe on legre sceal / weorðan in worulde wyrme to hroþor, / bifolen in foldan” (I care more zealously for the soul, [I care more] about the destruction of the soul than of the body, which in the grave in the world shall become a benefit for the worm, joined to the ground) (ll. 413–17). Regardless of the honesty of the devil’s concern for the soul, his description of the fate of the body is almost tasteful, when compared to other accounts of burial and decay (as we shall see). The construction “wyrme to hroþor” euphemistically communicates that the body will become a feast for worms; here also, we see that the body is no more for the joy, pleasure, and benefit of its human owner, but is now the domain of the lowly worm. Further, the half-line “bifolen in foldan” nearly repeats the kind of internal rhyme found in the *geweorþen eorþan* of “Guthlac A.” While the roots “fol” and “fold” in the words *bifolen* and *foldan* are not etymologically related, the morpheme “fol” appears in both, creating a moment of assonance that draws the auditor’s attention to the pairing of the two terms.¹¹ The repeated morpheme connects the two words “joined” and “ground” (or “earth”), mimicking the meaning of the phrase itself in which the body is “joined to the ground.” Again, as in “Guthlac,” the syntax here erodes the separation between body and earth; the body is not *in* the ground, but *joined* to it, and eventually will become earth.

Though “Guthlac” emphasizes the aggregate return of the physical body to its earthly source, the corpus of Anglo-Saxon “Soul and Body” dialogues is not so spare in describing the piecemeal (and gruesome) process of bodily breakdown. This literary

¹¹ Many thanks to Jana Schulman and Paul Johnson for their help on this point. While the poetic technique of assonance (an instance of rhymed vowel sounds terminating in differing consonant sounds within a word) is an anachronism here, the *effect* of the technique likely would not have been lost on an Anglo-Saxon audience.

genre, in which the departed soul lectures the deceased body about its weaknesses in life and their shared tortures in death, stretches across both poetry and prose, includes two “Soul and Body” poems (one from the *Exeter Book* and one from the Vercelli manuscript), a riddle, several sermons, and several twelfth-century poems, many of which I will discuss here.¹² The text known as “Soul and Body II” from the *Exeter Book* consists mainly of the soul’s long complaint to the body and a litany of the punishments that they both now must suffer in death.¹³ The section of the text addressing the body’s fate in the grave follows in full:

Ligeð dust þær hit wæs,
 ne mæg him ondsware ænige secgan, (1. 100)
 ne þær edringe ænge gehatan
 gæste geomrum, geoce oþþe frofre.
 Biþ þæt heafod tohliden, honda tohleoþode,
 geaflas toginene, goman toslitene,
 seonwe beoð asogene, sweora bicowen; (105)
 rib reafiað reþe wyrmas,
 drincað hloþum hra, heolfres þurstge.
 Bið seo tunge totogen on tyn healfe
 hungrum to hroþor. Forþon heo ne mæg horsclice
 wordum wrixlan wið þone wergan gæst. (110)
 Gifer hatte se wurm, þam þa geaflas beoð
 nædle scearpran. Se geneþeð to
 ærest ealra on þam eorðscræfe;
 he þa tungan totyhð ond þa toþas þurhsmyhð,
 ond to ætwelan oþrum gerymeð, (115)
 ond þa eagan þurhiteð ufon on þæt heafod
 wrymum to wiste, þonne biþ þæt werge

¹² Though often we see the soul speaking to the now mute and powerless corpse, J. E. Cross observes that several Anglo-Saxon homilies develop the theme of the *corpse* (“dry bones”) speaking to the *living* about the horrors of death and the grave; he cites Latin tradition, including the writings of Cæsarius of Arles, as the source for this conceit. See Cross, “‘The Dry Bones Speak’: A Theme in Some Old English Homilies,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 56.3 (July 1957): 434–39, esp. p. 434. Cross cites Migne, *Patrologia Latina* XL, *Sermones ad Fratres in Eremo* LVIII, col. 1341; and *Patrologia Latina*, XLV, *Prosper d’Acquitaine, Sententiarum ex operibus sancti Augustini delibatarum liber*, cols. 1897–8.

¹³ “Soul and Body I” and “Soul and Body II” are similar enough that they most likely were derived from the same original source poem. The primary distinction between the two is that “Soul and Body I” includes a more optimistic segment in which a saved soul speaks to its body; this section is missing from the second poem. The selections I discuss here from “Soul and Body II” are similar in both poems.

lic acolad þæt he longe ær
werede mid wædum. Bið þonne wyrmes giefl,
æt on eorþan. (ll. 99–120)

(The dust lies where it was, it may not speak any answer, nor promise any refuge, help, or comfort there to the troubled spirit. The head is split open, hands dismembered, jaws gaped, throat torn asunder, the sinews are sucked up, the neck chewed; fierce worms plunder the ribs, drink [from] the corpse in a troop, thirsty for blood. The tongue is torn into ten pieces for the pleasure of the hungry [worms]. Therefore it cannot readily exchange words with the condemned spirit. The worm is named “Gifer” / “Glutton,” whose jaws are sharper than a needle. He first of them all proceeds into the cave-dwelling; he destroys the tongue and moves slowly through the teeth, and to a banquet for the others clears the way, and right through the eyes from above into the head, a feast for the worms, when the wretched body has grown cold, which long before he¹⁴ covered with clothes. Then it will be food for worms, flesh in the earth). (ll. 99 ff)

The process to which the devil only alludes in “Juliana” is here spelled out in a raucous, step-by-step progression of consumption and destruction. In his collection of modern English translations of Anglo-Saxon verse, S. A. J. Bradley has commented that, in part owing to the horrific description of this passage and the piece’s “macabre emotionalism, threats and unmitigated pessimism,” this ghostly dialogue offers little in the way of artistic merit to the poetic corpus.¹⁵ Clearly, though, there is something greater occurring in this passage. In part, this fascination with corporeal disintegration, the horror evoked by the thought of pests splitting the skull and consuming eyes, throat, tongue, blood, and sinew, inspires a disgust with the earthly and physical in comparison with the bodiless, ethereal, and eternal life of the spirit. One might also see a connection between the work of the worms over this helpless body and the tortures envisioned for the souls of the

¹⁴ Indicating the man who now lies dead.

¹⁵ S. A. J. Bradley, ed. and trans., “Introduction to ‘Soul and Body II’,” in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: J.M. Dent for Everyman, 1995), 359.

damned in Hell; in Anglo-Saxon imaginings of Hell, bodies are chewed by *wyrmes*, often translated to indicate serpents or dragons.¹⁶

Further, for an Anglo-Saxon audience likely familiar with the heroic deeds and legendary figures of “The Battle of Maldon” and *Beowulf*, this text offers a solemn warning: if the body is so weak that it can be torn apart by worms, then perhaps we need not celebrate stories of heroic strength nor feel too invincible, even in our prime. One might also notice that, in this poem at least, the body has no name (a knock against a Germanic culture wherein one gained a kind of immortality through his famous name); the worm, on the other hand, is designated *Gifer* (“Gluttony”), a name the audience is unlikely to forget. Finally, as seen in the Vercelli homily, this text develops the same theme of the destruction of sensory organs (tongue and eyes, at least) and of our means of agency (hands, sinews, skull / brain), thus rendering the body powerless against intruders, unable to identify itself or to communicate, and insensible of its environment or place.

Just as the body becomes unaware of its place in the ground, the first and final lines of this excerpt from the longer text of “Soul and Body II” speak to a further breakdown of the boundaries between the body and the earth. As the soul laments its lot in the afterlife, the body is unable to respond. However, the poet does not express this exact idea; instead, “ligeð dust þær hit wæs, / ne mæg him ondsware ænige secgan” (ll. 99–100). Here, the poet envisions the *dust* lying still and silent, likely a reference to

¹⁶ See, for example, “Christ III,” line 1547. Victoria Thompson adds to this the serpent of Eden, the dragon, and the basilisk upon which Christ treads. Yet Thompson suggests that *wyrmes* / worms bear a much more complex meaning in Anglo-Saxon culture; they also evoke “snakes shedding their skins as well as their habit of inducing enemies to attack their body rather than their head. The first of these symbolizes the Christian shedding sin and the second represents martyrdom” (p. 133). Looking to poetic, homiletic, and sculptural evidence from Anglo-Saxon, classical, Irish, and Norse sources, Thompson characterizes the Anglo-Saxon *wyrm* as representative of good and evil, death and eternal life, power and subjugation, wisdom and mystery, and ultimately, as a transformative and chthonic symbol. See Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 132–69.

God's pronouncement in Genesis 3:19.¹⁷ This forecasts the future and, according to biblical verse, the *origin* of the disintegrating body, as it intermingles and becomes one with the earth. Moving from this initial image of dry, still dust to the dynamic and violent changes occurring to the body beneath the ground's surface, the poet ends with the observation that the body will become food for worms, "flesh in the earth" (*æt on eorþan*). As the poet (and the worms) break down identifiable organs and bones into pieces, the body is no longer a discrete, unified whole — more than the sum of its parts — but a series of fragments, each of which is no more than a piece of edible material in the earth. In this final phrase, *æt on eorþan*, the poet's choice to designate what remains of the body as flesh — edible, organic, decomposable material — strikes a different chord than his initial description of the body as dust, a much more inert and perhaps less horrifying offensive image. We are reminded that, in the end, we become part of a process of consumption, digestion, breakdown, and decay, flesh to be consumed within and *by* the earth itself.

More than this, the involvement of the worm(s) in this process provides another link between the body and the dust it will become. As Victoria Thompson points out, the term *wyrm* has a broader meaning to an Anglo-Saxon audience than simply the organisms we understand as worms; *wyrmas* may include worms, serpents, dragons, maggots, and even insects and arachnids.¹⁸ Yet, in one instance, the worms of "Soul and Body II" are called *moldwyrms*, a *hapax legomen* meaning "earthworm."¹⁹ Significant here is the fact that, as suggested by its name, a *moldwyrm* / earthworm consumes organic matter,

¹⁷ "ðu gewende to eorðan / of ðære ðe ðu genumen wære, / for ðan ðe ðu eart dust / ond to duste gewyrst" (you return to earth, from which you were born, for you are dust, and to dust you shall become).

¹⁸ Thompson, *Death and Dying*, 132–32; 144.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 141. The term appears in line 71 of the poem.

emitting mold or vermicast, a broken-down compost of the decaying material that will eventually turn back to soil.²⁰ Thompson argues that the *moldwyrn* is “analogous to death itself,” as they are both transformative agents.²¹ This is true in part, yet the *moldwyrn* (suggested by its very name) also represents the conjoining of earth and living tissue; as a result of its own bodily processes, the *moldwyrn* performs the ecological function of transforming flesh to what will become soil, thus enacting the fluid boundary between the two. Taken alongside the ecologically-rich term and function of the “moldwyrn,” Guthlac’s declaration that his body will be “geweorþen eorþan” (transformed to earth), the idea expressed in “Juliana” that we shall be “bifolen in foldan” (joined to the ground), and the characterization of the body as “dust” in “Soul and Body II” all contribute to the larger concept that the boundaries between body and earth break down in the grave, as the body slowly changes from flesh back to earth.²²

Another fragmentary and late Anglo-Saxon piece, known simply as “The Grave” and preserved in the twelfth-century MS Bodley 343,²³ continues this exploration of transformation from flesh to earth. As in other texts associated with the “Soul and Body” genre, here worms will divide (“todeleð”) the corpse (l. 16), and the body itself will

²⁰ Not necessarily known by Anglo-Saxon writers; this information is derived from modern agricultural sciences.

²¹ Thompson, *Death and Dying*, 141.

²² Gillian Rudd finds a similar fluidity between the body and the physical earth in a Middle English lyric. In this particular lyric, the poet emphasizes the various potential meanings of “erthe” (earth) — including the earth as grave, as material for a human body, and as created world — by repeating the term (*erthe*) at least twice in each line. Rudd finds that each repetition suggests a different meaning of the word, indicating fluidity in boundaries between “human” and “earth” in cases of burial and creation. See Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 21–28.

²³ Bodley 434 seems to be a religious hodge-podge, also containing various writings of Ælfric (including his *Catholic Homilies* and *Lives of Saints*), several homilies of Wulfstan and Augustine, Marian writings, a dialogue between master and student, a “History of the Holy Rood Tree,” and several short staves of music. For a discussion of the dating of “The Grave,” its (possible) relation to “The Departing Soul’s Address to the Body,” and the accuracy of referring to the poem as fragmentary, see Louise Dudley, “The Grave,” *Modern Philology* 11.3 (1914): 429–42.

experience a progressive decay. The final lines of “The Grave,” recorded by a later (thirteenth-century) hand provides what may be the beginning of a sequence of decaying attributes, as the unnamed narrator describes, “for sone þu bist ladlic and lad to iseonne. / For sone bið þin hæfet faxes bireued; / al bið ðes faxes feirnes forsceden; / næle hit nan mit fingres feire stracien” (for soon you will be loathly and hated to see. / For soon your head will be bereft of hair; / all the hairs’ fairness will be shed; / no one will stroke it fairly with fingers) (ll. 22–25). The poem ends here, though, as Louise Dudley points out, the closing lines “leave one with a sense of incompleteness, too. One expects other details about the eyes, nose, and mouth to follow,” likely referring to the lists of bodily breakdowns in other “Soul and Body” pieces.²⁴ Turning back to the poem’s beginning, we find a fascinating exploration of the idea of the body’s literal return to the earth in death, and the relationship between Earth (as concept and world, not simply as soil and / or ground) and humanity. The text opens,

De wes bold gebyld, er þu iboren were.
 De wes molde imynt, er ðu of moder come.
 Ac hit nes no idiht, ne þeo deopnes imeten;
 nes gyt iloced, hu long hit þe were.
 Nu me þe bringæð, þer ðu beon scealt.
 Nu me sceæl þe meten and þa molde seoðða.

(For you a house was built, before you were born / For you the earth was meant, before you came from your mother / but it was not prepared, and its depth was not measured / no one has yet looked into how long it should be for you / now it brings you to me where you’ve got to be / now it shall measure the earth for you and me). (ll. 1–6)

The last line of this selection suggests the preparation of the body for burial; the dictate of “now it shall measure the earth for you and for me [the grave]” recalls the physical labor of the grave-digger in creating a space large enough for the corpse. Read in this light, the

²⁴ Dudley, “The Grave,” 441.

preceding lines suggest the eventual reunification of body and earth in death: even prior to birth, a grave for each person is inevitable — “for you the earth was meant” — though these grave-spaces have not yet been measured for length or depth (“its depth was not measured”), and the length of each human life not yet known (“how long it should be for you”).

Read in another light, however, the opening lines of this poem about the grave *also* suggest a far more sweeping and perhaps comforting assurance of the relationship of humankind to the earth itself. The opening pronouncement that “for you a house was built, before you were born / for you the earth was meant” speak to the initial creation of the earth as a habitat for humankind, a “world-house” for every unborn person. That “it was not prepared, and its depth was not measured” indicates a time in the universe’s infancy before land is divided from water, earth from sky, and before the metrics of division have been applied to Creation. Thus “The Grave” speaks to the dark, horrifying prospect of an inescapable death and return to the earth *as well as* the creation of the earth as a home for humanity, thus softening the morbid reminder that we all will return to the soil.

Continuations: Earthly Decay in Twelfth-Century Sources

Providing evidence for the longevity of these kinds of conceptions of death and decay in Anglo-Saxon (and later) culture, at least one poem belonging to this “Soul and Body” tradition has survived from the twelfth century. Written nearly a century after the acknowledged end of Anglo-Saxon England with the Norman Invasion of 1066 CE, and at least a century later than the recording of most Anglo-Saxon poems in the tenth- and eleventh-century poetic manuscripts, the style of this poem clearly shows the slow shift

from Old to Middle English. Further, we begin to see a movement away from the typical Old English structure of two alliterative half-lines to a much shorter, seemingly simpler (and non-alliterative) line. Despite these linguistic and poetic differences, the twelfth-century “Worcester Fragment,” also known as “The Departing Soul’s Address to the Body,” contains a catalog of progressive decay strikingly similar to that which we find in the Anglo-Saxon homilies and poetry. One selection from the 685-line poem follows:

him deaueth tha æren.
 him dimmeth tha eizen.
 him scerpeth the neose.
 him scrincketh tha lippen.
 him scorteth the tunge.
 him truketh his iwit.
 him teoreth his miht.
 him coldeth his heorte.
 him leggeth the ban stille.
 thonne bith that soule hus.
 seoruhliche bereaved.
 of also muchele wunne.
 the ther inne wunede

(His ears deafen, his eyes become dim, his nose sharpens, his lips shrink, his tongue shortens, his sense fails, his strength wastes, his heart chills, his bones lie still; then is that soul-house woefully bereft of as much delight as therein dwelled). (ll. 31–43)²⁵

Much of this is familiar territory; we see a continuation of the practice of listing sensory organs and powers of movement and perception, one by one, as they wither and fail in death. Moreover, one even perceives more of a proper progression of decay, as the poet begins with the outward senses and signs of life (ears, eyes), then describes the shrinking and sharpening of nose and lips as the corpse dries; the poem then turns inward, as

²⁵ Translation a mix of my own and Singer’s. For text and translation, see *The Departing Soul’s Address to the Body: A Fragment of a Semi-Saxon Poem, Discovered Among the Archives of Worcester Cathedral*, ed. Thomas Phillips, trans. Samuel Weller Singer. E-book. Available on Project Gutenberg: <http://ia700200.us.archive.org/15/items/thedepartingsoul19937gut/19937-h/19937-h.htm>

muscles deteriorate (“strength wastes”), the heart turns cold, and finally, we are left with a conventional image of death: a still pile of bones. The body is left as nothing more than a “soul-house,” a container for the eternal part of humanity.

As we have observed in the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus, the “Soul and Body” tradition at times elides the demarcations between body and earth. So too does this text bear that message; in a later selection, the “soul” describes its former companion, “thonne lith the clei clot./ cold on then flore.” (then lies the clay clod cold on the floor) (ll. 69–70). Still referring to the body, the soul captures some familiar Old English alliterative style with its reference to a “clay clod cold” on the floor. Moreover, unlike the earlier selection that distinguished organ from organ, tissue from bone, now the body is conceived of as formless — a clod, unrecognizable as human — and made of clay, now indistinct from the earth into which it will be committed. Of course, while “clay” and “flesh” in this case seem to be indistinguishable, “earth” as a material may be made up of a variety of substances (clay, soil, sand, rock, grit), of which clay is only one, and which may vary according to one’s geographical location and the depth to which one digs. What distinguishes clay from the other substances in this context is the fact that clay can be *shaped*; this reminder of the body as a shaped form cues readers and auditors to think of Adam as fashioned directly from earth, as well as the circular mention / motion of “dust” in Genesis.²⁶ The poet’s use of the term “clei” here blurs the boundaries between the substance of the body and of the earth; in contrast, the poet’s earlier image of the body decaying until nothing is left but an empty cage of bone, a “soul-house,” suggests a less fluid relationship between the body and the grave. What is shared in both conceptions of the moldering corpse is the idea of containment: as the soul exists within and is

²⁶ Also relevant is the derivation of Adam’s name from ‘adamah,’ the Hebrew term for earth.

inseparable from the body (until death), so too must the body be contained within and bounded / bonded with earth at death. Indeed, the characterization of earth and grave as “house” in the poem’s very first line speaks to a trope that appears quite often in “Soul and Body” literature: the concept of body, grave, and earth as a series of concentric and concurrent “homes” for the transient soul.

Houses of Bone

In addition to the reference in “The Grave” to the body as a home for the soul, we find a similar locution in “The Departing Soul’s” reference to the body as a “soule hus,” or soul-house. This terminology resonates as a relic of the Old English literary tradition, specifically the poetic construction of the kenning, and this particular kenning — the body as *sawelhus*, or a similar expression — appears often in Anglo-Saxon poetry. In fact, the commonplace expressions of revulsion for the body that we also find in these texts are made ironic by the fact that the weak and temporal body is figured as a companion to or a *house for* the eternal soul. “Soul and Body II” turns on the idea that the soul must return to its former companion (and container) every week as a part of its punishment. Because the soul and body were inextricably bound to each other on earth, the soul must atone for the sins of its former companion. Other texts emphasize this same bodily weakness as a threat to the soul, yet the body is represented more as home than as companion. In “Christ III,” the third of a selection of poems in the *Exeter Book* detailing Christ’s life and death, God asks why humans are compelled to waste and pollute their bodies: “for hwan þu þæt selegescot þæt ic me swæs on þe / gehalgode, hus to wynne, / þurh firenlustas, fule synne, / unsyfre bismite sylfes willum?” (Why did you of your own

will through lusts and foul sins filthily pollute that lodging-place, a house of joy, that I hallowed in you as a delight for me?) (ll. 1480–84). Here, the body is “selegescot” (lodging-place) and “hus” (house), a sacred gift created to house the soul, the “delight” of God.

Similar imagery appears in “Guthlac B,” the poetic chronicle of the saint’s illness and death. Describing Guthlac’s failing health, the poet recounts how “wæs se bancofa / adle onæled, inbendum fæst, / lichord onlocen” (the bodily frame was consumed by disease; the interior of the body, fast with internal bonds, was unlocked) (ll. 954–56). Beginning with the structural metaphor of the body as “bancofa,” a container of bone, the poet develops this image of the body as a container (a box? a house?) to be “unlocked” and ransacked by disease. Later, the poem returns to this language as Guthlac himself remarks to a servant that pain and suffering “lichord onleac” (unlocked the interior of my body) (l. 1029), shortly thereafter calling his body “þis sawelhus, / fæge flæschoma” (this soul-house, doomed carcass) (ll. 1030–31). Here, the use of the term “onleac” (unlocked) depends on the audience’s comprehension that the body is to be figured as a sealed structure housing the soul, one that only disease and death can open to free the spirit. Even after his death, Guthlac’s servant borrows this image in describing the body to the saint’s sister, calling his flesh a “banhus abrocen” (broken bone-house) (l. 1367). Given the Anglo-Saxon fondness for riddling language — i.e., the tightly contained metaphor of the kenning — it is possible that we need not take this representation of the body as a “house” made of bone too literally. Viewed practically, however, the skeleton (in particular the shape of the rib cage) does function as a protective structure for the interior of the body (both physical organs and ethereal substances of soul, mind, heart) just as the

hall would function as protection for the individual and community. Further, the frequency with which these same texts (and others) play with the question of *what is home to the soul?* suggests that the image of the body as “soul-house” is in fact a purposeful poetic choice, and that the conflict set up between temporary and eternal homes is a source of constant struggle for both body and soul.

As Guthlac approaches death, he acknowledges the synchronized and oppositional forces pulling his mortal body back toward earth and his eternal soul toward the divine. He observes, “greothord gnornað, gæst hine fyseð / on ecne gearð, utsipes georn / on sellan gesetu” (the earth-hoard [of the body] mourns, the soul hastens to the everlasting land, eager for departure into better places) (ll. 1266–68). Just as the body has become little more than a “greothord” — a pile of earth, verbally resembling the grave into which it will be cast — the soul feels a pull to return to the “everlasting land” of heaven. Upon the saint's death, his servant informs his sister that, while the “eorðan dæl” (earthly part) will remain, “se wuldres dæl / of licfæte in leoht godes / sigorlean sohte” (the part of glory of the body sought reward for victory in the light of God) (ll. 1368–70). In this final sundering of soul and body, the soul leaves its earthly container to find reward and solace in an eternal homeland. This divine homeland is also famously mentioned in the Vercelli manuscript's “The Dream of the Rood,” a dream-vision wherein the True Cross appears to a dreamer to recount the events of Christ's death and resurrection. In the poem's final line, the unnamed penitent looks forward to joining his departed brothers and sisters “þa heora wealdend cwom, / ælmihtig god, þær his eðel wæs” (when their Ruler came, Almighty God, where his homeland was) (ll. 155–56). This idea of heaven as the true *eðel* — homeland, country, native place — extends beyond God's dwelling to include the

souls that will eventually return to join Him there. In this way, heaven is the true homeland to all earthly wanderers, and it is the permanent residence to which the blessed will return after their temporary sojourn here.

Yet the event of the Last Judgment, the final reunification of soul and body before both are condemned to eternal punishment or eternal bliss, in a way disrupts the neat dichotomies of body / soul, temporary / permanent, earthly / heavenly. “The Phoenix,” another *Exeter Book* poem, uses the mythical bird as a symbol for Christ’s death and resurrection; the phoenix also functions as a metaphor for the transformation and purification of the sinful soul into one that is guiltless, resplendent, and made new through the power of God’s grace. The poem details the process of this reunification:

ðær þa lichoman, leahtra clæne,
 gongað glædmode, gæstas hweorfað
 in banfatu, þonne bryne stigeð
 heah to heofonum. [...]
 þonne anra gehwylc,
 soðfæst ge synnig, sawel mid lice,
 from moldgrafum seceð meotudes dom [...]
 Swa bið anra gehwylc
 flæsce bifongen fira cynnes,
 ænlic ond edgeong

(There the bodies, clean of sins, go joyfully, spirits return to [their] bone-vessels, when the burning reaches high to the heavens [...] When each single one, honest and guilty, soul with body, seeks the Creator’s judgment from out of earth-graves [...] so each single one of the kin of men will be clothed in flesh, splendid and turning young again). (ll. 518–21, 522–24, 534–36)

Though this may seem a considerable departure from previous texts in which bodies are disarticulated by worms and joined to the ground, this vision of the end of time speaks to the ultimate reward for the faithful — reanimation and reconstruction after the abject destruction of the body. Once food for worms, human bodies will reemerge from earth-

graves, ready to be refitted with flesh, beautiful and ever-young in the homeland of the heavenly host.

This selection also speaks to some of the same yearnings that we observe in the death-lyrics of “Guthlac,” “Christ,” and “The Dream of the Rood,” as well as in the wider poetic corpus of exile. In lines 519–20 of this selection, “gæstas hweorfað / in banfatu,” or, simply translated, “spirits return to bone-vessels”: the spirits are still called home one final time for judgment. While we can read the verb “hweorfað” (infin. *hweorfan*) simply as “return” here, indicating the journey of the soul back to its temporal home of the bodily bone-house, we have witnessed this term accrue additional meaning in the poetry of exile. Thus, we might also read this line as indicating the souls “turning back,” “circling back,” perhaps even “wandering” back to the initial earthly home of the body, completing the circle in the place where life began.²⁷

The Homely Grave

While the soul completes dual journeys back to a heavenly homeland and to the *banhus* (bone-house) of the body, after death, the body must intermingle with the earth. As we have seen, Anglo-Saxon poetic (and some prose) texts provide a vivid account of the breakdown and consumption of the body in the grave; at the same time, however, the

²⁷ This understanding assumes that one reaches maturity and actually has time to “wander” the earth before returning home; for the premature deaths of babies and children, obviously, this is not the case. A 10th-century homily of Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham, describes three kinds of death: “se bitera deað, se ungeripoda deað, and gecyndelica,” which correspond to the “bitter” deaths of children, the “unripe” deaths of young people, and “natural” deaths of the elderly. The idea that death should “naturally” or ideally occur only in old age lends credence to the view of life as a long, slow journey, providing ample time for one to wander or stray far from the familiar. See Homily XI, “Sermo ad Populum in Octavis Pentecosten [Dicendus]” in J.C. Pope, ed., *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Series*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1967 and 1968), I, 420, lines 110–17. This particular sermon is also cited by Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 10. For a more detailed account of Anglo-Saxon responses to the untimely deaths of children, see Sally Crawford, “Children, Death and the Afterlife in Anglo-Saxon England,” in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 339–58.

grave itself tends to be figured in more familiar and “homely” terms. Prior to his death, Guthlac informs his servant that his body, itself a *sawelhus* (soul-house), must be “foldærne biþeagt, / leomu lames geþacan, legerbedde fæst / wunian wælræste” (covered over / swallowed up by an earth-house (grave), my limbs by a roof of clay, to dwell in a grave, fast in a bed of the slain) (ll. 1031–33). Later, the dying saint expresses his wishes for his sister, directing that she “lame biluce, lic orsawle / in þeostorcofan, þær hit þrage sceal / in sondhofe siþþan wunian” (enclose in clay my soulless body, in the dark chamber where it must afterwards dwell for a time in a sand-house) (ll. 1194–96). The mention of Guthlac's body as *biluce* (locked or enclosed) within the earth echoes earlier representations of the body as a container enclosing the soul, one that can only be “unlocked” by disease. Beyond this, the poetic representations of the grave as *foldærne* (earth-house) and *sondhofe* (sand-house), *geþacan* (covered or thatched-over) with clay or loam, create a less alien and forbidding way of perceiving the grave; here, the body's final resting place is as familiar and protective as the hall itself. Somewhat ambiguously, the deceased body *wunian* (dwells or inhabits) the grave, thus even the verb chosen by the poet indicates a familiar state (dwelling) in a familiar place.²⁸

The imagery of the “homely grave” is not unique to Guthlac's hagiographical poems, but appears more widely. In the aforementioned Vercelli homily detailing

²⁸ For Guthlac, inhabiting a grave is doubly interesting: in Felix's Latin account of his sojourn in the wilderness (and, thus, the poetry that came after), Guthlac's *beorg* likely evoked the iconic and scriptural meaning of a tomb. As Audrey L. Meaney observes, “according to hagiographers, however, anchorites often dwelt in tombs: when Anthony (the earliest and most famous of the Egyptian hermit saints, whose Latin *Life* Felix clearly used) first moved away from his village, he had himself shut into a tomb. Felix's account [...] is so hagiographically conventional, that it can scarcely be regarded as historical evidence. Nevertheless, if in real life Guthlac was indeed attempting to emulate the desert fathers, he would have regarded a burial mound as an appropriate dwelling.” See Meaney, “Anglo-Saxon Pagan and Early Christian Attitudes to the Dead,” in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. Martin Carver (York, UK: York Medieval Press, 2003), 229–41; this reference p. 231. Meaney cites *St. Athanasius: The Life of St. Anthony*, trans. R.T. Meyer (London, 1950), chs. 8–13.

the torments of death and hell, the homilist also describes the grave, “þæs huses hrof bið gehnægled þe him onufan ðam breostum siteð [...] hafað him þonne syððan þry gebeddan, þæt is þonne greot 7 molde 7 wyrmas”²⁹ (the roof of that house is bowed down which sits above him on the breast [...] Hereafter has him three bedfellows, that is then grit and mold and worms). In the larger context of the sermon, as Victoria Thompson points out, death and the grave are considered among the “five foretastes of hell,” and may be read as suitably horrifying. Thompson observes that

the audience is invited to replace their ideas about appropriate housing, clothing and bedfellows with images of themselves in a claustrophobic, low-roofed space, where they have been immobilized, stitched impersonally into the ‘worst part of their wealth.’ At the end of the homily, he will describe the earthly paradise as a place of sexual delight, but here one is in the embrace of less attractive partners [...] a striking way of bringing home the horror of the grave to the living.³⁰

Thompson argues for a reading of the text in which the homilist perverts the comforts of home to achieve his rhetorical objective — a gruesome warning of the terrors of death. However, we can also read this description as a careful balancing of horrific and homely, achieving a mixed result of presenting the body’s earthly fate as disgusting, yet inescapable and ultimately familiar.

Here, the grave is a “hus” (house) complete with a bowed “hrof” (roof) structurally protecting the vulnerable body, recalling the familiar image of the hall-roof, a protection against weather, darkness, and non-human threats.³¹ Further, though the bowing of the roof toward the corpse’s breast may seem a claustrophobic detail, as the structure of the “house” itself threatens to collapse and obliterate the body, this earthen

²⁹ Szarmach, *Vercelli*, 168. Translation is my own.

³⁰ Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 52.

³¹ Obviously, the image of the hall-roof also recalls God’s creation of “heofen to hrofe” (heaven as roof) for earth-dwellers, enclosing us in a world of His creation, in line 6 of “Cædmon’s Hymn.”

house stretches inward to touch and swallow the body, indicating that flesh and earth will soon be indistinguishable from each other. The personification of the “þry gebeddan” (three bedfellows) of “groot 7 molde 7 wyrmas” (grit and mold and worms) further recalls the familiar life of a human household, as the corpse rests (comfortably, it seems) in a bed with companions. Even this detail — the description of the rather disgusting elements of grit, mold, and worms as “bedfellows” — suggests a macabre intimacy between the corpse and its new roommates. Yet as bedfellows, the corpse, worms, and grit / mold will ultimately become familiar, as they share bodily contact until all boundaries between them break down.

This sequence of imagery is so strongly established in the Anglo-Saxon tradition that it reappears in “The Grave” and in the twelfth-century “The Departing Soul’s Address to the Body.” The tropes of the grave as a “dwelling,” wherein worms are the body’s companions and the body is shrouded in disgusting garments, are common to the homilies as well as to the early and late poems. In “The Departing Soul’s Address,” the soul warns,

that thu scoldest mid wurmen.
 husien in eorthan.
 nu thu hauest neowe hus.
 inne bethrungen.
 lowe beoth the helewewes.
 unheige beoth the sidwoves.
 thin rof liith on thin breoste ful nei.
 colde is the ibedded.
 clothes bidcled.
 nulleth thine hinen.

(that thou should with worms dwell in the earth. Now you have a new house, crowded within; low is the covering, unhigh are the sidewalls, your roof lies on your breast full near. Cold you are embedded, clad in clothes your hinds would refuse). (ll. 235–44)

As we see in the earlier texts, here the grave is figured as a “new house” for the body, “crowded within,” likely a reference to the plethora of worms with which the body will share its space. No longer living in an established hierarchical order, with humans treading upon lowly worms, now all seem to be equal “dwellers” within the tight space of the grave. This later poem emphasizes the claustrophobia of this space; we again find the image of a “roof” bowing low to the breast (as in *Vercelli IX*), yet the grave-house of this twelfth-century text is “low” and “unhigh” in roof and walls. Further, this new dwelling is “cold,” though the poet cleverly characterizes the body as “embedded,” suggesting both the comfort and familiarity of a bed, as well as the body’s complete submersion and encasement in the earth. Finally, another claustrophobic moment occurs twice in the poem, wherein the body is described as buried “on deope sæthe.³² / on durelease huse” (in a deep pit, / in a doorless house) (ll. 170–71; repeats ll. 393–94).³³ The continued conception of the grave as house here acquires another dark element; without a door, the house offers no exit, no escape.

“The Grave” again captures many of these images, exploring the theme of the “grave as house” from various perspectives: the grave’s structural similarity to a house, the idea of the doorless house, and the house as a center for socialization. Following the poem’s opening assertion that “Ðe wes bold gebyld, er þu iboren were.” (For you a house was built, before you were born) (l. 1), the poet takes up this metaphor toward the middle of the text:

Ne bið no þin hus healice itinbred:
hit bið unheh and lah, þonne þu list þerinne.
Ðe hele-wages beoð lage, sid-wages unhege;

³² In the second instance of this phrase, “sæthe” is spelled “seathe.”

³³ See the text online at <http://ia700200.us.archive.org/15/items/thedepartingsoul19937gut/19937-h/19937-h.htm>

þe rof bið ibyld þire broste ful neh. 10
 Swa þu scealt on molde wunien ful calde,
 dimme and deorcæ. Þet den fulæt on honde.
 Dureleas is þet hus and dearc hit is wiðinnen.
 Ðær þu bist feste bidytt and dæð hefð þa cæge.
 Ladlic is þet eorð-hus and grim inne to wunien. 15
 Ðer þu scealt wunien and wurmes þe todeleð.
 Ðus ðu bist ilegd and ladæst þine fronden.
 Nefst ðu nenne freond, þe þe wylle faren to,
 ðæt efre wule lokien, hu þet hus þe likie,
 ðæt æfre undon ðe wule ða dure 20
 and þe æfter lihten [...]

(Nor will your house be high-timbered, it will be low and level, when you lie therein. The end-walls are low and so are the side-walls, the roof is built full near your chest. Thus you shall in the ground dwell, full cold, dim and dark. That den becomes foul around you. Doorless is that house, and dark it is within. There you will be locked away fast, and death has the key. Loathly is that earth-house, and grim to dwell inside. There you shall dwell, and worms divide you. Thus you'll be laid to rest, and loathly to your friends. You will not have any friend who will wish to visit, who will ever look to see how you like that house, that will ever undo the door for you and let light in after [...]) (ll. 7–21)

Here, we find the now-familiar rhetoric of the “low-roofed house,” evoking a comparison with the high timbered roof of the idealized hall-home; again, this text creates a claustrophobic atmosphere with its mentions of a “low and level” ceiling, low end- and side-walls, and “the roof [...] built full near your chest” — a snugly fitting dwelling for the corpse. And this is certainly a dwelling, as the poet uses the term “wunien” (infin. *wunian*, to dwell) three times in nearly consecutive lines (ll. 11, 15, 16), though the experience of dwelling in this house is “calde” (cold) and “grim.” Yet the poet also invokes another function of the familiar hall, that of a central setting for Anglo-Saxon family and social life, as a means to demonstrate the profound loneliness of the grave. In this respect, the body will be “loathly” to friends, without any friends to visit or (in what seems a rather clever and darkly humorous addition) provide any kind of housewarming

— to look in and “see how you like that house.” Further, we encounter the familiar imagery of the grave as a locked house (an echo of the metaphor of the body as a locked container), *dimme*, *deorca*, and *dureleas* (dim, dark, and doorless), for which only “death has the key.” This image is reinforced at the conclusion of this passage (notably, this is the point at which the original scribe’s hand lets off and the new, thirteenth-century hand begins), which reminds us that the deceased’s friend will not open the door to let the light in after them (“þe æfter lihten”).

Clearly, the text builds a progressively darker and more enclosed portrait of the grave with each new line. However, the rhetorical (or poetic) technique of enhancing the horror of the grave through comparison to life in the hall also produces a fascinating complementary result: by reminding the audience of the hall’s high timbers, side walls, and end walls, the warmth of light and friends in one’s home, these images and memories coexist with the dark and dim conception of the grave. Juxtaposing these two visions of life and death, light and dark, joy and loneliness, warmth and darkness, the poet (perhaps unintentionally) tempers the claustrophobic and dark tone of “The Grave,” wedding life and death through the central image of the hall.

Read alongside the less gruesome figuring of grave as “sand-house” or “earth-house” in the “Guthlac” poems, as well as a selection from “The Phoenix” (which follows), descriptions of the body’s final resting place in Vercelli IX and “The Grave” take on a decidedly mixed tone: part gore, part comfort. Viewed in comparison with the late entry of “The Departing Soul’s Address,” the imagery of Vercelli IX seems even *less* crowded and more familiar. In a paraphrase of Job’s songs found in “The Phoenix,” the

grave again takes on attributes of the familiar space of home and of a lonely, worm-infested waiting room. The persona of Job articulates,

Ic þæt ne forhycge heortan geþoncum,
 þæt ic in minum neste neobed ceose,
 hæle hræwerig, gewite hean þonan
 on longne sið, lame bitolden,
 geomor gudæda, in greotes fæðm [...]
 þeah min lic scyle
 on moldærne molsnad weorþan
 wrymum to willan, swa þeah weoruda god
 æfter swylthwile sawle alyseð
 ond in wuldor aweceð.

(I do not reject that in the thoughts of my heart, that I should choose a corpse-bed in my ‘nest,’ a man weary in body, thence to go out, despised, on a long journey, covered in clay, troubled by my deeds, in the grit’s [earth’s] embrace. [...] Though my body must become moldered in the grave, the desire of worms, nevertheless the God of multitudes will set free the soul after the hour of death and wake it in glory). (ll. 552–56; 563–67)

Though the poet employs the now-familiar language of the grave — he will be *lame bitolden*, “covered in clay,” and *wrymum to willan*, “the desire of worms” — other details complicate what might be a conventional description of the corpse’s decay. He chooses a resting place *in minum neste* (in my nest), clearly a reference to the titular figure of the phoenix, but also a characterization of the corpse-bed as a comforting, homely space. Later, the speaker calls the grave a *moldærne*, a compound of *mold* and *aern*, signifying an “earth-dwelling” or “earth-house,” and alliterating with the term *molsnad* (moldered) in the b-line that immediately follows, thus linking the process of decomposition with the “earth-house” in which this process occurs. Finally, the body will find itself *in greotes fæðm*; “fæðm” indicates a measure of space, specifically the deepest or lowest point of earth, thus opposing the image of the grave-covering as roof. However, this term may

also signify an “embrace,” or simply “bosom,” thus placing the body within the earth’s embrace or the earth’s breast, certainly a more comforting and intimate conception of burial. Here too, the idea of resting in the earth’s bosom is an instance of concentric containment, as the placement of the human body *in greotes fæðm* echoes the concealment of the internal workings of body and soul within the human bosom, within the confines of the rib cage.

Yet another fascinating point in this selection is the intermingling of ideas of rest and movement; the persona looks forward to the time when the “God of multitudes will set free the soul after the hour of death and awaken it in glory,” referring to the soul’s reunification with the body at the time of the Final Judgment. Even before this, however, the speaker is “a man weary in body, thence to go out, despised, on a long journey, covered in earth.” While this may refer to the exhausting journey of the individual through life as he wends his way back to his “nest” or “corpse-bed,” the ordering of the poetic lines suggests that the man is both “on a long journey” and “covered in earth,” thus signifying the divided fates of the wandering soul and the decaying corpse.

Contrary to what we have seen in other texts, here the order of the poem intermingles the soul’s journey with the rest of the body, creating a confusion of concurrent rest and movement, but also a simultaneous journey toward home and a final home in the grave. This doubled journey is made more complex by assertions of the fate of the wandering soul in the span of time between death and the Last Judgment. Charles Wright points to the homiletic tradition that, after death, the soul must return every seven days to visit the body; he singles out a selection from a Latin / Celtic manuscript (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 279) that enumerates several *additional* places the

soul must visit after death: “the soul of each person visits in four ways after death: it visits the place from which [it exited?] the body, and the place of burial, and the place where it came into the body, and the place of baptism. Every Sunday it visits the grave.”³⁴ Granted, Wright provides no direct link between this specific “four visits” tradition and the corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry or homilies. Nevertheless, the fact that the concept was recorded in Latin and circulated in Ireland makes it *possible* that the “four visits” was not unfamiliar to a learned Anglo-Saxon audience, especially one that reveled in recreating the “Soul and Body” poems in ever-increasing detail. If, in addition to regular visits to the grave, the soul was believed to retrace its existence on earth — place of birth, place of baptism, place of death, place of burial — this would create yet another circular journey from death to birth and toward death again. Moreover, this may even be conceived as a repeated circuit, if the soul is expected to visit these sites each week in preparation to return to the grave every Sunday. In the face of the apparently linear conceptions of the lives of the body and soul, each of which terminate in either complete decay or the advent of the Last Judgment, we find suggestions of a circularity and cyclical structure in the experience of life on earth, a concurrence of rest and motion.

In the homiletic and poetic traditions of Anglo-Saxon England, we thus find a continuous strand of constructing death and the grave as the ultimate end of a gruesome process of fragmentation and decay. At the same time, these sources find in death and in the grave nested versions of “home.” Once itself a home for the soul, the deceased body is sealed in an earth-house, which, through poetic comparison to the warm and comforting home of the hall, becomes simultaneously forbidding and comforting, an

³⁴ Wright, *The Irish Tradition*, 258, n. 155. Wright notes that this tradition must have circulated in Ireland, for it also appears in “Adomnán’s Second Vision.” See Wright, 258–59.

alien and familiar new house for the corpse. At the same time that the body has found its final earthly home (a place wherein it will begin a transformation back to earth, such that it will become part of the door-less earth-house and will never again leave), the soul undertakes a period of wandering in which it laments for the weakness of its previous earthly vessel, and awaits its return to the eternal homeland. Home is a layered location in these texts, with concentric enclosures of soul within body within earth, until the soul is freed to wander in circles around its companion until they are reunited. We thus find that the human search for an end to restless wandering is life-long, and the individual ultimately finds “home” in both heaven and earth, as the *wuldres dæl* (heavenly part) and the *eorðan dæl* (earthly part) rejoin, respectively, the community of saints and the foundations of the earth.

What Remains

The Grave on Earth

Exploring the relationship between death and the environment in Anglo-Saxon literature brings into focus the agility of poetic and homiletic language; these texts perform seemingly contradictory tasks, casting decay as a process both horrific and familiar, and locating metaphors of “home” in earthly, bodily, and spiritual spaces. Looking beyond textual evidence, we find that archaeological reports (chiefly cemetery excavations) reveal instances in which the grave may have been constructed to evoke, symbolically and / or functionally, elements of the human home. Though some connections between the textual and material cultures of death are observable, we must be aware of the vast variations in Anglo-Saxon funeral practices and in the lack of

“surviving” and excavated remains from the Anglo-Saxon period. These inconsistencies in the physical evidence make it a challenge to arrive at any larger, universal conclusions about the connectedness of the poetic and funereal treatments of death in Anglo-Saxon England. Still, there are intriguing pieces of evidence from various cemeteries that seem to speak to and to reflect the images and motifs we have observed in the Anglo-Saxon literature of death.

While this chapter deals most closely with descriptions and evidence of inhumation in Anglo-Saxon culture, funeral practices in Anglo-Saxon England (including cremation, bodily burial, burial of ashes, and burial with grave goods) varied over time, space, and culture and according to religious faith, community, gender, rank, and age.³⁵ Funerary structures show variation over time and geographical area, encompassing plain pits and graves, deposits of stones or chalk around a body, stone slabs laid over a grave, “crypts” or wooden structures resembling houses, or even wooden coffins of varying thicknesses and levels of quality.³⁶ Beyond the challenges of interpreting these disparate

³⁵ For more detailed analyses of the variations in death and burial rites and the trends in interpreting archaeological finds in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, see Sam Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death: Burial Rites in Early England* (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2000); Thompson, *Dying and Death*, esp. 8–91; Helen Geake, “The Control of Burial Practice in Anglo-Saxon England,” in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. Martin Carver (York, UK: York Medieval Press, 2003), 259–69.

³⁶ Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 122–25; Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 97–101, 118–19. While there are also trends in burial practices, these trends are not necessarily uniform over the entire Anglo-Saxon period or across kingdoms. Cremation burial seemed to be favored in the early Anglo-Saxon period, gradually being replaced by inhumation, though this is not a strict change, and Sam Lucy argues that variations in funerary practices of cremation vs. inhumation seem to be influenced by geographical area. Typically, in an inhumation burial, the body will be aligned east-to-west, with the head pointed to the east, yet there are exceptions to this. See Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 130–32; 140–44. At times, grave goods were deposited with a body (but not always); in many instances these goods fell along gender lines (weapons with men, jewelry with women), yet this is also not universal. See Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 25–64, 83–87, and esp. 87–90; Audrey L. Meaney describes the types of goods buried with individuals of each gender in “Anglo-Saxon Pagan and Early Christian Attitudes to the Dead,” in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2003), 229–41; esp. 239–40. For an analysis of changing forms of burial from the seventh-tenth centuries, see Dawn Hadley, “Equality, Humility and Non-Materialism? Christianity and Anglo-Saxon Burial Practices,” *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 17.2 (2000): 149–78.

structures and fractured evidence, we are faced with the problem that what has been uncovered of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries is only a fraction of what was put into the ground. Moreover, depending on environmental factors and time, most organic materials deposited in the ground (obviously including bodily tissue, but also wooden items or vessels and textiles) have decomposed, and thus are undetectable or only suggested by the imprint these items may have left behind.

Though perhaps an obvious detail, inhumation burial often involves covering the body with more than just earth;³⁷ at numerous Anglo-Saxon burial sites, bodies were covered with organic material (tree branches, turf, cut grass, hay, chalk rubble, charred logs, decayed rushes, or even worked materials such as cloth or leather).³⁸ At times, stones were used to serve as coverings or linings for graves, such as limestone slabs found in graves at Kempston in Bedfordshire.³⁹ These organic or stone coverings also appear in cremation burials; in cases of “urned” cremations, in which the ashes of the deceased are buried within a vessel, stones may be placed over the mouth of the vessel. For example, a sandstone was placed over each urn in a burial in Kingston-on-Soar; thin stones covered the openings of vessels in a burial at King’s Newton, Derbyshire; pieces of flint covered the mouths of vessels at a burial in Castle Acre, Norfolk.⁴⁰ In an interesting reversal of this trend, the burial at King’s Newton featured inverted urns, wherein remains had been placed on a flat stone and the containers placed mouth-down on top of the ashes,⁴¹ creating a perfect domed “roof” above the remains. In instances of

³⁷ The term ‘inhumation,’ denoting the deposit of a body in *humus* (earth), also directs our attention to the half-rhyme of “humus” and “human.”

³⁸ Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

inhumation, the necessity of protecting a newly buried body from the elements, vermin, and other prowling animals — including grave-robbers — requires that some covering form a “roof” above the body, beyond the basic covering of earth. Further, in cases where the body is covered with grass, turf, or cloth instead of stone, this “roof” seems to be even more of a symbolic layer of protection. The symbolic value of the protective grave-roof becomes even stronger in urned cremation burials, where the charred remains of the body (and, possibly, whatever small belongings were burned alongside it) would likely have been much less tempting to prowlers.

Victoria Thompson adds to this discussion of “protective roofs and vessels,” citing the variety in construction, design, and materials for Anglo-Saxon coffins, and lingering over a number of coffins unearthed at York Minster, Winchester, and Raunds which either were (or mimic the design of) “domestic chests,” or which feature iron fittings and locks.⁴² She notes, “locks presuppose keys, and a coffin in the grave with only the lid visible, embellished with iron strappings and hinges, would have looked very like a door leading down into ground.”⁴³ Granted, these funeral structures and decorations are in the minority, yet, as Thompson observes, the concept of the locked box or the door in the ground “suggests that the grave may be read as a doorway,”⁴⁴ an intriguing proposition when one considers that the image of the grave as a “door-less house” appears twice in the twelfth-century “The Departing Soul’s Address” and once in “The Grave.”⁴⁵

⁴² Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 124–25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

In some excavations of cremation sites, moreover, the imagery of the deathly house and roof become even stronger. Sam Lucy observes that “some cremation graves appear to have wooden structures associated with them,” citing an excavator’s interpretation of a cremation-house at a cemetery at Apple Down:

Down & Welch [...] reconstruct the structure over cremation 146 at Apple Down as having corner uprights supporting a pitched roof, perhaps with a thatched or wooden shingle roof, and they think there may well have been side walls of planking or wattle and daub to protect the inside, and brace the structure. These structures at this site range from a metre square to 2.7m by 2.5m, and the excavators viewed them as being built specifically to house the cremation deposits of a single family.⁴⁶

Lucy further cites evidence of built, geometric structures contemporary with inhumation burials, providing examples of possible remains of rectangular structures at Lyminge, Kent, “slot features” at Portway, Hampshire and Sewerby, Yorkshire, and a six- to seven-meter long square enclosure in a cemetery at Spong Hill.⁴⁷ Lucy cites archaeological discussions over whether these “demarcate[d] ‘sacred areas’,” function as the “foundations for more solid structures such as shrines or mortuary houses,” or whether they may be part of a “late sixth- to seventh-century tradition of square enclosures and structures.”⁴⁸ While a handful of post-holes at a smattering of cemeteries does not a widespread pattern make, as I have stated, what survives of the burial practices of Anglo-Saxons is only a fraction of what went into the ground, and organic structures are most

⁴⁶ Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 118; Lucy cites Alec Down and Margaret Welch, *Chichester Excavations VII: Apple Down and the Mardens* (Chichester, UK: Phillimore, 1990), 90. Lucy observes that “comparable structures are known from earlier and contemporary sites on the continent, but some of these represent cremation pyre supports, rather than cremation houses”; see Lucy, 118–19.

⁴⁷ Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 149; for square enclosure, see Catherine Hills, Kenneth Penn, and Robert Rickett, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham. Part III: Catalogue of Inhumations* (Gressenhall, UK: Norfolk Archaeological Unit, 1984), 12. It is unclear whether this enclosure was meant as a deposit structure for a body or if it housed the body during funereal ritual. Hills, Penn, and Rickett further state that Spong Hill yielded remains of two males buried within chambers (p. 10).

⁴⁸ Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 149.

often only survived by the remnants of post-holes in the ground (and only then when the soil chemistry was correct).

In a very few cases, however, actual chambers and structures *do* survive from inhumation burials (though these are in the minority of excavated burial sites). One perceived high-status burial survives from Prittlewell in Southend, Essex; while no body survives to this day in this seventh-century grave, archaeologists believe that the luxury items found here (sixty items in total, including gold crosses, a buckle, glass bowls, and gold coins) suggest that this was a kingly burial.⁴⁹ The items (and corpse, one would assume) were buried within a wooden chamber four meters square and one and a half meters high — literally, a subterranean “house” or, as Pollington has it, “the size of a small modern living room.”⁵⁰ More famous is the Sutton Hoo ship burial in Suffolk, a seventh-century grave containing various high-status items: a helmet, a belt buckle, a sword, shield fittings, a whetstone, a standard, bowls, and silver spoons, among others. These objects were recovered from a burial “chamber” cradled within the remnants of a ninety-foot-long (fourteen-foot-wide) wooden ship.⁵¹ James Campbell describes “a gabled hut [...] built amidships to accommodate a very big coffin and an astonishing collection of treasures and gear. The trench had then been filled in and a mound raised over it to stand boldly on the skyline.”⁵² Beyond the foundational wooden-plank protective enclosure of the ship, this burial structure captures the “house” imagery and

⁴⁹ Stephen Pollington, *Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds: Princely Burial in the 6th and 7th Centuries* (Norfolk, UK: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2008), 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Neither a body nor the ship itself have survived to the present day; that a ship served as a protective ceiling for the burial is attested by a series of nails and imprints of the wooden planks. For more information, see Martin O. H. Carver, *Sutton Hoo: The Burial Ground of Kings?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), and Tom Williamson, *Sutton Hoo and its Landscape: The Context of Monuments* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2008).

⁵² James Campbell, ed., *The Anglo-Saxons* (London: Penguin, 1982), 32.

language of Anglo-Saxon death poetry, as the (now absent) body and treasures were further contained within a hut appended to the ship itself, as well as the figurative “roof” of the earthen mound piled high over both sea-vessel and hut.

Though, as Thompson points out, Anglo-Saxon funerary monuments mimicking a “roof” shape are rarely found over graves,⁵³ the construction (and/or reuse) of earthen burial mounds was somewhat common during the sixth and seventh centuries, with some dating even earlier.⁵⁴ Barrows or burial mounds could contain either or both inhumation or cremation burials, an extant or “primary” burial could be reused in later years, creating a “secondary” burial site.⁵⁵ Yet new barrows were still being constructed during the Anglo-Saxon period; Lucy points to four areas with a thick distribution of primary barrow-building in the seventh century — Kent, Sussex, Wiltshire, and Derbyshire — though Anglo-Saxon barrows can be found widely throughout southeastern England.⁵⁶ Although barrows vary in size, with some as “small mounds”⁵⁷ covering individual graves, others, such as the barrows at Stonehenge (Wiltshire Plain) and at Sutton Hoo would have been visible for miles across the flat landscape. Like the burial mound that the Geats raise over Beowulf’s body at Hronesness — “hlæw on hoe, se wæs heah ond brad, / wægliðendum wide gesyne” (a barrow on a promontory, it was high and broad,

⁵³ Thompson observes that “few crosses or slabs, and no hogbacks, have been found over graves, although the presumption is that most of these stones are funerary, rather than primarily memorial or devotional”; see Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 126.

⁵⁴ Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 146. Lucy points to possible “Saxon” (fifth-century) barrows at Bledlow, Buckinghamshire; at a cemetery at Marston St. Lawrence, Northamptonshire, in a field previously called “Barrow Furlong”; and at Beddington, Surrey, where two slightly raised areas yielded inhumation and cremation burials. See Lucy, 146.

⁵⁵ Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 117, 146.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 146–47; Lucy argues that “ostentatious barrow burial in the seventh century is seen as a deliberate statement in the face of the spread of the new Christian religion with its Merovingian overtones”; Lucy, 182; Lucy cites Martin O. H. Carver, “Ideology and Allegiance in East Anglia,” in *Sutton Hoo: Fifty Years After*, ed. Robert Farrell and Carol Neumann de Vegvar (Hamilton, OH: American Early Medieval Studies, 1992) and Robert van der Noort, “The Context of Early Medieval Barrows in Western Europe,” *Antiquity* 67(1993): 66–73.

⁵⁷ Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 146.

widely seen by seafarers) (ll. 3157–58) — these barrows serve as imposing visual reminders of the dead. Further, though the barrows vary in size and shape, the most common form is that of a round tumulus, mimicking the very roof and earth-house invoked by poetry and homilies.

The necessity of protecting a body or urn from the elements creates intriguing parallels between the “house” and “roof” imagery of the poetry and of physical reality; the presence of mounds in the Anglo-Saxon landscape becomes a permanent and daily reminder of the presence of the dead in their subterranean chambers.⁵⁸ Thus, these outcroppings of earth stand in for the specter of death. In these cases, the decaying body is invisible and yet constantly visible in the monumental earth, and earth at the same time hides and displays the reality of death.

A Clear View of the Body

Though the processes of cremation and inhumation (whether in tumuli or in graves) hide bodies and remnants of bodies from view, textual and archaeological evidence suggests that Anglo-Saxons were aware of the changes taking place beneath the ground. Even if we view the worm imagery of the “Soul and Body” tradition as an imaginative trope, the very processes of cremation and burial made public the reality of bodily breakdown. Depending on location, the act of digging a grave may have yielded unexpected and tangible evidence of bodily decay. The anonymous Anglo-Saxon “Homily XIV,” commonly known as “Assmann XIV” (for the name of its nineteenth-

⁵⁸ As Pollington suggests, maintaining the appearance of the mound within a landscape may have been a continuous activity: “the practice of adding earth to the grave may even have become part of the ritual of remembrance [...] The creation of the impressive structures we see today would involve much time, effort and planning and certainly required a knowledge of engineering principles.” See Pollington, *Burial Mounds*, 18.

century editor), provides an account of the discovery of bones during the excavation of a new grave: “oft wæ habbað gescawod, to hwilcum þingum we sculan gewurðan, syððan we deade beoð. We magan geseon, þonne man binnan mynster byrgene delfeð 7 þa ban þæron findeþ, hwilce we beon scylan” (often we have seen, to what things we shall be turned, after we are dead. We may see, when a man digs a grave within a minster and then finds bones there, what we shall be).⁵⁹ Several things are uncovered in these short lines; first, as Thompson points out, the homily reveals that “new graves are likely to be cut into soil containing old graves, and that human remains are a familiar sight to the homilist’s audience.”⁶⁰ Second, the homilist’s assertion that “often” his audience has seen what they and we shall be turned into (decaying flesh and skeletal remains) after death suggests that the sight of a body or skeleton — whether in an uncovered grave, or even an animal’s body dismembered for food and materials or found decaying out in the open — was, though probably disturbing, not an uncommon sight for an Anglo-Saxon individual.

Several lines later, the homilist provides more detail pertaining to the process of bodily decomposition. He adds, “heora lichaman licgað on eorðan 7 beoð to duste gewordene 7 þæt flæsc afulað 7 wirmum awealleð 7 nyðer afloweð in þa eorðan” (their bodies lie in the earth and are turned to dust and that flesh decays and seethes with worms and flows/melts down into the earth).⁶¹ Parts of this are familiar — the body lying in earth, the decaying flesh, and the presence of worms — yet several details add a new element to our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon conception of death. While the fragmentation and consumption of the body by worms is to be expected, the image of the

⁵⁹ “Über das jüngste Gerichte” (Homily XIV), in Bruno Assmann, ed., *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben* (Kassel: Georg H. Wigand, 1889), 164.

⁶⁰ Thompson, *Dying and Death*, 102.

⁶¹ Assmann XIV, 164.

flesh not only turning to dust, but *liquifying* and melting into the earth itself is a fascinating addition. This visceral, unforgettable detail conveys the transformation and (re)union of the body, now either dust or liquid, with the earth itself. Though bones remain as a testament to the once living body, the “stuff” of life, including flesh, organs, and skin, return to the earth to become indistinguishable from that source.

Cremation provided another means by which the Anglo-Saxon audience could witness the transformation of the body into more elemental, earthly material. Few descriptions of cremation exist in the poetic record; indeed, the account of the funeral pyre of Hildeburh’s son and Hnaef from the “Finnsburg Fragment” episode of *Beowulf* is memorable for its descriptive gore and for its singularity. The scop intones,

Het ða Hildeburh	æt Hnæfes ade
hire selfre sunu	sweoloðe befæstan,
banfatu bærnan	ond on bæl don
eame on eaxle.	Ides gnornode,
geomrode giddum.	Guðrinc astah.
Wand to wolcnum	wælfyra mæst,
hlynode for hlawe;	hafelan multon,
bengeato burston,	ðonne blod ætspranc,
laðbite lices.	Lig ealle forswealg,
gæsta gifrost,	þara ðe þær guð fornam
bega folces;	wæs hira blæd scacen.

(Hildeburh then commanded that her own son be entrusted to the burning heat of Hnaef’s funeral pyre, his corpse to burn and in the flame placed, at his uncle’s shoulder. A woman lamented, wailed in songs. The warrior ascended. Most of the funeral pyre whirled to the heavens, resounded before the barrow; heads melted, wound-gashes burst, then blood spurted out, the body’s wounds. The flame swallowed all, most greedy of spirits, those whom battle had taken away from both peoples there, their spirit was departed). (ll. 1114–24)

Memorable here is the concussive progression of bodily breaking and bursting: “heads melted / wound-gashes burst / blood spurted,” a catalogue of transformations from a body

that is whole and self-contained to a leaking, liquid mass. In the next lines, the corpses are consumed by fire, as the remainder of organic fuel for the fire is melted and transmuted into the ether. Though these details may seem overly gruesome and violent, the performance and reality of cremation in Anglo-Saxon society was perhaps not so very different. Early Anglo-Saxon rites of cremation (a public ritual) would have focused attention on the fragmentation and dissolution of the body and of the individual components (organs, bones, tissue) of the larger whole. In his study of bodily agency in Anglo-Saxon cremation rites, Howard Williams provides a lengthy yet fascinating articulation of this process:

unlike cremation in our society, [Anglo-Saxon cremation] was a visual spectacle of transformation that would be remembered by the mourners. The forensic and ethnographic literature provides us with an expectation of what might have occurred as the body was transformed during cremation into a series of physical and sensory components including heat, smoke, steam, bone and charred flesh. The inside of the body became visible as its many layers and surfaces were breached and fragmented. Firstly, the coverings of wood, bark, hides, leather or textile (if pyre material, canopies and coffins covered the body) were burnt off to reveal the body. Next, the clothing, hair, skin and fat were sequentially destroyed revealing the muscles, organs and bone. As the body was heated, the evaporation of the bodily liquids may have occurred so speedily that jets of steam sprayed from the body. Once heated, the body fat upon the clothed cadaver would perpetuate the cremation process, the corpse itself seemingly accentuating the transformation initiated by the fire. The muscles can tighten under the effects of heat followed by the charring of the muscles and organs before they were consumed by the flames. As the cremation continued, the bony frame of the body including the rib-cage and the skull was revealed, penetrated and fragmented by the fire. [...] For hours until the pyre had cooled, the fragmented bones might have remained visible as indications of the continued presence of the body that had earlier been ‘composed’ on the pyre.⁶²

⁶² Howard Williams, “Death Warmed Up: The Agency of Bodies and Bones in Early Anglo-Saxon Cremation Rites,” *Journal of Material Culture* 9.3 (2004): 263–91; this quotation appears on p. 271; Williams cites M. Bohnert, et al, “Fractures of the Base of the Skull in Charred Bodies – Post Mortem Heat Injuries or Signs of Mechanical Traumatism?”, *Forensic Science Journal* 87 (1997): 55–62 (pp. 58–60); M. Bohnert, T. Rost, and S. Pollak, “The Degree of Destruction of Human Bodies in Relation to the Duration of the Fire,” *Journal of Forensic Science International* 95 (1998): 11–21 (pp. 13–16).

In Williams's account, we find a systematic consumption and revealing of various layers of the body — coverings, clothing, skin, fat, muscles, organs, and, finally, bone — as well as the melting and evaporation of liquids. These descriptions put one in mind of the bodily fragmentation described in the “Soul and Body” texts, as organs and limbs are progressively severed and destroyed by worms and decay. Williams's mention of melting fat and steaming liquids is also reminiscent of the reminder in “Assmann XIV” that, once in the ground, the body will “melt” and flow into the earth. Overall, this account reminds us of the performative elements of funerals (whether they be inhumations or cremations), and the attendant reminders that the body will break apart and be (re)combined with elements of earth and sky.

Taken together, the evidence of the “Soul and Body” corpus, “Assmann XIV,” the short description of Hnaef's pyre from *Beowulf*, as well as Williams's description of the reality of cremation remind us that, despite the great lengths taken to cover bodies with earthen roofs and barrows, Anglo-Saxons likely had a realistic conception of the effects of decay or cremation on the body. Read alongside homiletic and poetic reminders that, at the time of the Final Judgment, long-waiting bodies would stand upright and be “re-clothed” in skin as though new, we see that Anglo-Saxons held both understandings of death in their minds simultaneously. Instead of supporting a singular and simple belief that the body lay closed and silent in its tomb in preparation for Christ's return to Earth, Anglo-Saxon literature speaks to a much more complex conception of the afterlife, made even more complex by the nested imagery of homes, soul-houses, and graves. This conception includes an awareness of (and anxiety about) the body's transformation into

and return to earth, as well as of the more linear, temporal progression of birth-death-Final Judgment-eternal life or eternal death, in the Christian worldview.

Linear and Cyclical Time

As members of a Christian community, Anglo-Saxons would have subscribed to the dominant worldview and temporal narrative of that belief system. As Faith Wallis eloquently puts it,

the Christian concept of time is remarkable for its linear focus, its boundedness, and its exclusivity. Time began at Creation, and will end at the Last Judgement. It goes in only one direction, forwards: before Christ, its goal was Christ himself; after Christ, its goal is the Parousia [the Second Coming of Christ].⁶³

We can see this linear focus reflected in poetry that captures the decay and ruination of the world. The observation in “The Wanderer” that “þes middangeard / ealra dogra gehwam dreoseð and fealleþ” (this world every day fails and falls) (ll. 62–63) captures the world’s progressive dissolution, leading to Christ’s ultimate return and Day of Judgment. Even the earlier cited selection from “Guthlac A” captures the same incremental process of decay: “bið seo siþre tid sæda gehwylces / mætre in mægne. Forþon se mon ne þearf / to þisse worulde wyrpe gehycgan” (this later season of each seed is more inferior in strength. Therefore a man does not need to study this world for improvement) (ll. 43–47). As the seeds of the earth grow weaker and meaner with each passing generation, ultimately they dwindle to nothing. Too, this selection provides a striking warning *against* viewing the seasons and ages of the world as cyclical. While *wyrpe* (l. 47) is here translated as “improvement,” the word also carries meanings of

⁶³ Faith Wallis, ed. and trans., *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 354.

“change,” “recovery,” and “revolution,” suggesting that, while improvement comes inevitably through the change of seasons and the revolution of the world, we need *not* expect any renewal or recovery of fruitfulness as the world continues to age.

Yet scientific and poetic texts *also* support a view of the world’s progression and growth as cyclical, evidenced by astronomical phenomena and the change of seasons. In his monumental explanation of the computation of time and of the relationship of astronomy and geography thereto, Bede makes clear that the Anglo-Saxon Christian worldview is a doubled understanding of time. On the one hand, he speaks multiple times about the observable structure of time on Earth as cyclical. Cycles may be defined by repeated events, including the change from day to night, the changes of seasons, and the sun’s circuit around the Earth every 365 days.⁶⁴ Bede cites the mathematicians and astronomers of ancient Greece who determined that “fixum in duodecim mensibus anni uertentis ordinare circulum” (the circle of the revolving year should be fixed at twelve months)⁶⁵ and that “undique gyrum caeli rotundissimum per lineam zodiaci circuli” (the gyre of the heavens, perfectly round at every point, is bound by the line of the zodiacal circle).⁶⁶ Likely borrowing from Isidore’s *De Natura Rerum*, Bede visualizes the relation of one season to another; the four seasons (*tempora*) take this name “uel certe quia quadam suae similitudine qualitatis ad inuicem contemperata uoluuntur. [...] Sicque fit ut

⁶⁴ In the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos.

⁶⁵ Bede, “De Temporum Ratione Liber,” in *Beda Venerabilis Opera: Pars IV, Opera Didascalica*, 2, ed. Charles Jones, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, 123B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977), 327, ll. 9–10; trans. Wallis, 52.

⁶⁶ Bede, “De Temporum Ratione,” 333, ll. 25–26; trans. Wallis, 55. More specifically, Bede continues, “sol .cccclxv. diebus et .vi. horis, luna .xxvii. diebus et .viii. horis, zodiaci ambitum lustrant” (the Sun illumines the circuit of the zodiac in 365 days and 6 hours, the Moon in 27 days and 8 hours): Bede, “De Temporum Ratione,” 336, ll. 77–79; trans. Wallis, 58. Speaking on the changing seasons, Bede observes that the “inaequalitates temporum” (inequalities of the seasons) are caused by the one’s location on Earth relative to the “cursuum solis annuorum” (annual circuits of the Sun): Bede, “De Temporum Ratione,” 387, ll. 6–7; trans. Wallis, 96.

amplexantibus singulis medio moderamine quae circa se sunt, orbis instar ad inuicem cuncta concludantur” (because they turn one into the other, being tempered to one another by some qualitative likeness. [...] And so it happens that with each one embracing what is on either side of it, through the moderating mean, the whole is linked up to itself like a sphere).⁶⁷ Thus, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the conception of time and earth are linked in the Anglo-Saxon scientific view, with each envisioned in circular or rotating terms. Bede continues his discussion of time as rotational, connecting the etymology for the Latin term *annus* (year) with the idea of cyclical movement: “annus uel ab innouando cuncta quae naturali ordine transierant, uel a circuitu temporis nomen accepit, quia ueteres ‘an’ pro ‘circum’ ponere solebant” (the word ‘year’ [*annus*] derives either from the renewal [*innouando*] of all things which pass away according to the natural order, or from the cycle of time, for the ancients were accustomed to use ‘an’ for ‘circum’).⁶⁸ Finally, he links computation to observable phenomena, locating the sun’s position at the completion of one yearly cycle at the start of the next one: “item solis est annus cum ad eadem loca siderum redit, peractis .cclxv. diebus et sex horis” (the Sun’s year is [complete] when it returns to the same place with respect to the fixed stars after 365 days and 6 hours).⁶⁹

In previous chapters, we have seen Anglo-Saxon poets express their observations about the movement of time in the physical world.⁷⁰ Specifically, the “Maxims” reflect a similarly cyclical understanding of time to what Bede provides in his computational

⁶⁷ Bede, “De Temporum Ratione,” 391–92, ll. 8–10, 14–16; trans. Wallis, 100. Wallis suggests the comparison to Isidore. See her note 316 on p. 100 in *The Reckoning of Time*.

⁶⁸ Bede, “De Temporum Ratione,” 395, ll. 1–3; trans. Wallis, 103. Wallis observes that Bede borrows from Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 1.14.5 (66.24–26).

⁶⁹ Bede, “De Temporum Ratione,” 396, ll. 21–22; trans. Wallis, 103. Emendation of quotation is Wallis’s.

⁷⁰ Specifically, see chapter three.

document. “Maxims I” communicates the expectation that season will follow season on the rotating axis of the year. Audiences can rest assured that

An sceal inbindan
forstes fetre felameahtig god;
winter sceal geweorpan, weder eft cuman,
sumor swegle hat, sund unstill.

(One shall unbind frost’s fetters, most mighty God; winter shall pass [by], [fair] weather come again, summer hot with the sun, the sea moving). (ll. 74–77)

Another selection from this collection of gnomes expresses what we see in the changing seasons — the cyclical nature of growth and death — in different terms: “Tu beoð gemæccan; / sceal wif ond wer in woruld cennan / bearn mid gebyrdum. Beam sceal on eorðan / leafum liþan, leomu gnornian” (two are mated; a man and woman in the world will bring forth offspring in childbirth. A tree will on earth be bereft of leaves, its branches mourn) (ll. 23–26). Though the sequence of observations about childbirth and foliage may seem unrelated or disconnected, taken together they present a visual comparison of stages in the life cycle for different living organisms. Carolyne Larrington describes this particular moment: “the arrival of the child is juxtaposed with the image of a tree which loses its leaves: a perennial cycle of growth and decay.”⁷¹ Again, the maxim is acceptable as true because the “cycle of growth and decay” is *perennial*; an audience observes year after year that birth will follow death, which will follow birth, just as surely as the leaves will grow and fall from trees.⁷² As we see, texts both prose and poetic,

⁷¹ Carolyne Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense: Gnostic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 123.

⁷² Turning again to the concept of the *cursus aetatis*, or the “Ages of Man,” the progression of the calendar year is linked to four ages in humankind: “the life of man was seen to correspond to a temporal cycle in the greater world: just as the year was divided by the solstices and equinoxes into four parts, so that human life, another finite stretch of time, had its four seasons.” See Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 9. Though Sears indicates

scientific and gnomic, affirm the cycle of seasons and the rotation of years for an Anglo-Saxon audience. The question thus arises: how can we square this with a Christian understanding of time as linear and of the world in a state of perpetual decay?

We may find part of a solution to this conundrum in the ancient tradition of structuring the world's history in seven (or eight) "world-ages" as part of a "cosmic week," an idea borrowed and conveyed in scientific and religious writings for hundreds of years and across continents. It is this patristic and scientific tradition of a "Cycle of the World-Ages" to which Bede had access and which he adapted for his own chronology.⁷³ Looking broadly at the landscape of time, Bede defines the Earth's existence in the span of a cosmic week, "unvarying and unique in that it does not come back again to its beginning, is composed of the unstable Ages of this world, and follows in all respect the pattern of the first week."⁷⁴ Bede describes "sex potius aetates significare mundi labentis, in quibus sancti laborant in hac vita pro Christo, et septimam perpetuae quietus in alia vita quam solutae a corporibus percipiunt animae sanctae cum Christo" (six Ages of this fleeting world in which the saints labour in this life for Christ, and the Seventh Age of rest in another life which the holy souls, released from their bodies, will possess in Christ).⁷⁵ Placing his own life within the Sixth Age, Bede observes, "quia nulla aetatum quinque praeteritarum mille annis acta repperitur [...] restat ut pari modo haec quoque, que nunc agitur, incertum mortalibus habeat suae longitudinis statum" (because none of the five Ages in the past is found to have run its course in a thousand years [...] it follows

here that a human's life span is finite, it is tempting to look at the Anglo-Saxon knowledge of the turning seasons and cycling years as applicable to the life cycle of humans, as well; perhaps for humans, the repetition of the "four ages" is achieved through reproduction.

⁷³ Among Bede's sources here are Eusebius of Caesarea's (263–339) *Chronikoi Kanones*, Augustine's *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* and *De civitate Dei*, as well as Isidore's *Etymologies*. For a complete discussion of his sources, see Wallis, lxxii–lxxxv and 353–66.

⁷⁴ Wallis, 39–40.

⁷⁵ Bede, "De Temporum Ratione," 537, ll. 45–48; trans. Wallis, 240.

that this [Age] likewise, which is now running its course, will also have a duration uncertain to mortal men).⁷⁶ This location of Anglo-Saxon England within the Sixth Age explains the perceived natural ruin and widespread moral failures observed in Anglo-Saxon literature, as they saw themselves living through the final Age before the return of Christ. Visually, we may represent this concept of the World-Ages as concurrently cyclical and linear; though the Ages follow one after another, this cycle proceeds in a kind of downward spiral through history and future times, bottoming out at the “end of the cosmic week” with the Second Coming and Last Judgment.

This doubled conception of time, as enunciated by Bede, is representative of a willingness to hold together two coexisting yet antithetical ideas in numerous Anglo-Saxon texts. In these texts, we see dual representations of exile as continuous motion *and* paralysis; of death as a return “home” *and* as an embarkation to further wandering; and of home itself as a location at once bodily, earthly, and heavenly. The Christian perception of time as both linear and cordoned into cyclical epochs finds an echo in the dual ideas of decay and circularity that appear in numerous Anglo-Saxon poetic texts. As established in the outset of this chapter, in the Christian vision of life and death, there is no return or rebirth of energy or matter (except at the Last Judgment). Even what we might consider “secular” poetry is colored with the dread of a quickly aging and deteriorating world. However, when some of the more secular Anglo-Saxon poetic creations, including enigmatic texts like the riddles, explore ideas of God and Creation, we find hints of a recognition of the cyclical flow of energy and matter through life and death. Descriptions of decay and destruction give way to growth, evidencing an ecological flow of energy from life to death and back to life.

⁷⁶ Ibid., ll. 52–57; Ibid.

Enigmatic Creation

In a poetic corpus where most texts lament the passing of the world, several Anglo-Saxon riddles and dialogues — texts that sharpen the mind by layering maxims and observations with rhetorical tricks and double-meaning — provide a glimpse at the “missing step” in the cycle from destruction to earthly creation. Granted, the cycle of earthly decay, wherein living matter, either through consumption or death, is broken down to provide nutrients and resources for other organisms, is commonly recognized in modern ecological and biological systems of thought. Such an understanding, however, was not necessarily held by Anglo-Saxons, though members of an agricultural society would have had to have some understanding of the nourishment of plants and animals through the waste and decay of other organisms.⁷⁷ This understanding is further suggested by one of the riddles, one believed to describe Creation (meaning the event itself and the breadth of the world) as a whole. What is not commonly observed of this riddle is that it may also describe creation as a *process*, and one that involves the return of energy from previously “dead” material.

While Riddles 40 and 66 both call on the audience to consider the height, depth, breadth, and variety of “Creation,” Riddle 40 broadens this conceit to include the various inhabitants and processes of Earth. In number 66, the speaker asserts itself to be both “mare þonne þes middangeard, / læsse þonne hondwyrn” (greater than this middle-earth,

⁷⁷ Although this understanding may not have been held by the “average” and unlettered Anglo-Saxon, a similar understanding *was* held by Aristotle in book 3, chapter 12 of *De Anima*, as he describes the necessity of seeking out nourishment, growth, and decay in the “nutritive soul” of all animals.

lesser than an insect),⁷⁸ while simultaneously encompassing the vast spaces of earth, water, heaven, and hell:

Sæs me sind ealle
 flodas on fæðmum ond þes foldan bearm,
 grene wongas. Grundum ic hrine,
 helle underhnige, heofonas oferstige,
 wuldres eþel, wide ræce
 ofer engla eard, eorþan gefylle,
 ealne middangeard ond merestreamas
 side mid me sylfum. Saga hwæt ic hatte.

(Seas and all floods and this breast of the earth, green fields, are in my embrace. I reach the foundations, sink under hell, climb over the heavens, the home of glory; reach widely over the country of the angels, fill up the earth, all of middle-earth and the vast sea-waters with myself. Say what I am called). (ll. 1–10)

Here, the riddler imbues all of the created world (including the heavenly and infernal realms beyond the physical middle-earth) with one voice, allowing the entirety of Creation to speak as one united being. At the same time, this being professes to be both great and small — “mare” and “laesse” — and to be everywhere at once. The variety of verbs chosen to indicate movement and the expansion of Creation into every possible space: *hrinan* (reach, touch), *underhnigan* (sink, succumb), *oferstigan* (climb, mount), *ræcan* (reach, overtake), *fyllan* (fill), suggest this omnipresence, and remind us of the hierarchy in which we are accustomed to order and divide things and places (i.e., moving from lowest to highest: hell — earth — heaven; small — great). Yet the pairing of opposites (heaven and hell, large and small, sea and earth) in one common embrace, as well as the seeming ease with which “Creation” traverses wide physical and perceived

⁷⁸ Despite the inclusion of the root “wurm” in the term “handwurm,” Bosworth and Toller gloss this noun as an insect believed to cause infection in the hand. It seems possible to me that this could refer to an insect in larval form or a maggot.

distances, creates an unexpected equalization and intimacy among things that would normally exist in different categories.

A similar equalization of space and things occurs in Riddle 40, a much longer rumination on the identity of Creation. Adapted from one of Aldhelm's eighth-century Anglo-Latin *enigmata*,⁷⁹ this riddle displays the same dexterity in collapsing wide distances between ideas, spaces, and things, while at the same time bringing forth the changeability of the created world and the roles of decay and destruction in creation. In lines such as “swa ic mid waldendes worde ealne / þisne ymbhwyrft utan ymbclyppe” (so I with the Ruler's word all of this circle of the earth from the outside embrace) (ll. 14–15), we see a portrayal of Creation as not only the world *itself* (as we see in Riddle 66), but as an entity actively embracing the vastness of the earth. This vastness is enlivened in Riddle 40 by a panoply of actions, landscapes, and inhabitants. Creation may “grima abregan” (jump at ghosts) yet is “eofore [...] cenra” (bolder than the boar) (ll. 17–18); it is “on stence strengre micle / þonne ricels oþþe rose” (in odor much stronger than incense or the rose) (ll. 23–24), yet is “fulre [...] þonne þis fen sweartre / þæt her yfle adelen stinceð” (fouler than this dark fen that here stinks in evil filth) (ll. 31–32). Creation is “hyrre” (higher) than heaven yet “sceawige wom wraðscrafu wraþra gæsta” (scrutinize[s] the evil pits of misery of wrathful spirits) in hell (ll. 38, 40–41), and Creation is “micle yldra” (much older) than the world but yesterday was “geong acenned” (young, reborn) (ll. 42–43).

As the riddler continues, his subject is harder and colder than “hearda forst, / hrim heorugrimma” (hard frost, the savage rime) (ll. 54–55); sweeter than “beobread blende

⁷⁹ See Riddle 101, “De Creatura,” in Nancy Porter Stock, *Through a Gloss Darkly: Aldhelm's Riddles in the British Library MS Royal 12.C.xxiii* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 231–38.

mig hunige” (bee-bread blended with honey) (l. 59); faster in flight than “pernex / opþe
 earn opþe hafoc [...] zefferus, se swiftra wind” (pheasant or eagle or hawk [and] zephyr,
 the swifter wind) (ll. 66–68), yet is outstripped by “snægl,” “regnwyrn,” “fenyce,” and
 “wifel” (snail, rain-worm, tortoise, and weevil) (ll. 70–73). The riddler’s Creation is even
 heavier than “se hara stan / opþe unlytel leades clympre” (the hoary stone, or the unlittle
 lump of lead-metal) (ll. 74–75), yet far lighter than “þes lytla wyrn” (this little insect) (l.
 76); harder than “flinte” (flint) (l. 78) and softer than “halsrefeþre / seo her on winde
 wæweð on lyfte” (downy feathers which here in the wind blow aloft) (ll. 80–81).

When the poem winds to an unfinished and abrupt close, Creation claims to be
 bigger and stronger than “se micla hwæl / se þe garsecges grund bihealdeð / sweartan
 syne” (the great whale who beholds the ocean’s abyss with dark face) (ll. 92–94), weaker
 than the “hondwyrn” (handworm, insect) (l. 96), and greater and fatter than the
 “amæsted swin, / bearg bellende, þe on bocwuda” (mast-fed swine, bellowing hill, he in
 the beechwoods) (ll. 105–106). As Creation here embraces, jumps, swallows, overcomes,
 rules, flies, floats, sinks, scrutinizes, and outstrips the denizens of middle-earth, so too we
 encounter a roll call of animals, plants, and landscapes in all their horror and glory. Given
 the variety of verbs and actions attributed to Creation in this riddle, as well as the broad
 cast of comparisons it makes to different organisms, an audience would have to consider
 “creation” as an active and changing entity, and not just a landscape and its inhabitants.

Considering the variety of earthly inhabitants mentioned in this text, readers and
 auditors may be surprised to encounter a number of creatures that generally go unnoticed
 or unmentioned in poetry due to their size or their unappealing appearances. In Riddle 40,
 Creation compares itself to (and contains) snails (l. 70), worms (*regnwyrn*, l. 70), and

turtles (l. 71), as well as insects such as the “hondwurm” (l. 96), weevils (l. 72), and water striders (ll. 76–77), not to mention individual species of plants mentioned: rose (l. 24), lily (l. 27), nard (l. 29), kelp (l. 49), wormwood (l. 60), and beech (l. 107). Though many of these appear in Aldhelm’s original source, the effect of focusing on the miniscule and minute as agents of movement and change (however slow or incremental) carries through to this riddle. The microscopic attention required here to pay tribute to a water-strider, weevil, or a snail’s pace is reminiscent of the attention to detail we find in other riddles, notably the description of the egg and chick, as discussed in chapter two. Here too, the focus on the slow speed and tiny mass of these creatures works to offset the grandiose descriptions of heaven and hell, whales and zephyrs, leveling the field of description so that all are called into consideration as members and pieces of the larger Creation.

One passage that asks the audience to consider some of Creation’s “lesser” objects and beings also suggests a connection between the slow action of these agents and the larger process of growth and creation. Echoing several passages from Aldhelm’s original, the riddler supplies, “ic eom wyrsliecre þonne þes wudu fula / oððe þis waroð þe her aworpen ligeð. / Ic eorþan eom æghwær brædre, / ond widgielra þonne þes wong grena; / folm mec mæg bifon ond fingras þry / utan eaþe ealle ymbclyppan” (I am worse than this foul wood, or this seaweed that here lies cast away. I am everywhere broader than earth, and more widespread than this green plain; a hand may grasp me and three fingers easily embrace all from without) (ll. 48–53). In comparison to Aldhelm’s original, the Anglo-Saxon riddler has shifted some lines and ideas to create a new series of juxtapositions. Here, the poet elides a section of text to bring together the images of foul

wood and cast-away seaweed.⁸⁰ In the Latin original, the rot and foulness of the wood are contrasted with the sweet scent of flowers; seaweed is mentioned in the context of earth being “cheaper than scorned seaweed,” yet more beautiful than “golden knobs on a shining clasp.”⁸¹ The Anglo-Saxon poet’s choice to condense these images and to present them end-to-end suggests a different purpose and comparison. Though in context, these lines contrast the universe’s beauties with its ugliness, its expansive size with its smallness,⁸² it is possible too that the reference to “wudu fula” and seaweed, when juxtaposed with the earth and “wong grena,” communicate the movement of decaying wood back into the earth, and the inclusion of an unseen world beyond the verdant plain within Creation.

Further, a later reference to consumption brings to mind this chapter’s previous discussion of earth’s enveloping of bodies and other dead material. The riddler describes, “ic mesan mæg meahelicor / ond efnetan ealdum þyrse, / ond ic gesælig mæg symle lifgan / þeah ic ætes ne sy æfre to feore” (I can eat mightier [meals] and equal an ancient giant, / and I can live happy at the feast / though I may never be able to eat forevermore) (ll. 62–65). This paradox, contrasting the abilities of various organisms to thrive with or without appearing to eat, may also speak again to the earth’s swallowing up of ruins,

⁸⁰ Though here, the pairing with “foul wood” would indicate that the “cast-away” description of the seaweed is meant to emphasize its ugliness, it is also possible that the sea-weed has been “cast away” by the ocean. In this reading, we are reminded of the motion of objects and organisms over the face of earth, and in this case, the motion of the tides to churn up what is usually hidden from human eyes.

⁸¹ See Stork, *Through a Gloss*, 231–32, ll. 15–17, 25–26 for Latin originals, and 237, ll. 15–17, 25–26 for translations.

⁸² As I mention in chapter three, Fabienne Michelet suggests an alternate reading of imagery in riddle 40. While here, it seems that the image of Creation enclosed within three fingers would suggest smallness, this may in fact be a reference to God’s encircling and controlling of Creation with one hand: “Images of God encircling creation suggest that, to Him at least, the cosmos is an expanse that can be grasped. In *The Order of the World*, He holds all the creation ‘in his anes fæþm’, and in *Riddle 40*, creation says that: ‘folm mec mæg bifon ond fingras þry / utan eaþe ealle ymbclyppan’. The Creator holds the universe, He controls it.” See Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 58.

waste, and decayed matter, while not actually “eating.” This selection is adapted fairly faithfully from the original *enigma*, with the exception that the “cyclopum” (cyclops)⁸³ of Aldhelm’s text becomes the *pyrse* of the Anglo-Saxon text. As discussed in chapter three, the *pyrse* (nom. *pyrs*) may take on any number of identities in Anglo-Saxon literature (demon, ghost, specter, giant, monster), and in this case may have been the clearest substitute for cyclops. However, it is worth noting that the Anglo-Saxon poet did not remove all classical references in his adaptation; he keeps Aldhelm’s reference to Vulcan in a description of lightning in ll. 56–57 of Riddle 40. The choice to cast cyclops as the *pyrs*, in this case, may speak to the association of the ancient ruins of Roman Britain as “*enta geweorc*,” the work of giants, specifically in line 87 of “The Wanderer.” Though the *pyrs* is not necessarily the same as the *ent*, this idea that the earth “eats mightier [meals than] an ancient giant” may remind auditors of the decayed and crumbling ruins of the stonework of “giants” within the landscape, standing like skeletal reminders of the destructive and consuming powers of time and nature.⁸⁴

Another Anglo-Latin text speaks metaphorically of the “devouring” powers of earth, providing an interesting counterpoint to the enigmatic language of Aldhelm’s and the Anglo-Saxon poet’s riddles.⁸⁵ Alcuin’s eighth-century “Dialogue with Pippin,” an imagined dialogue between the scholar and the son of Charlemagne, poses numerous questions about the nature of the body and of the world, offering an enigmatic and

⁸³ See Stork, 232, l. 33 for original Latin, 237, l. 33 for translation.

⁸⁴ *Enta geweorc* (the work of giants) is also mentioned in *Beowulf* and “The Ruin.” Audrey L. Meaney briefly discusses mentions of *enta* in reference to Roman ruins in “Anglo-Saxon Pagan and Early Christian Attitudes to the Dead,” 233.

⁸⁵ In his volume of translations of the *Exeter Book* riddles, Craig Williamson comments on the “use of riddles (or riddic metaphors) as an important rhetorical device in medieval dialogue,” observing a mutual give-and-take in structure, rhetoric, and enigmatic language between the two medieval genres of riddles and “learned dialogues.” See Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 11.

creative answer for each. After eliciting the identities and functions of human sensory and internal organs, celestial bodies, and meteorological phenomena, Pippin inquires, “Quid est terra?” (What is earth?), to which Albinus responds, “mater crescentium, nutrix viventium, cellarium vitae, devoratrix omnium” (mother of the growing, nurse of the living, storeroom of life, devourer of all).⁸⁶ Though the sequence here begins with the concept of birth and growth in the image of earth as mother, the final image of earth devouring all things (which, we must understand, includes dead and buried material), the penultimate image of earth as the *storeroom* for life suggests the storage of material, resources, nutrients, and the “stuff of life” beneath the surface. In this way, each of these identities (mother, nurse, storeroom, devourer) is linked to the others and one follows from another, creating a circular sequence in which each progresses from the one previous.

Later in this dialogue, Alcuin includes a clear statement of this circularity from life to death to life again, when the scholar enigmatically describes fire: “Vidi mortuos generare vivum, et in ira vivi consumpti sunt mortui” (I saw the dead generate the living, and in the fury of the living were the dead consumed).⁸⁷ In this seemingly impossible statement, the scholar recounts the process of the dead (wood) producing life (fire), as a spark ignites sticks, a flame grows as it is blown upon by a human, and the fire consumes more wood. Clearly, this is misleading language, and we are to understand that “death giving way to life” is so miraculous and unlikely a process that it would only occur in a

⁸⁶ “Disputatio regalis et nobilissimi iuvenis Pippini cum Albino scholastico,” in *Altercatio Hadriani Augusti et Epicteti Philosophi*, (Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, vol. 24) ed. Lloyd William Daly and Walther Suchier (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1939), 140. Translation mine, with help from an earlier translation in Sharon Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons* (London: Longman 1852), III: 380–82. Williamson cites selections from this dialogue in *Feast of Creatures*, 12.

⁸⁷ “Disputatio,” 141. Translation mine.

fire. However, as Patrick J. Murphy argues in his analysis of the *Exeter Book* riddles, often the “double solutions” produced by riddling language (visible most obviously in riddles with possibly sexual solutions) make clear that we are not meant to understand only one answer for each enigma. Instead, these texts work to suggest more than one possible answer to encourage us to move from earthly and fleshly thoughts to higher, more spiritual understandings; concurrently, we are meant to see signs of the miraculous and divine in even the most basic and offensive of earthly things.⁸⁸ Applied to Alcuin’s dialogue, this would suggest that we may understand more than one solution to this enigmatic description; instead of concluding that “only fire allows death to give way to life,” the auditors are left thinking that death may give way to life in other contexts as well.

What is implied, in the enigmatic texts of the Anglo-Saxon riddles and this Anglo-Latin dialogue, is that the definitions of “Creation” and “Earth” are not confined simply to the physical reality of this planet. Beyond portraying Creation as a divine product of the Almighty, the riddles suggest that an Anglo-Saxon audience might have also understood Creation as a *process*: a variety and series of changes occurring in the physical world around them, and of an interconnected web of different organisms, phenomena, and agents acting in congress with each other. Further, the juxtaposition of decay and growth and the language of “devouring” in the riddles and in the dialogue suggest an understanding of a cyclical progression in life, a progression from living thing to decaying matter and back to living thing, as dead matter enters the crucible of the earth and is reformed into something new. Placed alongside the dominant Christian worldview

⁸⁸ Patrick J. Murphy, “Chapter 5: Innuendo and Oral Tradition,” in *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 175–220.

of time and space as moving in a linear progression from beginning to end, this cyclical conception of the world collides with such a notion. The spiritual and moral decay of humanity may lead in a straight path further and farther from the heavenly ideal, yet the physical existence of earthly matter (humans included) must be subject to the cyclical patterns of growth and change observable on earth. Moreover, considering the layered portrayal of death as rest, journey, and homecoming in Anglo-Saxon poetry and homilies, we see that circular and linear conceptions of time and space must coexist in this context.

Circling Back

Even in descriptions of the future-most point of the Christian, linear map of time, the circular motion of life persists. Rereading the description of Christ's return from "The Phoenix," we see that "gaestas hweorfað / in banfatu" (spirits turn back / return to [their] bone-vessels) (ll. 519–20), completing a circle that began at birth. In this process of return, "swa bið anra gehwylc / flæsce bifongen fira cynnes, / ænlic ond edgeong" (so each single one of the kin of men will be clothed with flesh, splendid and turning young again) (ll. 534–36). Though this rebirth of humankind as fleshly and ever-young is a reflection of the rebirth of the legendary phoenix itself, as it reemerges from the ashes of its own pyre, the idea of rebirth after death in a Christian text merges linear and cyclical views of time.

As the circling years bind together earth and its processes of change and movement, we see that while time must ever move in predetermined patterns, earth's inhabitants must move with it. Humans cannot escape from age, decay, and death, and find themselves moving in the common cycles to which all organisms must move,

ultimately ending back within the earth from which their biblical progenitor was formed. The poetry, homilies, and didactic texts describing the experience and meaning of death in Anglo-Saxon culture explore this circular trajectory in various ways. In many cases, home is the central point around which we wander — the point that keeps our circle just⁸⁹ — and the point to which we are pulled in death. Further, the idea of “home” becomes a nested or concentric concept, with the soul enclosed by the body and the body enclosed by the roof and walls of the hall, and later the “earth-hall” of the grave enclosed by the earth itself. Even this final destination in *greotes fæðm* — earth’s bosom — completes a circle for both body and soul, as the human returns to a new “home” in the grave, and the soul eventually returns to the heavenly *epel*, its homeland. In this way, humans are inexorably pulled back to their points of origin, and find the completion of their journeys in the places where they began.

⁸⁹ To borrow a phrase from John Donne.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

Though ecocritical studies are very much a product of our present moment in history, a moment of environmental devastation, change, and crisis, questions about the human influence upon and relation to the environment — questions of “how did it come to this?” — are almost as old as the written word. Starting with words, specifically, the etymology of “ecology,” we find that our study of the earth and its processes is a search for our own *oikos*: our place, our niche, our dwelling, our *home*. As a species, however, we seem to be alienated from that foundational idea of home. We ask, “how can we make use of the natural world? How can we control it? How can we escape from it when it threatens us?” Inherent in these questions are assumed divisions, assumed frictions between the realms of the human and natural, of the influence of “culture” upon the resources and processes of “nature.” These presumptions of separation and of a shifting relationship of dominance, in which humans, “wild” organisms, and natural landscapes alternately threaten and subdue each other, color our portrayals and readings of both human and ecological communities in literature and other cultural artifacts. In order to escape these binary ways of thinking about humanity / nature, nature / culture, and wild / civilized — in order to view the futures of humanity and of local environments and ecosystems as inextricably linked, bound to thrive or disappear together — we need updated ways of reading and understanding the environment and our place(s) within it.

My interdisciplinary approach, which brings together ecocritical literary interpretation, archaeological reports, and historical accounts of shifting landscapes,

allows us to see where the figural and the actual intersect. In my analyses of the Anglo-Saxon hall and agricultural community, the landscapes of water, wood, and waste, and locations of burial and cremation, we see where the spaces and things that might commonly be considered to be vestiges of “culture” (texts, architectural structures, fashioned objects, and constructed boundaries) are actually points where our perceived divisions between nature and culture break and dissolve. Even the preliminary divisions with which I began my study several years ago (structuring each chapter to focus on an anthropocentric space or landscape: hall and farm, environments of exile, and grave sites) gave way, as it became clear that these kinds of human-inscribed boundaries are unsustainable. Looking at these landscapes through literary descriptions, the evidence of archeological study, and historical accounts, we see that organisms and things are bound to move over and through these spaces, while the landscapes themselves are mutable and defy categorization.

For individuals, scholars, poets, and auditors living in Anglo-Saxon England, this search for home, for the place where humans survive and thrive, leads first to the partly symbolic and legendary space of the hall and to the agricultural community moving around and through this large central locus. Though this space is figured in some of the best-known Anglo-Saxon literary sources (e.g., *Beowulf*) as a gleaming center of light in a dark world of chaos and danger, the wider range of poetry and physical evidence from Anglo-Saxon settlements attests to a more complex system of exchange and movement through the hall and its environs. In agricultural communities existing around the central point of the hall, individuals depended on both cultivated and wild resources to survive, turning animals and plants into tools, food, and shelter, and turning to each other for

edification and a sharing of wisdom and history. To a degree, some of the poetry circulating through the hall (and in the manuscripts of the time) reveals a separation between the “natural world” and the “world of humans,” featuring organisms and things that struggle against human captors and operators. Yet these “speaking things” — the plough, the onion, the swan alike — also remind us that all created things, including humans, are subject to natural cycles and pressures, leveling a hierarchy that would place human agency over and above the agency of animals, plants, and things. More than this, the poetry of life in the hall demonstrates that social ecologies developed around this central locus; as legendary poetry and riddles move through communities and generations, individuals learn of the dangers of immoderate behavior, jealousy and feud, passing on knowledge and necessary advice for surviving within a community.

While this central *oikos* of the hall and attendant community are foundational to the human conception of “home,” as we see, the hall, its inhabitants, and environs do not exist in stasis. The continuous movement of things, organisms, and wisdom through the hall is part of a vast system of constant movement over the face of the earth. Using the “hall-image” as a center and protector for all created things on earth, Anglo-Saxon Creational poetry attempts to identify and lock things in their places, encircling the world with the Creator’s might and intention. At the same time, however, the gnomic and enigmatic poetry of the Anglo-Saxons betrays a fascination with the idea that things inevitably move out of place, coming into contact with new communities or assemblages. Moving across a broad horizontal plane of Creation, things — a hawk, an antler, a tree, a reed — create new places for themselves and new identities within those places. This

movement through the space of Creation is inextricably linked to the movement of time; in due course, all things move with the seasons and cycles of earth.

Like the hawk, the antler, the tree, and the reed, humans find themselves moving in new trajectories and settling in new spaces. Unlike these things, however, humanity exists in a state of perpetual spiritual exile in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Cast out from our “true” heavenly home, we are condemned to inhabit the earth, a space of mixed punishment and provision. Within a wider world of spiritual exile, “The Wanderer” and “The Wife’s Lament” present figures doubly expelled, for they have lost their places in human society as well. Forced into places perhaps environmentally unsuitable for humans, the *eardstapa* and the *wif* observe environmental cycles continuing around them, yet they are unable to participate, find joy, or reproduce in these environments. As images of wintery waters and summery woods surround them, these figures are in constant motion yet also paralyzed by memory and isolation: they have fallen out of time and place and are unable to find their ways to their original homes or to new places. In contrast, “The Seafarer” shows an exile who finds purpose in his solitude; though at times, his environment mimics the wintery horizons of “The Wanderer,” the seasons continue to turn in his vision, and he looks forward to his movement across the sea (and through his life), pursuing new vistas.

One of the few actual, mappable locations described within Anglo-Saxon poetry serves as new *oikos* for the voluntarily-exiled Guthlac. Breaking open the idea of the “wasteland,” a space associated with the desert in scriptural poetry, communicating a lack of inhabitants, uses, or value, the *fen-westen* of East Anglia seems to be exactly the opposite. This environment was changeable in the Anglo-Saxon period, certainly, but

offered rich opportunities for isolation for religious orders as well as a thriving and productive environment, thanks to the seasonal flooding of the land. The fen, perched between a solid and a maritime environment, becomes a liminal space ideal for habitation by creatures, organisms, and things cast out of human society or for those that defy categorization — including Guthlac, the warrior-turned-saint. Beyond this, the changeable nature of the fen comes to embody the transient and uncertain courses of human lives, as we continue to navigate through the world.

As an inescapable result of the continual turn of seasons and movement through space and time on earth, our navigations must come to an end. Exploring the portrayals of death and decay in Anglo-Saxon poetry, however, it is perhaps surprising (though fitting) that death is so often figured as a return home. In the nested “homes” of body and grave, the body as “soul-house” is progressively disarticulated and consumed by worms and by earth, while the grave becomes at once homely and gruesome. As soul and body separate, both move toward their ultimate homes: the body in the ground, the soul in its heavenly *epel*. This (temporarily) bipartite destiny for body and soul, in which each circles back to “home,” draws our attention to enigmatic and dialogic descriptions of Creation itself. In these riddles and dialogues, “creation” becomes both thing and process, suggesting a cyclical comprehension of the decay of natural materials. In these dialogues between soul and body, student and scholar, everything created eventually returns to earth to become something new.

The grave, like the liminal spaces described in chapters three and five in which people and things shift and change, provides a space where the human body changes, becoming first a feast for worms and then reverting into the humus from which Adam

was shaped. In death, Anglo-Saxons found both a reunion of body and earth (in the process of decay) and reunion of body and soul (at the Final Judgment). Here and throughout this study, processes and places of change unite the seemingly separate realms of humankind and nature. Though we begin with a hierarchy that places God above humanity, humanity above the damned in Hell, and nature rotating around this axis, we see that humankind and nature merge in the nexus-point of renewal after death.

In the final structure for this study — a (somewhat) circular trajectory that moves from hall to poetic ordering of the world, then to landscapes of water, wood, fen, and finally back to the “homely” grave — we end where we began. The circle, symbolic of the journeys of humans, animals, and things outward from home, through the world, and back to the almost gravitational pull of that center, also evokes earthly cycles of birth, growth, and decay, in which the ultimate end (and beginning) is renewal of life, albeit perhaps in a different form. Moreover, this circular journey through Anglo-Saxon landscapes reflects popular trends in structuring environmental analyses of medieval literature, as well as an element that is missing from these studies. Current environmental explorations of (mostly late) medieval and early modern literatures tend to emphasize human interactions with and incursions into natural landscapes at specific locations and points of time, acknowledging the permeability of boundaries between human and animal, body and earth, architecture and spiritual space, as well as boundaries between landscapes of woodland, wasteland, water, field, and garden.¹ These avenues of

¹ See, for example, Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser, eds., *Engaging with Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, eds., *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006); Wendy Davies, Guy Halsall, and Andrew Reynolds, eds., *People and Space in the Middle Ages, 300–1300* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

approach, so useful in interpreting late medieval texts and culture, must be brought fully into Anglo-Saxon studies. In analyses of Anglo-Saxon texts and culture, it is not enough to view the hall, the ocean, or the wasteland as static, symbolic, and unreal landscapes; instead, we must examine what these spaces tell us about physical, emotional, and social survival in Anglo-Saxon culture, and how they are integrated into the individual's larger journey through the life of this world. These texts demonstrate that it is also not enough for us to observe and shatter binary and hierarchical ways of thinking about nature and culture, humanity and earth; in analyses of place and space in any literature, we must bear in mind that *time* and *processes of change* are critical to our perceptions of place, and that the life cycle of the human is embedded within the larger cycles of seasons and years on Earth. The circular structure of this study moves from the permeable human home, a place where social ecologies develop to ensure human survival, through landscapes in flux and in processes of seasonal change, to the ultimate point of the human journey, where decay and death returns him or her to the ultimate point of origin. In each part of this exploration, we see the ways in which the individual and his or her "fit" within an environment is determined as much by space as by time, and how he or she is able to navigate seasonal (and sometimes unpredictable) change. In our current moment in history — one in which we seem to be running out of time to understand how our environment has changed (and how to survive in this new climate) — we must remember to read in order to understand the environment and our place within it, but also to understand our pivotal place in time.

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