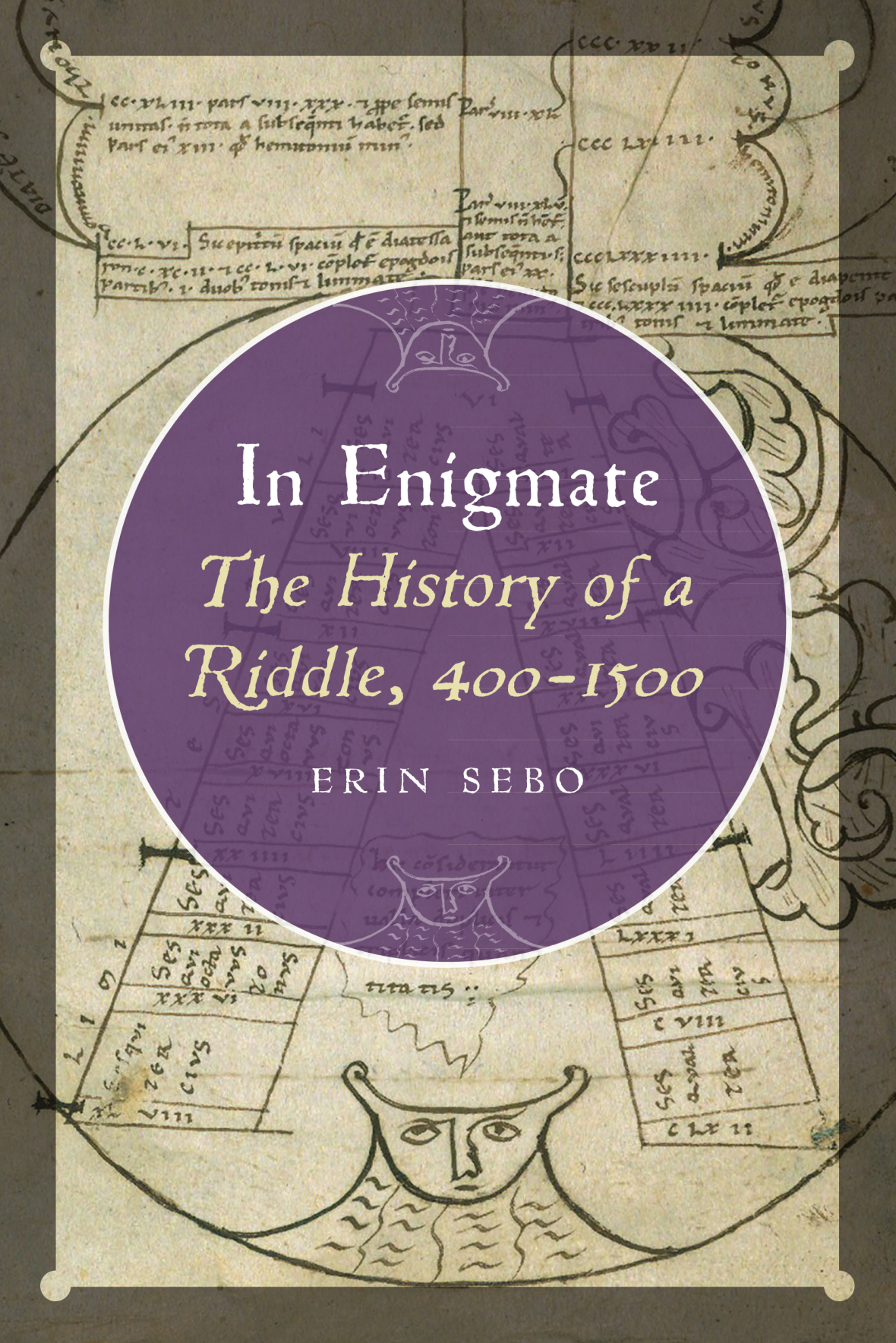


In Enigmate

The History of a Riddle, 400–1500

ERIN SEBO

In Enigmate

Dublin Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature

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The History of a Riddle, 400–1500

ERIN MADELEINE SEBO



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Preface

> Your soul covered the earth,
> and you filled it with parables and riddles.
>
> Sirach 47:15 (RSV)

I first read Old English riddles as a child. I picked up Michael Alexander's *The earliest English poems* because the title was intriguing; I had no idea of what the history of English poetry might be, or what its earliest poems might be like. Of all the strange and wonderful poems in the volume, it was the riddles from the Exeter Book that caught my attention – or more accurately, it was the idea that riddles were among the earliest English poems. When I read them, I was disappointed. I had wanted to solve them – of course – which I was completely unable to do. More than that, they did not seem like riddles to me. They were not phrased as questions and, mostly, they did not turn on a logical or linguistic trick. Increasingly perplexed, I went looking for other riddles in other volumes and came across this: 'Wha[n] antecryst is come in to this worlde what thynge shall be hardest to hym to knowe?' A perplexing question but, as it turned out, the answer was even more perplexing: 'A hande barowe for of that he shall not knowe whiche ende shall goo before.'[1] I did not understand the answer and more interestingly, I was disappointed by it. My unarticulated but strongly-felt definition of a riddle at the time dictated that a riddle should be a puzzle whose clues could *only* be satisfied by one answer so that a diligent guesser could solve it. The answer to this riddle, a 'hande barowe', though it conforms to the implicit logic of riddles, seemed random. Certainly, the Antichrist might be perplexed by a hand barrow, but why should he find it *most* perplexing of all? Why should he not be more perplexed by a plate, beaker, bowl or jar? After all, none of these has a front and back. Why should he not be more perplexed by a sieve? A sieve is a container which does not contain what is put in it. Indeed, why should the Antichrist be *most* perplexed by an object at all? Why not be more perplexed by a handshake or any other human custom without obvious function?

It was not until my first academic encounter with riddling that I started to guess the answer, or at least, to understood that I had asked the wrong questions.

1 Anon., *The demau*[n]*des ioyous* [Enprynted at London: in Flete strete at the sygne of the sonne by me wynkyn de worde, In the yere of our lorde a M.CCCCC. and xi.] [1511], from Electronic reproduction (Ann Arbor, 1999), Early English Books Online, 34:10.2.

This came during my Masters thesis which was initially conceived as a study of the survival strategies of female characters in the Child Ballads but rapidly became concerned with the single-most successful of these – riddling. I came to see that in the popular culture that produced the ballads, riddles performed a range of psychological and cultural functions. My myopic concern with the riddle's answer had, in the kind of irony I now regard as an occupational hazard for the riddle scholar, prevented me from 'solving' the riddle; certainly it had prevented me from understanding it. I came to realize that the answer is important, not in itself, but because it valorizes a particular kind of thinking and, even more significantly, because of what it suggests about the nature of the world. The point of the riddle is that, despite the might and power of the Antichrist, in fact *because* of it, he is ignorant of the simplest pieces of common knowledge concerning everyday life. Worse, when confronted with the alien hand barrow, the Antichrist, like me, asks the wrong question; it does not matter which way a hand barrow faces.

So, this subversive riddle, in mocking the horrors of the Apocalypse and the powers of the Antichrist, is cathartic. It reminds its audience that the mighty are fallible, that the humble may know things of which the powerful are ignorant and, most importantly, that things are not always as they seem. This riddle, like all riddles, takes the audience through a process. We must first consider the question and then, when the riddle is solved, understand the answer. During this process, there is a constant negotiation between the audience and the riddle as the audience measures the riddle against its experience of the world. Teaching riddle literature I have found that students who would not dream of criticizing the structure, conceit, thought or imagery of a poem will challenge an answer or dismiss entirely a riddle that does not satisfy riddle logic and their experience of the nature of things – just as I did when I was disappointed with the Exeter Book riddles as a child. When a riddle does satisfy these criteria, the audience experience a catharsis born of being shown the world in a new light which they nevertheless recognize as true; a strange mixture of unfamiliarity and recognition.

Intrigued by this glimmer of understanding, my Masters thesis became a study of the mechanics and narrative function of riddles and riddling in the Child Ballads. I was especially intrigued by the ballad singers' constant adaptation of traditional riddles to suit the changing nature of the encounters described in their narratives. Naturally, I became increasingly curious about the history and origins of the riddles (if oral traditions may be said to have origins). Through Atkinson's *The English traditional ballad* I became aware of the connection with the Exeter Book riddles and from there with Aldhelm and finally Symphosius. And so, I came back to my childhood perplexity over how the enigmatic descriptions in the Exeter Book acted as 'riddles'; all the more so now I was aware that they were part of a wider tradition of riddles of this type. Although the Exeter Book riddles have elements in common with the 'Antichrist riddle', they belong to a riddle type far more complex and far more culturally alien to the modern world. This book traces the history of a single riddle of this kind, the 'creation riddle'.

A note on the texts

The earliest text of Symphosius' *Aenigmata Symphosii Scolastici* appears in the *Codex Salmasianus*, a North African miscellany of the seventh century (though it was probably complied in the early sixith century)[1] which includes fragments from various famous ancient authors, lesser late antique Latin poetry, and collections of epigrams. Bergamin has identified thirty-two manuscripts of the *Aenigmata* spanning a period from the seventh to the foureenth century, more or less divided into two recensions, B and D. Riese suggests that both of the two recensions date back to the sixith century and that the D tradition derives from an authorial revision, though, increasingly, the latter hypothesis is thought to be unlikely. Rather, scholars have adopted Baehrens' 1882 theory that two scholars or grammarians emended a parent manuscript of *Codex Salmasianus*, each making different 'corrections' and so producing the two recensions. Ohl sums up current critical estimation of the two recensions when he comments:

> the readings of B … are often less felicitous than those of D, in a few instances they are quite unmetrical; they seem, too, to have suffered greater corruption in transmission. On the other hand, while none of the versions of D are unmetrical, many are at the best obvious attempts to better something not quite fully understood in B.[2]

In view of this, Bergamin has recently produced an edition of the *Aenigmata* based 'sulla collazione completa di tutti i codici noti'[3] ('on the complete collation of all the known codices'). I have largely adopted Bergamin's thorough and meticulous 2005 edition of the text. In line with recent philological thinking, I follow her preference for a more conservative approach than that of Shackleton Bailey in his 1982 edition. But in a few difficult cases I have accepted Shackleton Bailey's conjecture or simply marked the text as corrupt. Bergamin's textual conservatism epitomizes the ideology of a small group of Italian Symphosius scholars, including Spallone, Murru, Vitale, and particularly Guarducci,[4] who have

1 R. Ohl, *The Enigmas of Symphosius* (Philadelphia, 1928), p. 15. **2** Ibid., p. 26. **3** M. Bergamin *Aenigmata Symposii: la fondazione dell'enigmistica come genere poetico* (Firenze, 2005), lxxxviii. **4** See M. Spallone, 'Tradizioni insulari e letteratura scolastica: ll ms angelicanus 1515 e gli aenigmata di simposio', *Studi Classici e Orientali,* 25 (1985), 185–228; F. Murru, 'Aenigmata symphosii ou Aenigmata Symposii?', *Eos*, 67 (1980), 155–8; M. Vitale, 'gli enigma

produced some of the most insightful and influential work on Symphosius in recent times. Their approach does not deny the losses, corruptions and interpolations inevitable in the process of textual transmission; on the contrary, much of their work is devoted to the rigorous assessment of manuscript evidence. But they recognize that with only the evidence of the text to go on, and without other contemporary extant riddle collections for comparison, extensive scholarly textual emendation runs a high risk of writing preconceptions into the text.

For Aldhelm's *Enigmata* I have used Ehwald's masterful edition throughout. I have used Muir's edition of the Exeter Book. All pre-twentieth-century versions of the ballad known as *Riddles wisely expounded*, including the mid-fifteenth-century lyric *Inter Diabolus et Virgo* (Rawlinson MS D.328, fol. 174 b), are drawn from Child's monumental five-volume masterpiece *English and Scottish ballads* published between 1882 and 1898. For later versions of the ballad I have relied on Bronson's equally authoritative 1959 *The traditional tunes of the Child ballads*. For Symphosius' text I have provided a translation and commentary. For the other texts, which are less problematic, I have provided full texts in the order they are discussed. For all Biblical quotations I have uses the version of the Bible which was most likely to be known to each poet. For Symphosius, Aldhelm and the Exeter Book poet(s) I have used Jerome's Vulgate[5] with English translations taken from the Douay-Rheims Bible. I have accepted the view that the Vulgate became standard relatively quickly, as Pope Damasus hoped when he commissioned it in 382 and although, as Rebenich notes, figures such as Augustine used both the Vulgate and the Old Latin texts, the Vulgate was popular and the version most likely to be known to Symphosius.[6] I have also accepted the view that it is the Bible most likely to be known to the Anglo-Saxons.[7] In the case of the anonymous composers of the Exeter Book, this can only be a probability. However, in the case of Aldhelm, it is clearer. Although he occasionally uses the Old Latin Bible, he seems to have favoured the Vulgate, with which he was clearly very conversant.[8] For the Child ballads, I have used the King James Version. For convenience and clarity, I have used Loeb editions of Greek and Latin texts. I have used standard English titles for all works in Greek; for non-English texts written in languages that use the Latin alphabet, I have retained the titles of the original language. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

di simposio e le citazioni dei grammatici', *Studi e ricerche dell'istituto di civiltà classica cristiana e medievale. facoltà di magistero. Genova,* 7 (1986), 201–17; M. Guarducci, 'La chiciola Cristiana', *Rivista di filologia e di istruzione Classica*, 119 (1991), 447–56. **5** R. Marsden, *The text of the Old Testament in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 65. **6** G. Bowersock, P. Brown & O. Grabar (eds), *Late antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 341; S. Rebenich, *Jerome* (London, 2002), p. 25. **7** M. Lapidge (ed.), *The Blackwell encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2001), p. 64. **8** R. Marsden *The text of the Old Testament*, p. 65.

Introduction

pueri in scholis hoc sciunt
… the boys in school know that.
Alcuin, *disputatio Pippini* (Patr. Lat. 101, 978)

This is the history of a single riddle, the riddle of everything, sometimes called the 'creation riddle'. The riddle turns on the idea that, because creation includes *everything*, *every* statement made about it is true and, more importantly, every contradiction is true of it. The riddle was devised by Aldhelm, a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon cleric, but the idea was inspired by the late antique riddle text, *Aenigmata Symphosii*. Like all riddles, this riddle was transmitted, translated and transformed over time, but in the case of this riddle, unusually, it survives in a series of texts spanning more than a thousand years. From its origin in the largely ignored *Aenigmata Symphosii*, the riddle became the best-known riddle in early England (if the sheer number of both popular and elite versions in which it survives is anything to judge by). It survived the decline of riddles as a learned literary form after the Norman conquest, and re-emerged in medieval lyrics and early modern ballads. This study focuses on premodern material – versions of this riddle that date to before 1500 – but in fact, once the riddle had been transformed into a form that was adapted to popular ballads, it was able to travel further and into more unexpected places, some of which are even traced here. Vestiges of it may be found in any number of modern texts, including Tom Waits' 2006 album *Orphans: brawlers, bawlers & bastards*.

Despite the breadth of its distribution and the dramatic changes it undergoes, the line of influence between the creation riddle texts is surprisingly clear. Partly, this is due to the fact that they belong to 'a sub-genre' of riddling, those riddles which were inspired by, and take their form from Symphosius' riddles. More importantly, the fundamental conception as well as the images and metaphors remain remarkably consistent over time. This study traces a progression through four main 'texts' which, it argues, mark significant stages in the development of the creation riddle, and in fact, 'Symphosian riddling'. The first text, Symphosius' *Aenigmata* is the foundation text of the genre. Here, the collection itself describes creation through one hundred riddles, each expressing through its own facet the diversity of creation. The next, *De Creatura*, transforms this into a single ambitious eighty-three-line work. It was composed by Aldhelm, Symphosius' closest imitator who, in doing this, effectively 'invents' the creation riddle. The line of

development continues through three vernacular riddles, Riddles 40, 66, and 93, from the Exeter Book, which variously rework the dualistic imagery of *De Creatura*. Most significantly, the last of these, Riddle 93 distils this imagery into short, discrete riddle 'clues' that pass into oral tradition. Finally, the influence of Symphosius' riddles can be discerned in the adaptations of an early modern English ballad known as *Riddles wisely expounded* (Child 1). In this last stage, the descriptive 'clues' of the Exeter Book creation riddles are separated into a series of single line questions in a riddle contest between the devil and a young girl. Although each question now has its own answer, none of which is 'creation'. The conception is preserved in the nature of the riddle contest itself. What is at stake in the contest between the devil and the girl is the nature of creation – and the fate of her soul. These single-line questions reappear in ballads concerned not with creation and the nature of things, but rather with love and matrimony but common to each of these riddle 'collections', either collectively or singly, is that it deals with, and interprets, the nature of things.

Yet, perhaps more than its popularity or longevity, the creation riddle is intriguing because it reveals cosmological and cosmographical conceptions. In each retelling – including those from roughly the same period – the understanding of the nature of creation is reimagined. More significantly, because it is a riddle rather than a scientific or theological text, these riddles reveal what Bakhtin calls 'the official conceptions'[1] of cosmology; precisely those conceptions that are usually not preserved. Often these are the views of demographics who either cannot write or do not have access to the materials and means of writing in the pre-modern world, as in the case of the early modern ballads which represent an entirely popular tradition – quite possibly a women's tradition – that preserved these cosmographic visions for centuries before they were finally collected and written down by anthropologists. In this case, the fact they were written down only so much later is an indication of the value – or lack of value – placed on them by their society. It was only with the rise of Romanticism and the interest in nature, emotion and 'folk culture' that they were collected at all. For example, the riddle's first known iteration in *Aenigmata Symphosii* expresses a cosmology that is fast going out of favour. Symphosius, a Roman pagan during the rise of Christianity in the Empire, imagines the world in a way that is quite contrary to the new orthodoxy. In fact, even the version composed by Aldhelm, an important and respected abbot and later bishop, often displays a tension between the author's theological understandings (as attested in his 'scholarly' works) and what he seems to have actually imagined.

We see a more complex iteration of a similar discrepancy in the vernacular Old English versions of the riddle in which the vision, I suggest, is quite different from that found in other Old English poetry. The starkest difference, not surprisingly, is with Old English Biblical poetry. However, there are also marked differences from the wider Old English poetic corpus. As Neville and

1 M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN, 1984), pp 394–5.

Michelet both argue in various ways 'literary enclosure of the natural world prevails throughout Old English wisdom literature' and that 'once contained in writing, transformed into letters and words, the natural world can be counted and limited'.[2] Michelet suggests that this literary project is reflected in the imagery itself:

> A close analysis of these tales of origins recalls contemporary spatial notions… For instance, although God is omnipotent and his power is spatial, these texts present space as a finite extension. Cosmographic imagery reflects this of enclosure: it represents heaven as a roof or the Lord's spatial control as an embrace.[3]

For her, this finds a corollary in a number of aspects of Anglo-Saxon life and culture. For example, she notes:

> The notion that space has to be settled and populated is pervasive in the Old English corpus, and it has wide-reaching consequences for the mental map the Anglo-Saxons elaborated. For a given area has to be occupied. Just as the emphasis placed on boundaries reflects the idea that space is bounded extension, the stress put on the population of land is again congruent with general medieval notions of space.[4]

Although both Michelet and Neville regard the *Exeter Riddles* as sharing this vision, I suggest that the conception is more complex and that, at times, is marked by its refusal to enclose the world. Like the versions found in the early modern ballads, the cosmographic representations found in the Exeter Book riddles are interesting because they show signs that they may have been told and retold, not merely read and transcribed. For, although they are literary in many respects and were certainly recorded by an educated elite, they seem to have circulated in popular culture and so offer a rare – if partial – glimpse of how creation was imagined outside the scholarly class in Anglo-Saxon society. Together the versions of this riddle represent an unusual – unique, perhaps – opportunity to study the imaginary geography of pre-modern society as it changed over time.

The fact that in these four 'texts' what we are actually dealing with, in some sense, is a single text, returns us to the issue of genre. Because these are riddles they behave differently to poems and, although, naturally, it is important to understand each in its cultural and historical context, it is also important to understand them in the context of each other. Although my methodology is primarily literary, it differs from those literary scholars who have approached riddle texts as if they were static literary artefacts, as well as from folklorists who offer generalist surveys of diverse riddle traditions, and from anthropologists (like Dundes or Maranda) whose focus has been on the social function of riddles. Furthermore,

2 J. Neville, *Representations of the natural world in Old English poetry* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 195.
3 F. Michelet, *Creation, migration and conquest* (Oxford, 2006), p. 73. **4** Ibid., p. 60.

this 'case study' of a particular riddle, demonstrates the capacity of literary and cultural forms to persist, transform and reinvent in ways that reflect and respond to changing cultural imperatives. Whatever their status in the modern world, in antiquity and throughout much of history, riddling has been a serious poetic genre which, by virtue of its deployment of paradox at the furthest edges of linguistic signification, is uniquely suited to expressing and meditating upon the otherwise unsayable and ineffable aspects of the human condition. Indeed, for ancient writers, the process of unravelling and penetrating to the meaning of a riddle may, under certain circumstances, enact the religious experience of passing from ignorance into understanding. Finally, and intriguingly, it is worth noting that riddles are among the earliest 'poems' composed in England as well as among the earliest composed in English, and so the disposition of riddles to see the miraculous in the mundane and to reconceive the world in surprising new ways were dominant literary ideas in currency during the beginnings of English poetry and are, in some sense then, at the heart of English poetry.

Chapter one is an introduction to riddles, their formal qualities, and how they function as well as a survey of what we know about the culture of riddling in the ancient world. This is the context for Symphosius' riddle collection and highlights both what is original about the collection and something of the cultural attitudes that influenced it. Chapter two is an interpretative discussion of Symphosius' *Aenigmata* itself that explores the operation and vision of this foundation text. I then trace the progression through three main 'texts' that mark the most significant developments of Symphosian riddling. *De Creatura*, is the final riddle of the *Enigmata Aldhelmi*, a work by Symphosius' closest imitator, Aldhelm. Despite his adoption of Symphosius' form for individual riddles, Aldhelm does not produce an inter-related riddle collection. Instead, as he explains, he uses his riddles for the double purpose of demonstrating the principles of Latin metrics and the dissemination of Christianity. But in the epic eighty-three line *De Creatura* with its grand sweep of sequential imagery consisting of a series of implied questions on Creation, Aldhelm engages in a totalizing exploration of the created world. He attempts, and achieves, in a single riddle what Symphosius accomplished over his riddle century. In so doing Aldhelm 'invents' the creation riddle as a single riddle that attempts to encompass the diversity, majesty and, indeed, the enormity of Creation. It is a composition whose device is an expression of faith that every extreme and consequently, every contradiction, is reconciled in the riddle's answer ('creation'), since all contraries are contained within the created world. *De Creatura's* ending adopts a more usual, agonistic riddle form in that it directly challenges the reader to name the subject of the description. It is this riddle, rather than the other Latin collections of Tatwine, Eusebius or Alcuin, which represents the development of Symphosius' conception, and is therefore the focus of chapter three.

De Creatura was so popular and widely influential that there are no less than three 'creation riddles' in the Exeter Book; Riddles 40, 66, and 93. These three texts are the focus of chapter four. Between them they chart the stages by which

the sweeping imagery of *De Creatura* is distilled into a litany of short, discrete 'clues', still cosmographical in nature, but in increasingly condensed works. Riddle 93, the shortest and simplest in structure is the final stage of the sequence. The Exeter Book 'variations' on Aldhelm's *De Creatura* transform it from scholarly, ecclesiastical Latin into something which is more easily remembered and could be told and retold, so that Aldhelm's complex images are adapted into oral formulaic elements. These elements are then adopted into early modern popular ballads; the concern of chapter five. This chapter examines the adaptations, over six versions, of an English ballad known as *Riddles wisely expounded* (Child 1) beginning with the earliest manuscript, which dates from the fifteenth century, and tracing it through the eighteenth century onwards, the most recent dating to the mid-twentieth century. Over the evolution of this text, the riddles return to narrative and pass from literary into oral tradition. The five chapters, then, describe an arc, beginning with Symphosius' adaptation of traditional riddles[5] and ending, via their vernacularization in the Exeter Book, with their absorption back into popular tradition. The texts considered here offer a unique opportunity: to study a series of riddles, spread over a period of more than a thousand years, in which the line of influence is unusually clear. Because these are versions of the same basic idea, it is possible to trace changing imaginings of the world, not only from the point of view of the elite. As these are versions of a riddle, a profoundly interactive, transmitted genre, we also catch glimpses of how the world was conceptualized by the ordinary people who told and retold this riddle. Each text, understood in its context, offers a view of the created world; an interpretation of its nature and of humanity's place within it.

5 C. & D. Ingemark, 'Teaching ancient folklore', *The Classical Journal*, 102 (2007), 279–89, at p. 285. The article argues that 'riddles were an important part of the oral traditions of antiquity' and suggests that Symphosius' collection draws on this oral tradition.

CHAPTER 1

Riddling in the ancient world

> ἐπεὶ δὲ τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν,' ἔφη, 'τὸ ζητεῖν ἀρχή. τοῦ δὲ ζητεῖν τὸ θαυμάζειν καὶ ἀποπεῖν, εἰκότως τὰ πολλὰ τῶν περὶ τὸν θεὸν ἔοικεν αἰνίγμασι κατακεκρύφθαι.[1]
>
> 'Since', he went on to say, 'inquiry is the beginning of philosophy, and wonder and uncertainty the beginning of inquiry, it seems only natural that the greater part of what concerns the god should be concealed in riddles.'
>
> Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi* 385.2

In the modern world, riddles have largely been consigned to school playgrounds and Christmas bon-bons. But in the ancient world they were a significant, complex and, of course, enigmatic, genre. On the one hand, it was regarded as the form of oracles and prophecies; a form through which divine mysteries might be understood and explored. On the other, when used comically, it is a form which could be turned to biting social commentary – as ancient authors from Aristophanes to Athenaeus demonstrate. Consequently, it is not form which, like an elegy or an ode, can be defined by its content or mood. However, neither is it one which can be defined by its form, like the sonnet, villanelle, rondeau, or even the ballad. Not surprisingly given the sheer diversity of riddle literature, for many years the most important discussion in riddle scholarship was concerned with developing a definition for the genre. This discussion, conducted mostly by anthropologists and folklorists such as Taylor, Dundes, and Georges, was deeply influenced by mid-twentieth-century Structuralism. They attempted to devise a general definition of the riddle as a genre of folklore that could be applied across cultures – sometimes to traditions as disparate as the Finnish and the West African[2] – and promoted a scholarly discourse concerned with finding common ground between the numberless texts which at one time or another had been described as 'riddles'. Their approach emphasized commonalities, recurrent motifs and structural parallels, and their work highlighted the interconnections between riddles and various other kinds of literature, in particular, proverbs and wisdom literature. Awareness of these interconnections has been illuminating.

1 *Plutarch's Moralia*, trans. F. Babbitt (London, 1936), p. 203. **2** The most notable of these attempts were made by early scholars such as Archer Taylor and later by Georges and Dundes in their influential critique of Taylor's theories. See A. Dundes & R. Georges, 'Toward a structural definition of the riddle', *Journal of American Folklore*, 76 (1963), 111–18.

The observation, for example, that riddles are central to marriage rituals in many cultures (especially in Greece, Turkey and Eastern Europe) has allowed us to reconsider their significance in texts like *The Merchant of Venice* or the *libretto* for Puccini's *Turandot*. Moreover, it is this generation of folklorists who is responsible for demonstrating that modern European culture is unusual in the status it currently attributes to the riddle genre. However, this approach also led to discounting texts considered riddles by the societies that produced them because it did not conform to a definition devised anachronistically by scholars. It seems more productive, then, to assume the cultural specificity of riddles. What is significant and culturally illuminating is why they are regarded as riddles in any particular time and place.

Moreover, despite the importance of this early anthropological work, it has been problematic in other ways too. First, a corollary of the search for parallels has been a tendency to blur the distinctions between the function of different kinds of riddles in different cultures. Instead, riddles were categorized and understood either in terms of recurrent motifs or semantic structure. This approach is particularly unhelpful in understanding those riddle texts that are made up of a heterogeneous collection of riddles, such as that preserved in Athenaeus. Moreover, it undermines the inherent strength of an anthropological approach to genre that typically focuses on social and cultural function. This is a particularly unfortunate irony since this approach would be especially useful in understanding what is, after all, an intrinsically interactive genre. Second, in such anthropological studies, oral riddles were understood as entirely distinct from written riddles. Blauner, for example, makes this his main methodological focus by opening his study of the literary riddle (which, in nine pages, covers riddling cultures from China to England from the eleventh century BCE to the eighteenth century CE) with the assertion that '[a]lthough literary material and folk-material are often inextricably entwined, it is best for the folklorist to separate them as much as possible'.[3] In fact, as Blauner's comment makes clear, it is extremely difficult to disentangle the two and it is not clear what the point of the distinction might be. If a literary riddle is retold in a popular context, then it can only be because it seemed interesting or appropriate; which, in itself, should be illuminating. However, generally when material is appropriated, it is adapted, which is also illuminating. In fact, the oral/literate divide has been maintained largely because it indicates the circumstances under which each riddle was 'collected' and so came to the attention of scholars. It has dictated *which* scholars have studied a particular riddle; oral riddles are studied by anthropologists, literary riddles by literary scholars. Consequently, the texts at the heart of the present study, the Latin and vernacular riddles of Anglo-Saxon England, have largely been ignored by anthropologists, despite their representing one of the richest sources for riddles in the English tradition. Instead, Anglo-Saxon riddles have been studied by literary scholars, whose approach is opposite to this and who encounter

3 D.G. Blauner, 'The early literary riddle', *Folklore,* 78 (1967), 49–58, at p. 49.

opposite problems. Where anthropologists tend to view riddles ahistorically and solely in terms of riddle theory, literary scholars tend to treat riddles as an unusual species of poetry. This has produced close, careful and specific literary readings, sometimes without considering the cultural function of the riddle. More significantly from the point of view of this book, the literary approach has often ignored the history of a specific riddle. The reluctance to cross the oral/written divide has meant that riddles are rarely studied as evolving texts when, in fact, one of the most interesting features of riddles is that they are particularly prone to appearing in all sorts of places, across media, traditions, cultures and historical periods. In many – maybe even, most – instances a riddle will have been recorded orally as well as appearing in written texts. As Gimbutas writes:

> when oral tradition offered a wellspring for written texts, in epochs such a Homer's Greece, the early Middle Ages, and the nineteenth century, the literary riddle was apt to be a recorded version of a folk riddle or a literary imitation of the folk genre.[4]

Yet even this underestimates the lively, productive cross-pollination that riddles undergo as they pass through various cultural forms. Some sense of just how pervasive a riddle can be is demonstrated in the work of scholars like Hill and Borthwick who each trace the history of a single riddle. (The latter cites examples of his chosen riddle in sources from the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* to an inscription on an eighteenth-century Italian Octave Spinet.) Moreover, as the work of scholars like O'Brien O'Keeffe, Scattergood and Klein[5] demonstrate, by comparing different 'versions' of a riddle produced by different cultures we gain a more precise insight into their cultural values. All texts reflect cultural values but in the case of texts that have been altered and adapted, there is a far more active decision to include or exclude material. These choices may suggest a range of things. Sometimes, a particular element will be excluded when it no longer makes sense to the audience. Sometimes, it is simply not important enough to retain. On the other hand, those things that are added, since it takes a certain effort to add, tend to be important and are often central to the society's understanding.

This brings us to one of the central concerns of this study – and to the question I dismissed in the opening paragraph, what is a riddle? I have already argued that it is not possible to develop a cross-cultural definition of what it *is,* but it is, perhaps, possible to say what it is *not*: it is not merely a poem because it has an

4 Gimbutas, *The riddle in the poem* (Lanham, MD, 2004), p. 3. **5** K. O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'The text of Aldhelm's Enigma no. c Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson C. 697 and Exeter Riddle 40', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 14 (1985), 61–74; T. Klein, 'The Old English translation of Aldhelm's riddle *Lorica*', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 48 (1997), 345–9, and J. Scattergood, 'Eating the book: Riddle 47 and memory' in H. Conrad O'Briain, A.M. D'Arcy & J. Scattergood (eds), *Text and gloss: studies in Insular language and literature* (Dublin, 1999), pp 119–27.

interactive function which engages the audience in a way that is more specific and explicit than poetry in general. More importantly from the point of view of this study, at what point has a riddle text been altered and adapted so greatly that it is no longer the same riddle? If a riddle has the same imagery, is it the same riddle? If it has the same answer, it is the same riddle?

Medieval riddlers did not think so; the compilers of the Exeter Book, for example, often included more than one riddle with the same answer. The interest for them, at least, seems to be in trick or conceit at the heart of the riddle, in *how* the riddle confuses or deceives the audience. This seems to be what defines a riddle, what makes it itself. Gimbutas describes this as the 'kernel metaphor'[6] but such a term excludes all those riddles that turn on puns, word play and other kinds of misdirection. So instead I refer to the trick, paradox, metaphor, or ambiguity that makes the riddle as its 'device'.[7] Since it is what makes the riddle function, I argue that the device is what defines the riddle. So, while a riddle may be found in many versions in many texts, as long as the device does not change, I argue that it is the same riddle. Riddle devices are durable and often remain relatively unchanged over long periods of time and through different media. The device may be as profound as a paradox or as superficial as a pun and it determines a riddle's focus and its implicit worldview. Riddle devices, like narrative types, are reused in different situations. During this process they may be embellished in any number of ways, but the device remains the same. Borthwick, for example, traces a riddle device, which refers to a tortoise, from Ancient Greece to Enlightenment Italy (see above),[8] while Hill traces one referring to time from antiquity to Tolkien.[9] Hill observes that a riddle adapts so that it becomes typical of the society that tells it and yet it is fundamentally the same riddle because the riddle device remains unchanged.[10] Most subjects have given rise to more than one riddle device; for example, Symphosius' Bell riddle (*Tintinnabulum*), which revolves around the bell being sometimes noisy and sometimes silent, is not the same as the sixteenth-century bell riddle of *Riddles of Heraclitus and Democritus*, which derives its ambiguity from describing the bell in human terms.[11] However, the subject of creation has only ever inspired one device in the English tradition, the one the early English poet Aldhelm invents. Aldhelm's basic device exists (with minor variations) in versions of the creation riddle right up until the early modern period.

The project of this book is to trace the history of this riddle, its topic – creation – and the influence of a particular riddle text. The text is the late antique

6 Z. Gimbutas, *The riddle in the poem,* p. 23. **7** For a fuller discussion, see below. **8** See E. Borthwick, 'The riddle of the tortoise and the lyre', *Music and Letters*, 51 (1970), 373–87. **9** See T. Hill, 'Saturn's time riddle: an insular Latin analogue for *Solomon and Saturn II* Lines 282–91', *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 39 (1988), 273–6. **10** Ibid., p. 275. **11** The riddle runs, 'There is a bodie without a hart, that hath a toong, and yet no head;/ Buried it was, ere it was made, and lowde it speaks, and yet is dead.' Anon., *Riddles of Heraclitus and Democritus* (London, 1598), reprinted in M. Bryant, *Riddles, ancient and modern* (London, 1983), p. 165.

riddle collection known as the *Aenigmata* and its influence dominated early English riddling to the exclusion of other more obvious sources, including the Bible. In some way, all riddles are concerned with creation by virtue of their interest in the nature of things. All riddles focus on the essence of their subject, with what defines it. However, it is the *Aenigmata Symphosii* that is the first surviving text to use riddles to chart creation systematically, and the riddles inspired by it are the first extant to make creation explicitly and consistently a riddle topic. Riddles in the Symphosian tradition that take creation as their subject – what Tupper calls the 'creation riddles'[12] – share a common form and a common conception of what a riddle is. They constitute a distinct and separate *genus* historically and, eventually, culturally and geographically as well. However, it is what they do not share that makes them intriguing to study. For, although, these texts exhibit a clear line of influence, often drawing heavily on their source, each represents a significantly different cosmology and cosmography; a different understanding of the schema and workings of the world, from the ecosystem to the planetary system. Riddles are a particularly good form for considering such a question. (Curiously this aspect of Symphosian riddling has not received much scholarly attention, despite the wide acceptance of the proposition that riddles are 'units of world view'.)[13] A riddle is comprised of a question *and* an answer, so the text determines, not only what answer is 'correct', that is to say, what answer reflects the true state of things, but also determine the methodology by which the right answer is reached. A riddle, then, implicitly endorses a specific kind of intelligence and cognition. For example, the famous Ancient Greek riddle that the fishermen ask Homer states:

> ὅσσ' ἕλομεν λιπόμεσθα, ὅσ' οὐχ ἕλομεν φερόμεσθα (*Cert.* 325)[14]
>
> The ones we caught we left behind, the ones we missed we carry.

Here a certain kind of literalism is rewarded, since the riddle may only be answered by rejection the contextual implication that ***ἕλομεν*** 'we caught', refers to what the fishermen *mean* to catch. By contrast in the Sphinx's riddle, it is exactly the opposite quality which is rewarded. Here it is the ability to understand metaphor and symbolic language which solves the riddle:

> στι δίπουν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τετράπον, οὗ μία φωνή,
> καὶ τρίπον, ἀλλάσσει δὲ φύσιν μόνον ὅσσ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν
> ἑρπετὰ γίνονται καὶ ἀν' αἰθέρα καὶ κατὰ πόντον•
> ἀλλ' ὁπόταν πλείστοισιν ἐρειδόμενον ποσὶ βαίνῃ,
> ἔνθα τάχος γυίοισιν ἀφαυρότατον πέλει αὐτοῦ. (Athen. 10.83)

12 F. Tupper, *The riddles of the* Exeter Book (Darmstadt, 1968), p. 238. I follow Tupper in using this term. **13** A. Dundes, 'Folk ideas as units of worldview' in A. Paredes & R. Bauman (eds), *Toward new perspectives in folklore* (Austin, 1975), pp 93–103. **14** Anon., *The contest of Homer and Hesiod*, trans. M. West (Harvard, 2007), p. 351.

> There is a creature upon the earth that has two feet
> and four, a single voice,
> and three feet as well; of all that moves on land,
> and through the air, and in the sea, it alone alters its nature.
> But when it makes its way propped on the largest number of feet,
> then the swiftness in its limbs is the weakest.[15]

However, perhaps more important than either determining the truth or of determining what qualities will define cleverness, a riddle is able to determine the question itself. This most fundamental point, the ability to set the terms of the investigation, more than anything makes the riddle a form ideally suited for discussing cosmological conceptions. And this particular succession of texts is unusual in that they contain, for the most part, the cosmological assumptions of 'ordinary' people, on a topic usually reserved for scholars and theologians.

THE SYMPHOSIAN TRADITION

The vogue for riddles in early England was not echoed elsewhere in Europe. It was produced by a matrix of cultural influence and agendas all combining in this particular time and place, but the catalyst, as I note above, is the surprising and intriguing *Aenigmata Symphosii*; a collection of one hundred Latin riddles which are the sole surviving work of an early fifth-century author identified only by the pseudonym 'Symphosius'.[16] Set at the feast of the Saturnalia, each riddle deals with a different subject drawn from the physical world. Unlike most previous riddling, these *enigmata* took the form of obscure and witty descriptions, each designed to illuminate the aspects of their subject which are most extraordinary, paradoxical and obscure. With a few exceptions, Symphosius' riddles are not explicitly framed as questions and each is solved by its own lemma. The challenge then is for the audience to follow Symphosius' obscure and intricate twists of thought and unpick the implications of his multiple intertextual allusions.

15 Athenaeus, *The dinner guests*, trans. D. Olson (Harvard, 2016), p. 387. **16** There has been considerable debate around the correct dating of Symphosius. Müller places him as early as the second or third century because of his excellent Latinity and command of metrics. See *De re metrica poetarum Latinorum praeter Plautum et Terentium libri septem* (Leipzig, 1894), p. 39. By contrast, Riese argues that he was contemporary with the compilers of the earliest manuscript, the *Codex Salmasianus*. See A. Riese (ed.), *Anthologia Latina* (Leipzig, 1894), p. xxvi. There are intriguing literary clues that support a fourth- or fifth-century dating, for example, Symphosius assumes that tigers conceive by the wind and while there are classical references to conception by wind in relation to other animals, the only extant references to this belief in relation to tigers belongs to late antiquity. (See Opp. Cyn. 1. 320, 3. 350 ff.) There is now a scholarly consensus that Symphosius probably lived in the late fourth and early fifth century. See E. Sebo, 'Was Symphosius an African? A contextualizing note on two textual clues in the Aenigmata Symphosii', *Notes & Queries*, 56:3 (2009), 324–6; Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symposii*, xiv, and Ohl, *Enigmas*, p. 15.

Here the sum is greater than the parts; Symphosius arranges his riddle topics so that, by virtue of their interaction, they map and interrogate the human and natural worlds. More than anything else, the challenge for the audience is to engage with his vision of, as Lucretius has it, '*rerum natura*', 'the nature of things'. The riddles that adopt and then adapt the form and concerns of Symphosius' riddles I term 'Symphosian tradition'.

In some ways it is not surprising that Symphosius had such a lasting influence. His riddles are so satisfyingly regular in form – one hundred riddles, each three dactylic hexameter lines – that his collection had the effect of bestowing a typical formal structure to a genre that previously had been marked by its absence. Although many of his imitators made minor alterations in terms of their riddles' length, the regularity of Symphosius' metre persisted and had the effect of transforming riddles into a form that could be used to demonstrate Latin metre in Anglo-Saxon England. The number of his riddles, one hundred, became canonical for riddle collections, and, at least to begin with, his imitators adopted his most peculiar convention; entitled solutions to each riddle. Finally, and most significantly, riddles in the Symphosian tradition are marked by the absence of narrative context.

Although Symphosius' riddles, in many ways, begin the process of separating riddles from narrative, the collection is introduced by a narrative that (apparently) tells of how the riddles came to be composed and told. Moreover, they are an inter-related, unified collection so that each is contextualized by the others, and the collection as a whole is governed by highly-complex and intricate taxonomies. Nevertheless, some scholars have credited him with the separation of the riddle from its narrative context and function, and so regard him as the founder of 'true' riddling. Pavlovskis, for example, claims that Symphosius is a significant author because his work represents 'a sizable collection of genuine riddles and nothing but riddles, without extraneous material such as fictional or mythical contexts'.[17] This view suggests that it is only when the riddle is separated from context that it may genuinely be regarded as a riddle. However, extracting riddles from narrative is not purifying the form, but rather, somewhat artificially, divorcing it *from* its more usual state. Riddles are interactive; they are meant to be posed and solved, either in reality, or in fiction. Without such a context, riddles become almost epigrams; a development that entirely changes the nature of the genre. So much so, that many riddle writers who produce collections free of narratives tend to construct some kind of 'context' to replace them. Those riddles which do not, such as the works of the Bern riddler, Tatwine, or Eusebius, move towards epigram but they represent 'dead-ends' from the point of view of the riddle as a genre. These riddles do not seem to have been especially popular or influential and they do not appear to have had a significant impact on the oral tradition. Although the literary fashion for wit in the

17 Z. Pavlovskis, 'The riddler's microcosm: from Symphosius to St Boniface', *Classica et Medievalia*, 39 (1988), 219–51, at p. 221.

Renaissance leads several significant poets, including Wyatt, Herbert, and Johnson, to compose epigrammatical riddle-poems designed to display their poetical dexterity, they never enjoy much popularity. There is a similar phenomenon in the eighteenth century – another period in which the poetical fashion is for wit – particularly in Italy and France[18] but these texts are also no more than curiosities. Unlike ancient and medieval riddles, they are not understood as vehicles for exploring fundamental questions. Instead, they are amusements, or a kind of party-trick designed to display their author's ingenuity.

By contrast, those Symphosian riddles that find substitutes for context, survive and are retold, and eventually find their way back into popular narratives. The influence of Symphosius lasts for a thousand years, but eventually, his riddles (or the riddles descended from his riddles), find their way back into the kind of popular riddling Symphosius adapted in the first place. This study follows those riddle-writers whose variations on Symphosius' work shift it inexorably back towards the more usual forms of oral, agonistic riddling and towards the reinstatement of 'context'. These are also the texts featuring creation riddles; an interesting coincidence. While the subjects of other Anglo-Latin riddles (primarily natural history and theology) appeal mainly to scholars and clergymen, the nature of the created world and of the powers that rule it, is a subject which, either explicitly or implicitly, dominates the cultural imagination across demographics; perhaps the coincidence is not so surprising after all.

ANCIENT RIDDLE TERMS: *AENIGMATA* AND *GRIPHOI*

In order to understand Symphosius as an innovator in the riddle genre, it is important to contextualize him within the culture of riddling in the ancient world. Although a surprising amount of material exists – both in terms of ancient riddles texts and of ancient works about riddles – it is a difficult and at times contradictory corpus. Perhaps the best place to begin is with the etymologies of the Greek and Latin words for 'riddle' and their implications. The old Latin word for riddles, *scirpus*, 'bulrush', is based on the analogy between the intricate trickery of riddles and the intricate patterns of woven baskets made from bulrushes. This analogy is also at the heart of one of the Greek words for 'riddle', *griphos* (γρῖφος), which takes its meaning from the act of weaving, particularly the weaving of fishing baskets.[19] A Latinized version of the word, usually *griphus*, is occasionally used by Latin authors. However, the more usual word for 'riddle', the word used by Symphosius and adopted by medieval riddlers is the Greek-derived '*aenigma*'. *Aenigma* came to mean 'riddle' by virtue of the metaphor of darkness;

18 See M. de Fillipis, *The literary riddle in Italy in the eighteenth century* (Los Angeles, 1967) and A. Taylor, *The literary riddle before 1600* (Los Angeles, 1948). **19** This adds an extra aspect to *The contest of Homer and Hesiod* and to the riddle that Homer fails to solve and that results in his death. The riddle told by fishermen is prompted by Homer's question about what they have caught in their nets and revolves around a word-play on catching.

a reference to the obscurity of riddles. This idea of darkness is so persistent that the King James Bible usually translates **αἴνιγμα**/ *aenigma* as 'dark sayings'. Most famously, Saint Paul is translated (perhaps even mistranslated) as saying that we shall see God 'through a glass, darkly' (1 Cor 13:12) when his Greek '**ἐν αἰνίγματι**', means that we shall see God in riddles, by means of riddles.[20]

So, we have two strands of riddle words found in both Latin and Greek, one that relates to weaving (*griphos*/ *scirpus*), one to darkness (*ainigma*/ *aenigma*). However, it is not clear whether these words were strictly synonymous or whether they refer to distinct two and different kinds of riddling. Athenaeus' *The dinner guests*, at least, seems to suggest that there were. He has Aemilianus the Grammarian, say:

> **ἀλλ' ἡμεῖς ζητήσωμεν πρότερον μὲν τίς ὁ ὅρος τοῦ γρίφου, τίνα δὲ Κλεοβουλίνη ἡ Λινδία προὔβαλλεν ἐν τοῖς αἰνίγμασιν** (10. 69, 7)
>
> Let us, then, first ask what is the definition of the riddle [*griphos*]; but (we will not consider) what it was that Cleobulina of Lindus propounded in her riddles [*ainigmata*][21]

Unfortunately, Cleobulina's work does not survive so we are not in a position to compare the two, to see if they represent different kinds of riddling and, if they do, how they differ from each other. Moreover, Athenaeus includes such a diverse range of literary and linguistic forms in his account of *griphoi* that it is hard to guess what the nature of the distinction might be. More confusingly still, Symphosius, who describes his words as *aenigmata*, reworks several riddles which Athenaeus counts as '*griphoi*'.

So, perhaps, it is simply the case that there was not a clear distinction. Perhaps, the terms were used in different ways at different times and in different places. However, there is also some evidence to suggest that the difference between *ainigmata* and *griphoi* is not one of form, but rather of context. Hesychius defines a *griphos* in terms of riddling at symposia and links the form to competitive drinking games and forfeits. This might suggest that *griphoi* were told as part of a more licentious kind of riddling, while *ainigmata* were more oracular and serious in tone. Indeed, although Plutarch includes both *griphoi* and *ainigmata* in his account of the religious festival, the *Agrionia*, he clearly feels they are distinct enough for it to be important to include both:

> **...τοῦ δείπνου τέλος ἔχοντος, αἰνίγματα καὶ γρίφους ἀλλήλαις προβάλλουσιν, τοῦ μυστηρίου διδάσκοντος, ὅτι λόγῳ τε δεῖ χρῆσθαι**

20 J.R.R. Tolkien is perhaps playing on this in his chapter title 'Riddles in the dark' from *The Hobbit*. The play is a rather neat one since Gollum and Bilbo are literally in the dark but also figuratively; neither is sure of the other's motives or situation. **21** C. Gulick (trans.), *Athenaeus: The Deipnosophists* (London, 1930), p. 531.

> παρὰ πότον θεωρίαν τινὰ καὶ μοῦσαν ἔχοντι καὶ λόγου τοιούτου τῇ μέθῃ παρόντος ἀποκρύπτεται τό ἄγριον καὶ μανικόν, ὑπο τῶν Μουσῶν εὐμενῶς κατεχόμενον (Plut. *Sym.* 8. 1,171)
>
> … when their dinner is over (the initiates) quiz each other with riddles [*ainigmata*] and conundrums [*griphous*]. The meaning of this ritual is that when drinking we ought to engage in conversation that has something speculative, some instruction in it, and that when conversation like this accompanies indulgence in wine, the wild and manic element is hidden away, benevolently restrained by the Muses.[22]

Moreover, when Plutarch is writing about riddling, *not* in the context of religious festivals of misrule but rather in the context of more sober expressions of the sacred (such as oracles), he does tend to use the term *ainigmata* rather than *griphoi*.[23]

Whatever the distinction might be, it does not seem to have been universally observed and whatever it was, it seems to diminish further overtime, especially in the Latin tradition. Gellius, one of the few late antique sources to comment on riddles as a genre, implies that by his lifetime, the distinction has been lost completely: 'quae Graeci dicunt "aenigmata", hoc genus quidam ex nostris veteribus "scirpos" appellaverunt.' ('[t]he kind of composition which the Greeks call "enigmas", some of our early writers called "*scirpi*"').[24] Gellius' comment not only fails to distinguish between *scirpi/ griphoi* and *aingimata/ aenigmata*, but may also hint that the word *scirpus* had become archaic, perhaps even redundant, which suggests that Latin readers were not distinguishing between different kinds of riddling. The distinction seems both to have survived longer and been more significant in the Greek tradition, since it is still meaningful for the Greek-speaking Athenaeus a hundred years after the Latin-speaking Gellius. For Symphosius, who had some knowledge of Greek and who was deeply engaged with the Greek literary tradition, then, this distinction may well have still had some meaning and, overall, there seems to be a tendency for *αἴνιγμα/ aenigma* to be associated with more serious, religious or oracular riddling, while *griphos/ scirpus* seems to have been more ludic. So, it is interesting to note that, despite his formulaic dismissal of his work as mere *nugae* ('trifles'), works improvised on a whim, Symphosius, who *was* conversant with Greek tradition,[25] chooses to give them what appears to have been the more serious name of *aenigmata*.

22 F. Babbitt (trans.), *Plutarch's Moralia*, p. 111. **23** Similarly, in Christian religious writings, the words *ainigma* and *aenigma* are used, especially in the Bible and Augustine's *De Trinitate*, but not *griphos* or *scripus*. There are several Biblical passages concerning *enigmata* but the most famous is 1 Cor 13:12, in which Paul says that we see God in riddles: λέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι. Augustine comments on this passage and on *enigma* as a trope in book 15 of *De Trinitate*. **24** 'The kind of composition which the Greeks call "enigmas", some of our early writers called "*scirpi*"': see J. Rolfe (ed. and trans.), *The attic nights of Aulus Gellius* (London, 1927–8), pp 382–3. **25** He constructs Greek/Latin bilingual puns in the *Aenigmata*

RIDDLES IN ANTIQUITY: ATHENAEUS' RIDDLE TYPES

The substantial body of riddle texts that survive are a fraction of those composed in antiquity and late antiquity. Apuleius claims to have written riddles though they do not survive[26] and Athenaeus cites a wealth of now-vanished works. Moreover, in addition to the high rate of attrition suggested by these references to no longer extant works, much ancient riddling was lost simply because it was never written down at all. The association between riddling and symposiac modes of speech suggests a strong oral riddle tradition, a suggestion confirmed by the assumption in writers such as Aristophanes that audiences will be familiar with particular riddles.[27] Nevertheless, the extant riddle literature is considerable. There are riddles in the Old Testament, as noted above, and Paul discusses the notion that we see God in riddles in the New Testament.[28] In the Greek tradition, there is the famous riddle of the Sphinx (the basis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*), the riddle contest in *The contest of Homer and Hesiod* and the *Elektra* plays of Euripides and Sophocles. The *Greek anthology* preserves riddles, problems, and mathematical puzzles, Plutarch includes a series of riddles in his *The dinner of the seven wise men*, and Athenaeus devotes a large portion of Book 10 of *The dinner guests* to a discussion of riddles. In the Latin tradition there are riddles in Ovid's *Fasti* and Vergil's *Eclogues*. Writers as disparate as Plautus and Gellius tell riddles and Ausonius wrote a remarkable poem devoted to riddles on the number three. In addition, Aristotle, Plutarch, Gellius, Athenaeus and Hesychius all wrote definitions of the riddle of one kind or another. With such a body of theoretical material and of individual riddles to work from, it should be possible to form a relatively clear idea of the genre. However, because of lack of agreement between authors about the nature of riddles, and the absence of a common form, semantic structure, riddlic conceit, content, or mood in the riddles they cite, this material raises more questions than it answers.

Of the extant 'riddle texts' the most illuminating is Athenaeus' discussion in Book 10 of *The dinner guests*, the most comprehensive work on the genre sur-

and shows a preference for Greek over Roman traditional riddles and for Greek over Roman myths. For example, while he often draws on the mythic matrix surrounding the foundation of the Greek people concerning Prometheus, Deucalion and Hellen, he shows no interest in foundation stories of Rome concerning Romulus and Remus. Similarly, he draws on the *Iliad* but not the *Aeneid*. **26** Interestingly, the word he uses for riddle is 'griphus', an unusual loan word from Greek. (Apul. *Flor.* 9). **27** For a discussion of Aristophanes' play on a particular riddle in *Wasps*. **28** The most prominent of these are Samson's riddle and the writing on the wall deciphered by Daniel. Interesting, Thatcher argues for a culture of riddling in the Bible. He claims that much of Jesus' ministry may be understood in terms of riddles since Jesus teaches through dialogue; questions and answers and speaks in riddlic modes: his parables, metaphors and puns are all similar to the language of riddling. Moreover, many of the most important Biblical conflicts are in the form of verbal duels. Neither Jesus nor the devil can force piety or impiety on humanity, but rather, must persuade mortals; Jesus most notably in the Sermon on the Mount, the devil, in the Garden of Eden. T. Thatcher, *The riddles of Jesus in John: a study in tradition and folklore* (Atlanta, 2000).

viving from late antiquity. Rather than giving a single definition of the riddle, it lists several different sorts of riddling, all of which are illustrated with examples. Although Athenaeus turns his attention specifically to *griphoi*, several factors,[29] especially the fact that Symphosius reworks traditional riddles mentioned by Athenaeus, suggest that his understanding of the riddle genre is relevant to a reading of Symphosius. The discussion in *The dinner guests* purports to move from one riddle type to the next, progressing from simpler forms of riddling to more complex ones. But, disappointingly, Athenaeus provides very little analysis of the various features of these riddle types. Instead he has one of his characters, the host Larensis,[30] list examples grouped together by subjective associations that are sometimes based, not on riddle type, but on their presence in a particular author or in the same text. It is not always clear which riddlic features match which riddle type. The situation is further complicated by Athenaeus' frequent digressions and the fact that many of the 'riddle-types' appear to be represented more than once and at different points in the text. It must also be said that, at least for the modern reader, many of the 'riddles' would not qualify as such. However, despite these short comings, one may gain some impression of the qualities that Athenaeus regards as definitional by considering each riddle in relation to those placed on either side of it.

I suggest Athenaeus' riddles fall into five basic types. The first turns on the substitution or subtraction of letters or syllables. These seem to be the ancestors of literary riddling and most are dependent on the literacy of the riddle's audience. For example, Athenaeus cites as a riddle an episode in a play by Agathon in which an illiterate man spells out the name 'Theseus' by having the letters described to him – an indication of the still tenuous nature of literacy in the ancient world that also helps to explain the significance of 'spelling' riddles, so perplexing to modern audiences in cultures of almost universal literacy. Symphosius incorporates an element of spelling riddles in *Lapis* and *Porcus* where letters are subtracted from the *lemmata* to reveal the answers to the secondary puzzle within the main riddle (*lapis/apis* and *porcus/orcus*). But this is certainly not a substantial aspect of Symphosius' riddling.[31] Perhaps more interestingly, Athenaeus quotes riddles made by combining the first and last syllables of Homeric lines to form the names of various objects. These are reminiscent of several of the texts included with Symphosius' riddles in the *Codex Salmasianus* that modern scholars have not identified as riddles, though perhaps Athenaeus' comments give grounds for wondering whether they might have been regarded as riddles in late antiquity.

29 Other factors which indicate the relevance of Athenaeus to Symposius are the remarkable breadth of Symphosius' influences, and the dilution of the *aenigmata/ griphoi* distinction in Latin authors. **30** P. Livius Larensis was an historical figure; a consul at Rome in the late second century contemporary with the setting of the feast. See P.E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge history of classical literature* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 122. **31** In fact, it becomes more common among the riddlers of early England such as Tatwine and Eusebius.

The second riddle type in Athenaeus is what I term 'metaphorical riddles'. This seems redundant at first because, of course, almost all riddles employ metaphor – Archer Taylor actually makes this central in his definition of a riddle; 'the true riddle … compares an object to another entirely different object'[32] and, in general, it is true to say that riddles work by encouraging the reader to look for the answer in the wrong place, in effect, the riddle question appears paradoxical because we *misread* the metaphor.[33] However, the metaphorical riddles in Athenaeus deserve the name because they are constructed from a single, extended (in some cases overly-florid) metaphor that makes up the entirety of the riddle. This type of metaphorical riddles depends on the fact that the metaphor is misleadingly uncontextualized. The type encompasses what Athenaeus refers to as the 'riddles of Pythagoras' (essentially gnomic verses), charms, proverbs, oracular utterances, and other kinds of wisdom literature. It also includes the riddles whose over-blown and tenuous metaphors Aristotle instances in support of his claim that the over-use of metaphors leads, not to poetry, but to riddles, *Poetics* (22. 1458a, 20–5). These riddles are also derided by Athenaeus who quotes a lengthy passage from Antiphanes' *Amorous* in which the speaker's elaborate metaphorical descriptions are mocked by an interlocutor who advises that he use plain words instead.[34] Symphosius' *Navis*, *Ericius*, *Pons*, *Balneum* all fit this category, although Symphosius more usually employs a range of different and often only implied metaphors rather than a single, extended, explicit one. However, the type becomes very popular among his literary descendants. In early England, in the context of a vernacular poetic tradition, rich with kennings, in which poets heap metaphors upon each other, this becomes the obvious riddle type. Most of the Exeter Book riddles could be said to belong to it.

Interestingly, Athenaeus includes in this group a riddle which he attributes to Theognis, but which becomes traditional and is finally reworked by Symphosius:[35]

> ἤδη γάρ με κέκληκε θαλάσσιος οἴκαδε νεκρ ς
> τεθνηκὼς ζῳῷ φθεγγόμενος στόματι (Athen. 10.85, 3–4)
>
> For already the corpse from the sea summons me home, which though dead it be, speaks with living tongue.[36]

Athenaeus tells us that the answer is 'a cockle-shell used as a horn'. The riddle uses two related and interconnected strategies; the first is the extended metaphor which compares the shell to a corpse and the second is the apparent contradic-

32 A. Dundes & R. Georges, 'Toward a structural definition of the riddle', *Journal of American Folklore*, 76 (1963), 111–18, at 113. **33** W. Pepicello & T. Green, *The language of riddles: new perspectives* (Columbus, OH, 1984). **34** Gulick (trans.), *Deipnosophists*, pp 534–7. **35** See E. Borthwick, 'The riddle of the tortoise and the lyre', *Music and Letters,* 51 (1970), 373–87. **36** Gulick (trans.), *Deipnosophists,* pp 572–3.

tion that a dead creature speaks with a 'living' voice. Symphosius' version, *Testudo* (Tortoise) employs only the second strategy[37] so that his version is no longer an instance of the riddle type Athenaeus is discussing. Rather it becomes what anthropologists now term an 'Oppositional riddle', the third type of riddle discussed by Athenaeus.[38]

> Tarda, gradu lento, specioso praedita dorso;
> †docta quidem studio†, sed saevo prodita fato,
> viva nihil dixi, quae sic modo mortua canto. (Symp. 20.13)
>
> Deliberate, with slow step, gifted with a splendid back,
> […], but betrayed by cruel fate,
> Living I said nothing, as soon as I die I sing in this way.

These attributes appear to be paradoxical since they are framed in terms that are in strict contradiction. In riddles of this type the contradiction is always in the words not the fact. That is to say, the riddle appears to express a paradox, but its solution reveals it to be an ordinary, everyday feature of the world. Such riddles exemplify another Aristotelian riddle definition: '**αἰνίγματός τε γὰρ ἰδέα αὕτη ἐστί, τὸ λέγοντα ὑπάρχοντα ἀδύνατα συνάψαι**' (*Poet.* 22, 25–6) ('[t]he essence of a riddle consists in describing a fact by an impossible combination of words').[39] Athenaeus returns to this type of riddle later in the discussion where he describes it as:

> **ἀρχαιότατις δ' ἐστὶ λογικὸς γρῖφις καὶ τῆς τοῦ γριφεύειν φύσεως οἰκειότατος** (Athen. 10.453)
>
> A very ancient kind of riddle, and one that is most closely related to the true nature of the riddle, has to do with logical concepts.[40]

The metaphorical type includes a range of riddles whose semantic structures are differently categorized by modern scholars. It includes Homer's riddle from *The Contest of Homer and Hesiod* and reworked by Symphosius in *Pediculus*; '**ὅσσ' ἕλομεν λιπόμεσθα, ὅσ' οὐχ ἕλομεν φερόμεσθα**' (*Cert.* 325) ('The ones we caught we left behind, the ones we missed we carry').[41] This riddle employs an apparently straightforward contradiction; how can anyone bring home what they did not catch? The answer, 'lice', reveals that the riddle was framed so as to encourage us to assume that the speaker did not already possess whatever it was they simultaneously 'left behind' but still 'carry'. Athenaeus gives an example

37 As a description of a tortoise, not a cockle shell, naturally! **38** For more on oppositional riddles see R. Georges & M. Jones, *Folkloristics* (Bloomington, 1995), p. 100. **39** *Aristotle: The Poetics*, trans. W.H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA, 1932), p. 85. **40** Gulick (trans.), *Deipnosophists,* pp 552–5. **41** M. West (trans.), *Homeric hymn, Homeric apocrypha, the Lives of Homer* (Harvard, 2007), p. 351.

which runs, 'τί ταὐτὸν ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ ἐν θαλάττῃ' (Athen. 10. 453 b) ('What is the same in the sky, on the earth, and in the sea?')[42] The solution to riddle can be one of a number of animals, since, as Gulick explains, the bear is 'the Great and Little Bear, also the bear-crab' the snake is the 'constellation Serpens, also a kind of fish, Ophidium' and the eagle is the 'constellation Aquila, also *Myliobatis aquila*, a kind of ray'.[43] But the conundrum derives from the fact that the riddle's audience is encouraged to try to think of a single beast found in the sky, on land and in the sea, when, in fact, the solution involves different entities, all with the same name. This riddle type is given an especially sophisticated expression in Symphosius' *Taurus*.

Athenaeus' final two riddle types seem, to a modern sensibility, especially out of place in a catalogue of riddles. The fourth type, which Athenaeus claims was associated with performers such as Aristonymus the harp-virtuoso and Cleon the mime actor, turn on a central pun more like a joke than a riddle. In the fifth type contestants attempt to best each other with the breadth of their knowledge of poetry. Unlike those previously discussed, these 'knowledge riddles' are much harder to transform into a poetic genre because they are too firmly rooted in the contest situation; they make no sense outside an agonistic wit-combat setting. Usually, as Taylor and Auden point out, riddle contests either 'appeal to a process of thought' or rely on 'an inventory of knowledge'.[44] But both seem applicable in the case of this final riddle type. One would expect a 'cutting contest' around memorized bodies of poetry would simply require 'an inventory of knowledge'. However, in a culture that still retained certain values associated with orality, the contest is an educational exercise that develops habits of thoughtful and discerning engagement with the material. Athenaeus gives several examples of the different forms such riddling might take. One riddler might recite one line of poetry and the other respond with the next line. A riddler might recite a passage illustrating a particular author's opinion on a subject and the other respond with an example from another writer who writes to the same effect on the subject. The contests might also give displays of metrical agility in which all 'riddle' solutions had to be offered in a pre-determined metrical pattern. This sort of contest may also involve naming everything in a particular category; for example, all the Trojan leaders whose names start with a particular letter. Although Symphosius does not directly engage in this kind of riddling, the breadth of literary knowledge required to follow the intricate twists of his riddles is evidence of the same kind of literary culture.

Interestingly, the riddles in Plutarch's *The dinner of the seven wise men* also belong to this basic type and to this kind of riddle culture. Technically, Plutarch's riddles are classed as 'Superlative riddles' – a riddle type that becomes important

42 Gulick (trans.), *Deipnosophists,* p. 555. **43** Ibid. **44** Taylor & Auden, *Elder Edda* (London, 1973), p. 21. Taylor and Auden make this point in order to differentiate riddles in general from the Germanic tradition of riddling that does require its riddle-guessers to demonstrate 'an inventory of knowledge'.

in post-medieval England – but what is significant about them is that they rely on factual knowledge. Like Symphosius, these riddles are designed to quantify and structure the world. However, the implicit ideology of the text is quite different. Where Symphosius' riddles enumerate the diversity of concrete phenomena, Plutarch offers a conceptual framework for the world and even the conditions of moral existence. In fact, Plutarch's riddles, like many Superlative riddles, become almost a series of maxims, a kind of catechism:

> τί πρεσβύτατον; χρόνος.
> τί μέγιστον; κόσμος
> τί σοφώτατον; ἀλήθεια
> τί κάλλιστον; φῶς
> τί κοινότατον; θάνατος
> τί ὠφελιμώτατον; θεός
> τί βλαβερώτατον; δαίμων
> τί ῥωμαλεώτατον; τύχη
> τί ῥᾷστον; ἡδ
>
> What is the oldest thing? Time.
> What is the greatest? The Universe.
> What is the wisest? Truth.
> What is the most beautiful? Light.
> What is the most common? Death.
> What is the most helpful? God.
> What is the most harmful? An evil spirit.
> What is the strongest? Fortune.
> What is the easiest? Pleasure.[45]

Interestingly, too, Plutarch has his character, Neiloxenus the *episkopos*, give these riddles pre-eminence over other riddle types, because they are, in his opinion, more cultivated and civilized.

Although the riddles of Symphosius' Anglo-Saxon successors are quite different from this kind of riddling, there are also obvious parallels to be drawn with the Anglo-Saxon *Maxims* and even Alcuin's *Disputatio regalis et nobilissimi juvenis Pippini cum Albino scholastico*. In fact, since later Germanic riddles are often of this type, 'knowledge riddles' may have been the normative type for early Anglo-Saxon riddle writers, despite the fact they chose to adopt Symphosius' form. Since most extant Germanic riddling[46] post-dates our earliest English riddles, Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, it is necessarily problematic to attempt any kind of a reconstruction of the anterior tradition he might have inherited. However, given the highly conservative nature of the oral poetic tradition there is some reason for

45 *Plutarch's Moralia*, trans. F. Babbitt, pp 384–7. Interestingly, it would also be possible to class such riddles as 'superlative' riddles, a category that is represented elsewhere, as we have seen, in Atheaeus. **46** The *Edda* are the richest source.

thinking that riddles as a genre may have been equally popular in early Germanic medieval culture and the type of riddles may not have been so different from the ones found in the later Germanic texts. Taylor and Auden point to the preservation of an oral-formulaic phrase like 'warriors among the folk', which is found across the Germanic world, over a period of centuries. They note that,

> … *firar í folk* 'warriors among the folk,' which appears in 'The Treachery of Asmund,' occurs in the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (*fireo in folche*) and in the Old English riddles (*fírum on folce*), although the forms in which these poems appear suggests that their dates of composition span half a millennium.[47]

Moreover, the love of kennings (described by Cassidy and Ringler as 'riddles in embryo')[48] in Germanic tradition and the proliferation of riddling in Germanic literature across Europe, suggests a deeply-rooted, long-held love of riddling, the echoes of which reverberate in our earliest extant texts. Thus, it is worth noting that riddle contests similar to the 'cutting contests' described in Athenaeus are found in the *Edda*. Here the riddle-guessers must name things or number geographic features (such as rivers or stars).[49] In the *Alvíssmál*, for example, Þórr requires his opponent, Alvíss, to tell him the different names used among the various 'races' – men, giants, gods, elves, dwarves – for the earth, the heavens, the moon, the sun, the clouds, the wind, the calm, the sea, fire, wood, night, barley and ale. The list of things to be named by Alvíss forms a catalogue of the universe, not unlike the encyclopaedic *Aenigmata Symphosii*.

Even from this brief analysis it is clear that Athenaeus' understanding of what might be considered a riddle was fairly broad – and not nearly so consistent as he appears to think. Yet, his discussion of the riddle types is invaluable for understanding the nature of riddling in the ancient world and into the medieval. His work, despite its anomalies, is in effect a normative survey, and so is especially important in giving us a point of reference for understanding and contextualizing Symphosius' work. In particular, it gives us some kind of framework for understanding both his immersion in contemporary riddle culture and his innovative divergences from it.

THE FORM OF SYMPHOSIUS' RIDDLES: MARTIAL'S SATURNALIAN EPIGRAMS

Although Symphosius' riddles are distinctive in form, he did not invent the form itself. Rather his originality lies in adapting a pre-existing form from another genre, in this case from Martial's Saturnalian epigrams. The 'literary closeness of [Martial's] *Xenia* (and the *Apophoreta*) to Symphosius' riddles'[50] has been much

47 Taylor & Auden, *Elder Edda*, p. 14. **48** F. Cassidy & R. Ringler (eds), *Bright's Old English grammar and reader* (New York, 1971). **49** Taylor & Auden, *Elder Edda*, p. 21. **50** F. Grewing,

remarked. Like Symphosius' riddles, the epigrams in the *Xenia* and *Apophoreta* contain witty descriptions of everyday things, each obfuscated by the paradoxical description but revealed in the lemma. Both Martial and Symphosius use a fixed number of lines, the former distiches, the latter tristiches. Further, since the epigrams in the *Xenia* and *Apophoreta* describe gifts given at the Saturnalia, they also share their festive context with Symphosius' riddles.[51] Martial explains his composition of the epigrams by remarking in the introductory poem of the *Apophoreta*:

> … quid agam potius madidis, Saturne, diebus,
> quos tibi pro caelo filius ipse dedit? (Mart. 14.1, 9–10)
>
> … what else am I to do, Saturn, on the unsober days your son himself gave you in exchange for Heaven?[52]

Leary notes that during the time of the Saturnalia it was 'customary for the mottoes attached to gifts distributed at dinner to contain riddles'.[53] Suetonius also attests this custom, though he does not describe the labels as 'riddles'. Instead, he tells us that the Emperor Augustus had a fondness for labelling the gifts 'titulis obscuris et ambiguis' (Suet. *Aug*. 75) ('with obscure and ambiguous labels'); that is to say, the titles were playfully misleading about the gifts they accompanied.

There are also strong similarities between Symphosius' *Praefatio* and Martial's introductory poem in the *Apophoreta*. Both start by referring to the year's cyclic return to the time of the Saturnalia and then give details of the license that characterized the festival observances. Both take the self-deprecating stance of dismissing their own work and excusing their professed 'failings' by attributing them to the excesses of the season. Symphosius' *Praefatio* also follows Martial's conceit (introduced in the *Xenia*) that the epigrams themselves might be given as a Saturnalian present. Symphosius tells us that he invents his riddles by way of compensating for having arrived at the feast empty handed:

> Ast ego, ne solus foede tacuisse viderer,
> qui nihil adtuleram mecum quod dicere possem,
> hos versus feci subito (*Prae*. 13–5)
>
> But I, not to seem the only one to be disgracefully silent,
> Who had brought nothing with me which I was able to say,
> I improvised these verses

'Review of T.J. Leary, martial book XIII: the Xenia', *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 8 (2002), 38. **51** The Saturnalian context and Martial's ready wit makes these an obvious model in some ways, though in others the choice is rather perplexing. The lemmatical solutions are an example of one of the stranger formal aspects of the riddles. **52** W. Ker (trans.), *Martial: Epigrams* II (London, 1978), p. 441. **53** T.J. Leary, *Martial book XIV* (London, 1996), p. 58.

And Martial makes a similar joke when he writes of his verses:

> Haec licet hospitibus pro munere disticha mittas,
> si tibi tam rarus quam mihi nummus erit. (Mart. 13.3, 5–6)
>
> These distiches you can send to your guest instead of a gift, if a coin shall be as rare with you as with me.[54]

There are also parallels in the substance of Symphosius' and Martial's collections. Many of Martial's epigrams take subjects that Symphosius was later to treat in his own work. Some of Symphosius' riddles seem to refer explicitly to Martial.[55] Indeed, Glorie suggests that Symphosius' *Beta* and *Grus* are based on *Betae* (13) and *Grues* (75) from the *Xenia*, and that Symphosius' *Tessera*, *Strigilis Aenea*, *Lanterna* and *Spongia* allude to *Turricula* (16), *Strigiles* (51), *Lanterna Cornea* (61), and *Spongea* (144) from the *Apophoreta*.[56]

However, in some ways the parallels are misleading. Martial's epigrams are intended to be comic and although Symphosius mimics this comic tone – perhaps even uses it as a sort of defence – his riddles are perceptive, erudite and despite the drunken context, at times sober and sobering. Similarly, Martial's collection is piecemeal; a collection of witticisms in more or less random order, whereas there is a structure and an order to Symphosius' collection that embodies and expresses the underlying ideas of the text. Symphosius has ordered the topics of his riddles so that his collection is a The *Aenigmata Symphosii* becomes taxonomy of the material world, at each point revealing unexpected insights into familiar things.[57] The difference between the two authors is most apparent in their respective authorial voices. In the *Xenia* and *Apophoreta*, Martial speaks in his own voice, describing his subjects from a distinctive dry, self-deprecating stance. The audience is encouraged to participate in his urbane, occasionally acerbic, even outrageous, view of the world. By contrast, each of Symphosius' riddles describes itself in its own autonomous voice, encouraging the audience to take on a series of Other perspectives.

THE FUNCTION OF RIDDLES

Although riddles are no longer thought of as a subversive form, it is precisely this quality of exploring Other perspectives displayed by Symphosius' work that is at

54 W. Ker (trans.), *Martial's Epigrams*, p. 393. **55** Interestingly, Rehnan in arguing for his 'literal interpretation' of *Beta* argues that Symphosius is using a technique which may be found, among other places, in Martial. R. Rehnan, 'Symphosius 41.1: a literal interpretation', *Classical Quarterly*, 31 (1981), 471. **56** *Variae Collectiones Aenigmatum Merovingicae Aetatis*, ed. F. Glorie, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina,* 133–133a (Turnholt, 1968), p. 862. **57** In fact, it was clearly part of Martial's intention *not* to write an overly inter-dependent collection; he admits as much himself in his repeated suggestion that his readers skip over those epigrams which do not interest them. (Mart. 13.3, 7–8; 14.2, 1–4)

the centre of the mechanics of riddles. Pepicello and Green have argued that riddles depend 'on the ability of language to create multiple frames of reference'.[58] The language of riddles is innately duplicitous. It seeks to misdirect the riddle reader's attention to prevent them from perceiving its multiplicity. Instead it encourages them to focus on a single, and it emerges, incorrect, frame of reference. Riddles encourage us to think within one framework, while the answer we seek can only be gained by thinking within another. The ability to tell the metaphorical from the literal, the ability to recognize the true situation, the true order of things, characterizes riddle wit. In a contest of knowledge, the more powerful figure wins because knowledge depends on social advantage. However, in a test of wit social advantage counts for much less, since riddles 'appeal to a process of thought rather than to an inventory of knowledge'.[59] It is an integral part of how the genre functions. This quality of exploring the Other meant that, in addition to being a subversive genre, in the ancient world riddles were felt to be an appropriate medium for the revelation of divine mysteries. This is precisely because riddles require their audience to change their conceptions in order to find the solution. So, in terms of the mechanisms of riddles, the association with revelations, including religious revelations, is not surprising. Because all riddles are framed so as to conceal the obvious and draw out the atypical and anomalous, they inevitably have the effect of revealing their subjects in a new light; whether that turns out to be comic, disconcerting, distressing, or enlightening depends on the particular riddle. A riddle encourages the audience to revise their perceptions and preconceptions in light of the riddle's solution. Thus Plutarch, who had a pronounced interest in riddles and eventually became a priest of the Oracle at Delphi, writes of the Orphic Mysteries that the greatest truth is to be found in their most enigmatic aspects:

> ὅσῳ γὰρ μᾶλλον παράδοξόν ἐστι καὶ τερατῶδες τὸ αἴνιγμα, τοσούτῳ μᾶλλον ἔοικε διαμαρτύρεσθαι μὴ τοῖς αὐτόθεν λεγομένοις πιστεύειν, ἀλλὰ τὰ λεληθότα περιεργάζεσθαι καὶ μὴ πρότερον ἀφίστασθαι, πρὶν ἂν ὑπὸ θεοῖς ἡγεμόσιν ἐκφανῆ γενόμενα τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν τελέσῃ. (*E. Del.* 8–16)
>
> For just in proportion as the enigma is more paradoxical and wonderful, so does he [Orpheus] warn us to distrust the appearance, and seek for the hidden meaning.[60]

Similarly, in the Old Testament prophets speak in riddles (*Ezet* 17:2) and so does God (Num 12:8). Given this presence in both the classical and the Jewish tradi-

58 W. Pepicello & T. Green, *The language of riddles: new perspectives* (Columbus, 1984), p. 13. **59** Taylor & Auden, *Elder Edda,* 21. Taylor and Auden make this point in order to differentiate riddles in general from the Germanic tradition of riddling which does require its riddle-readers to demonstrate 'an inventory of knowledge'. **60** G.R.S. Mead, *Orpheus* (London, 1896), p. 40.

tions, the two greatest influences on medieval Christianity, it is not surprising that this notion – that the riddle is the proper medium for approaching the spiritual realm – is also found here, perhaps best exemplified by Isidore of Seville's definition: 'aenigma enim est obscura similitudo, per quam monetur homo ut cor suum acuat, et ad interiora intelligenda confugiat' (Isa. *De Fide* 2.22, 2) ('[a] riddle is an obscure analogy through which one is warned to sharpen wits and turn to those inner things which are to be grasped').[61] That is, the mechanics of riddles take their audience from puzzlement to insight and in so doing reproduce the experience of divine revelation.

This aspect of the genre is a key part of understanding the function and meaning of the creation riddle in all its various iterations. Symphosius, Aldhelm, the Exeter Book poet(s), and the Child Ballad singers all, in their own ways, use riddles to probe the nature of things. In the case of the Child Ballads, the added elements of narrative and a fictional riddle contest, give the audience a degree of distance, but, in essence, the riddles' function is the same. Interestingly, too, all four 'texts', the *Aenigmata*, *De Creatura*, the Exeter 'creation riddles', and *Riddles wisely expounded*, have a religious context. Symphosius sets his riddles at the feast of the Saturnalia, Aldhelm declares the purpose of his riddles to be the exploration of the hidden secrets of God (Ald. *Prae.* 7), Riddles 40 and 66 of the Exeter Book chart the relationship between God and Creation,[62] and *Riddles wisely expounded* recounts a contest of wits between a young girl and the devil that re-enacts and reverses the outcome of the earlier contest between Eve and Lucifer in the Garden of Eden.

Each of these four texts uses the riddle to engage with the religious discourses of their time. Because the historical and cultural context for each of these riddle texts is widely different, the forms and means of expression also differ. For Symphosius, who was probably an educated pagan writing in an increasingly intolerant Christianized Roman Empire sometime around the beginning of the fifth century CE, the riddles seem to be a plea for cultural plurality. In their allusions and intertextuality, they simultaneously preserve the old pagan literature of the Classical world (then at risk of being lost, forgotten, or even destroyed), and argue that this Classical tradition is not necessarily in conflict with the new religion. For Aldhelm, a clergyman, writing three centuries later at the beginning of the eighth century CE, the problem is exactly the opposite. His England is only a generation or two away from paganism. Consequently, he uses his riddles as an opportunity to adopt some of the refinements of pagan literature in the service of religious instruction. In the case of the Exeter Book the exact circumstances of their composition are unknown; however, it is unlikely that all the riddles were composed by the same person or at the same time. Moreover, whoever ordered and collated them does not seem to have been especially con-

61 V. Law, *Wisdom, authority and grammar in the seventh century* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 24. **62** The third creation riddle in the Exeter Book is so fragmentary that it is impossible to guess what kind of contextualization it may once have had.

cerned with ordering them in a particular way, so, although all texts have ideology, this one does not have an agenda in the same way that the texts of Symphosius and Aldhelm do.[63] In the specific instances of Riddles 40, 66, and 93, however, the concern appears to be understanding the relationship between God and the everyday experiences of the Anglo-Saxon world. Finally, *Riddles wisely expounded*, like all English and Scottish folk ballads, reflects a heterodox amalgamation of Christian, and 'folk' beliefs and legends, expressive of the often-subversive popular culture of the ballad singers.

CONCLUSION

This study focusses on the treatment of a specific riddle subject (creation) in a specific riddling tradition (the Symphosian riddle) over a period of more than a thousand years. Because each text is deeply influenced by its predecessor, the variations and innovations of each author are particularly significant in illustrating cultural shifts and reflecting changing conceptions of creation and humanities' place in it. Creation is imagined as orchestrated or random, benevolent or indifferent, abundant or deficient. For Symphosius, creation exists in a hundred interrelated facets, it is abundantly pluralistic. For Aldhelm, who describes creation in a single poem structured around a series of oppositions, it is the ordered *magnus opus* of omniscient and omnipotent God. For the Exeter Book poet(s) – especially the Riddle 40 poet who reproduces Aldhelm's form but allows his evocation of detail to disrupt Aldhelm's dichotomies – it is teeming, abundant with life of all kinds. And for the singers of *Riddles wisely expounded*, who imagine Creation as the subject of a riddle contest between a young girl and the devil, the created world is poised between good and evil, full of snares for the unwary that may only be overcome with virtue and riddle wit.

63 C. Williamson, *A feast of creatures: Anglo-Saxon riddle-songs* (London, 1983), pp 4–5.

CHAPTER 2

Symphosius' encyclopaedia of the world in riddles

> furor est profecto, furor egredi ex eo et, tamquam interna eius cuncta plane iam nota sint, ita scrutari extera, quasi vero mensuram ullius rei possit agere qui sui nesciat, aut mens hominis videre quae mundus ipse non capiat.[1]
>
> Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 2, 1

Symphosius' *Aenigmata* is a strange and ambiguous work and although it is possible that there were other similar works that do not survive, since nothing like it is found in Gellius, Athenaeus, or even Aristotle's discussions of the riddle genre, it seems likely that it was an innovative and original work as well. Indeed, Symphosius' own *Praefatio* suggests that his riddles are unusual, even unique. Here Symphosius gives an account of his riddles' origin which, though clearly false, assumes a culture of oral riddling familiar to his audience. The *Praefatio* reveals that in Symphosius' milieu there is still a conception of riddles as oral and agonistic – as in our best late antique source on riddling, Athenaeus.[2] By contrast, Symphosius' riddles are written, literary, allusive, intricately structured and, most astonishingly of all, presented to their audience already solved. It appears that in composing the *Aenigmata* Symphosius transforms a genre which, even when it appears in literary works, was still typically connected to oral culture. In extracting a riddle from its context, usually a guessing game, and replacing this with a range of textual and intertextual strategies Symphosius invents what were later termed 'literary riddles' and is even described as 'il fondatore di un genere' ('the founder of a genre').[3]

The implications of this extraordinary departure from agonistic riddling have often been overlooked; a point perhaps best demonstrated in Riese's assessment

1 'It is madness, perfect madness, to go out of this world and to search for what is beyond it, as if one who is ignorant of his own dimensions could ascertain the measure of anything else, or as if the human mind could see what the world itself cannot contain.' J. Bostock (ed. & trans.), *The natural history of Pliny* (London, 1855), p. 16. **2** On riddling and other verbal Symposia games not covered in the account of Athenaeus in the Introduction, see A. Luknovich, 'The play of reflections between literary form and sympotic theme in the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus' in O. Murray (ed.), *Sympotica: a symposium on the Symposion* (Oxford, 2000), pp 263–71. **3** Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symposii*, pp xx.

that Symphosius' riddles are too easily guessed, and Peck's joking response that '[t]he fact … that Symphosius has very considerately given the answer to each [riddle] as its title, may have something to do with Professor Riese's criticism that they are "easily guessed".'[4] Perhaps because entitled solutions became a generic feature, the peculiarity of the situation does not seem to strike either scholar, even while they are commenting on it. Yet, it is a drastic subversion of the genre. The point of the genre is that a riddle has to be guessed; that is its purpose. If you deprive them of this feature, what is their point? And yet, Symphosius wrote a hundred, answered riddles, so we must assume that he thought that there was a purpose, or at least value, to his riddles, aside from the solving of them. We may go some of the way to answering this puzzle by examining the structure of the *Aenigmata*, the world view implicit in it and how this world view is embedded in the mechanics of the riddles themselves; that is to say, how Symphosius enacts his world view in the process the audience undergoes in their reading of the text and contemplation of the solutions. In fact, I suggest that, far from diminishing the interactive aspect of riddles, Symphosius has developed it – but in a new way.

In part, he does this simply by supplying the answers. By presenting his audience with solved riddles, Symphosius has forced us to go looking 'in scirpo nodum', 'for a knot in a bulrush', to go looking for trouble. Or, since *scirpus* may also mean 'riddle', to go looking 'for the knot in the riddle'.[5] It seems that here the usual function of riddles is replaced by the complex, intricate, literary cycle structure. This notion of the cyclical riddle collection, as much as anything, reveals Symphosius' interest in origins and change as a way of interrogating and understanding the nature of things; the *Aenigmata*, not surprisingly, enact a Saturnalian view of the world that stresses cyclical change, reversal and above all else, plurality in all things. Of all the innovations that set Symphosius apart from his predecessors and most heavily influence his literary descendants, the most significant is this notion of the collection itself. It persists in the Symphosian tradition after all its other elements have been transformed almost beyond recognition. Even Symphosius' closest formal parallel, Martial's *Xenia*,[6] differs on this point since the *Xenia* often presents several epigrams on the same topic, and the work moves from one topic to another with no stronger structuring principle than that all the epigrams on the same subject are collected together. The number of epigrams on any given subject seems entirely dictated by the limits of Martial's inventiveness. Symphosius, on the other hand, composes one riddle per subject and orders them so that they trace a trajectory through the physical world

4 E. Peck, *The hundred riddles of Symphosius* (Woodstock, 1912), p. 9. **5** The proverb 'in scirpo nodum quaeris' is widely attested. The earliest example is in Plautus. (*Men.* 2.1.22). It means 'you are looking for trouble', literally, 'you are looking for a knot in a bullrush'. **6** Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii*, p. xix. As Grewing points out, in his review of Leary's *Martial book XIII: the Xenia*, the 'literary closeness' of the *Aenigmata* and the *Xenia* is an area in need of further investigation. Grewing, 'Review of T.J. Leary', p. 38.

that finally circles back upon itself. Over the course of the one hundred riddles, Symphosius emphasizes the paradoxical, even the miraculous, in the everyday and the familiar. In fixing upon those aspects of a thing which are surprising, he makes his reader reconsider their perceptions of the world.

Unfortunately, Symphosius' riddles are often considered individually, which has contributed to him being dismissed as a rather uninteresting poet and has contributed to the tendency to misread the tone of the collection as frivolous when the collection, in fact, moves through a range of tones. The tendency to think of Symphosius' riddles individually – a tendency that would make perfect sense with the riddles for many other collections – is not confined to the modern readers. Throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period, medieval writers and editors cannibalized Symphosius' text and commandeered riddles for their own works or for inclusion in new miscellanies. As Bayless notes, Symphosius' riddles 'circulated widely in the medieval period; later riddle collections frequently rephrased those of Symphosius or simply borrowed riddles from him wholesale.'[7] Since scholars often come to Symphosius through an interest in later medieval riddles, there has naturally been a tendency to regard Symphosius' riddle cycle as an anthology of individual riddles rather than as a work in which all textual features – including lemmata[8] – are integral. Perhaps more problematically still, the taxonomic principles that govern the organization of Symphosius' riddle cycle are not immediately clear to a modern audience, except in the most general way. Very little scholarly attention has been paid to what the overall effect of this structure might be, though, in fact, Symphosius gives us a clue by setting the riddles at the feast of the Saturnalia that immediately associates the *Aenigmata* with the time of the winter solstice and with a particular set of religious ideas, especially notions of renewal and misrule.

I began this chapter with a quote from Pliny, an author well-known to Symphosius and well-liked, if the number of allusions to his work is anything to go by, which argues that an understanding of the natural world is necessary before any other kind of philosophical or religious speculation can be undertaken productively. In particular he argues against the madness of one 'qui sui nesciat' ('who is ignorant of himself') attempting to understand other, greater things. He presents his *Historia Naturalis* as an attempt to understand the human world and the human condition as a preparation for greater questions. Despite the reluctance to read Symphosius as a riddle cycle, it has long been recognised that riddle centuries based on Symphosius' model act as 'a kind of encyclopaedia'[9] and so

7 M. Bayless, 'Alcuin's *Disputatio Pipini* and the early medieval riddle tradition' in G. Halsall (ed.), *Humour, history and politics in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2002), pp 157–78, at 157. **8** Of course, lemmata are later additions of a manuscript tradition, however, as Du Bois' comment suggests, in the case of Symphosius, they appear to be original. Indeed, Bergamin sites their similarity to Martial's lemmata in the *Xenia* as evidence for the Saturnalian 'ambientazione' ('ambience') of the *Aenigmata*. See Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* p. xix. **9** E. von Erhardt-Siebold, 'An archeological find in a Latin riddle of the Anglo-

Symphosius' 'encyclopaedic' *Aenigmata* may be viewed in similar terms. In their interest in life and death, origins and metamorphoses, reversals and cycles, the riddles probe the material world and ultimately beyond it.

THE ORDER AND STRUCTURE OF RIDDLES IN THE *AENIGMATA*

The hundred riddles are organized in terms of a range of internal ordering devices rather than by a single principle – even here Symphosius is disposed to plurality – and the complex and highly idiosyncratic patterns of association seem to reflect both oral and literate modes of thought and categorization.[10] They are particularly reminiscent of the associative, tangential shifts in subject that mark Athenaeus' *Dinner guests*, despite the host's insistence on a thorough and logical progression. As in that text, the taxonomic strategies and associations reveal an implicit conceptualization of the world in the *Aenigmata*. Perhaps most significantly, every riddle is linked to the next by at least one strategy. Most are also linked to other riddles that are further afield. In itself, such a structure is an implicit argument for a view of the world in which complex, decentralized, pluralistic and in which objects, plants, animals and even humans are intricately interconnected.

The collection is organized by three major taxonomic strategies: similarity of riddle subject, similarity of motif or theme, and aural similarity of lemmata. The primary organizing principle is similarity of riddle subject. By this means, the *Aenigmata* are categorized into loose groups, the three largest and most prominent of which are animals, plant life and man-made artefacts. Often subject-based groups overlap; it is not unusual for sequences of riddles to belong to more than one of these. In addition, clusters of riddles often share similar ideas or themes. For example, several neighbouring riddles from the 'animal' category share the motif of 'mixed species parentage'. This thematic similarity is not necessarily evident from the lemmata, of course. Sometimes it is expressed in the imagery or ideas of the riddle itself and this kind of noetic linking often cuts across the larger, subject-based groupings. Finally, individual riddles may be placed together on the basis of a rhyme, consonantal rhyme, or assonance in their lemmata, as in *Grus* and *Mus* ('Crane' and 'Mouse'), or *Tinea*, *Aranea*, and *Coclea* ('Bookworm', 'Spider' and 'Snail'), or *Calx* and *Silex* ('Lime' and 'Flint'). Sometimes they might be placed together because of a similarity of word, as in *Specular* and *Speculum* ('Window Pane' and 'Mirror'), or *Malum* and *Malleus* ('Apple' and 'Hammer'). This system of internal echoes cuts across other groupings so that reading the links, commonalities, and divergences, meaning that the collection connects the various elements of the world, as well as the ideas explored in the individual riddles in a range of ways, some of which may even be slightly in conflict with each other.

Saxons', *Speculum,* 7 (1932), 252–6, at p. 252. **10** W. Ong, *Orality and literacy* (London, 2002), p. 52.

The first three riddles, *Graphium* ('Stylus'), *Harundo* ('Reed'), and *Anulus Cum Gemma* ('Ring with Gem') seem disparate at first glance. They seem disparate at second glance too because the riddles are written to obscure what they have in common; that all three are associated with writing. This is obvious in the case of the *stylus*, but the reed is described in both its use in reed pipes and as a reed pen, so that only half the description links the riddle to the others in the group. The last riddle of the three, the jewelled ring, is a signet ring for sealing letters – though this element of its function is never referred to specifically, and it is this unmentioned function that suggests a link to the next riddle, *Clavis* ('Key'), which is also concerned with sealing things and marking property. Even in these first four riddles it becomes clear that perceiving and understanding the structure of the text and the connections between riddles is part of the riddle game. The next riddle, *Catena* ('Chain') relates to the key of the riddle before, while the one after that, *Tegula* ('Roof Tile'), returns to the idea of the house, already mentioned in *Clavis*. From there Symphosius seems to have associated roof-tiles with height and open air and so the next five riddles, riddles 7–11 are airborne and largely meteorological: *Fumus* ('Smoke'). *Nebula* ('Cloud'), *Pluvia* ('Rain'), *Glacies* ('Ice'), and *Nix* ('Snow'). Within the group itself there is the progression from the cloud (a relation of smoke) to riddles on water in its various states, starting with rain, the state in which water is most closely associated with clouds. The 'water' riddles bring us to the next group *Flumen et Piscis* ('River and Fish'), *Navis* ('Ship') and *Pullus in Ovo* ('Chicken in the Egg'). The first two riddles suggest that the continuing theme here is related to water, however the egg riddle reveals that, although water may be the image that brought us here, the common theme of these three is the most abstract so far: they are all dependent upon something else; the fish upon the river, the ship upon the sea, and the chicken upon the egg.

From the nascent chicken, the *Aenigmata* turns to living things. The next twenty-four riddles are on animals: *Vipera* ('Viper'), *Tinea* ('Bookworm'), *Aranea* ('Spider'), *Coclea* ('Snail'), *Rana* ('Frog'), *Testudo* ('Tortoise'), *Talpa* ('Mole'), *Formica* ('Ant'), *Musca* ('Fly'), *Curculio* ('Weevil'), *Mus* ('Mouse'), *Grus* ('Crane'), *Cornix* ('Crow'), *Vespertilio* ('Bat'), *Ericius* ('Hedgehog'), *Pediculus* ('Louse'), *Phoenix* ('Phoenix'), *Taurus* ('Bull'), *Lupus* ('Wolf'), *Vulpes* ('Fox'), *Capra* ('Goat'), *Porcus* ('Pig'), *Mula* ('Mule'), *Tigris* ('Tiger') and finally *Centaurus* ('Centaur'). Within this group there are several overlapping subsections, linked by a network of associations, similarities, dissimilarities, theme, content and even source material. The viper and the bookworm, for example, are linked by their unusual and destructive sources of nourishment. The snail, frog, tortoise, mole and ant, at least in Symphosius' depiction of them, are all marked by their self-sufficiency. The fly, weevil and the mouse are scavenging pests. The crane, crow and the bat are flying creatures.[11] However, the grouping of the louse, phoenix and bull is, perhaps the most interesting. It is based on its sources rather than con-

11 Unlike his Anglo-Latin imitators, Symphosius is not especially interested in bird riddles, nor does he represent birds in an especially positive light.

tent since all three riddles allude to famous ancient Greek narratives. *Pediculus* is a riddle taken from the story of Homer's death, phoenix is a mythical creature, and the bull riddle turns on the fact that the mythological figure, Taurus, shares his name with the generic name of his kind. The theme in the story of Taurus of hybrid parentage is revived a couple of riddles later in *Capra, Mula*, *Tigris,* and *Centaurus,* all of which have to do with abnormal parentage. This is obvious in the case of the centaur[12] and mule, and, as the riddle itself makes clear, the tiger is included because of the belief in the ancient world that certain animals, including tigers, conceived by the wind:[13] 'et mihi dat ventus natos nec quaero maritum' (37.3) ('the wind gives me children and I do not seek a husband'). The most complex example, however, is in *Capra*, which refers to the mythic goat who nursed the god Jupiter; a development of the idea of hybrid parentage to include the rearing of offspring of a different kind. *Capra*, *Taurus* and *Centaurus* also group with *Phoenix* as a collection of mythical creatures and creatures from myth. In a sense this also forms an association between *Capra* and the following riddle, *Porcus*, which, as the creature says, has divinity within it 'si littera prima periret' (36.3) ('if the first letter disappears'). Interestingly, this group is also structured in terms of dissimilarity, so that the predatory wolf, fox, and tiger are juxtaposed against their prey, primarily domesticated animals such as the goat, pig, and even the mule.

From riddles on fauna, Symphosius moves to flora. Riddles 40–66 are concerned with plants: *Papaver* ('Poppy'), *Malva* ('Mallow'), *Beta* ('Beetroot'), *Cucurbita* ('Gourd'), *Cepa* ('Onion'), *Rosa* ('Rose') and *Viola* ('Violet'). In many of these, Symphosius creates obscurity by describing plants in terms of animal imagery. This section is also marked by inversions. Beetroot, whose edible part grows under the ground, is placed next to the gourd, whose character as a hanging plant is emphasized for greatest contrast. The onion, a sharp-smelling and rather ugly plant is contrasted with the rose, a fragrant and beautiful one. Yet both have their own defences. *Rosa* and *Viola*, the scented flower riddles, lead into the next group, *Tus* ('Frankincense'), *Murra* ('Myrrh') and *Ebur* ('Ivory'), all of which are precious commodities. Here the inversion is between nature and civilization. These three are natural substances whose preciousness derives from processes of refinement that are the mark of civilization. Situated at the half way

12 There are several different accounts of the origin of the centaurs. Chiron, perhaps the most famous centaur and the teacher of culture heroes such as Achilleus and Theseus, is the son of Saturn (disguised as a horse) and the nymph Philyra (Bibl. 1.2.4). However, his lineage is exceptional. Most centaurs are descended from Ixion and Nephele (an eidolon of Hera devised by Zeus), or, in alternative tradition, from Centaurus and the Magnesian mares. It is not clear whether Symphosius has a specific tradition in mind when composing this riddle. **13** Aristotle was among those who subscribed to the idea. However, interestingly, the only extant references to this belief in relation to tigers belongs to late antiquity. (See Opp. Cyn. 1. 320, 3. 350 ff.) References are strikingly absent from earlier sources such as Aristotle, where we might reasonably expect to find them. This rare, if inconclusive, clue supports the now accepted dating of Symphosius as roughly fifth century.

mark, these three riddles bring us back to the opening themes of the collection and in particular, to those of the first three riddles which are also concerned with objects commodified by the civilized world.

By contrast, the next set of riddles, 50–66, *Fenum* ('Hay'), *Mola* ('Millstone'), *Farina* ('Flour'), *Vitis* ('Vine'), *Hamus* ('Hook'), *Acula* ('Needle'), *Caliga* ('Boot'), *Clavus Caligaris* ('Hob Nail'), *Capillus* ('Hair'), *Pila* ('Ball'), *Serra* ('Saw'), *Ancora* ('Anchor'), *Pons* ('Bridge'), *Spongia* ('Sponge'), *Tridens* ('Trident'), *Sagitta* ('Arrow') and *Flagellum* ('Whip'), is concerned with the concrete and the practical uses to which the natural world is put in order to support civilization. Within this group Symphosius shows human attempts to cultivate nature (*Vitis* and *Fenum*) but also to subdue it to human purposes (*Serra*, *Ancora* and *Pons*). So, while the first half of the collection might be thought of as concerned with nature's interaction with humanity, this interest in human interaction with nature establishes the theme of much of the second half; and it is significant that in the final riddle of this group, *Flagellum*, the hide of an animal is transformed by humans in order to subdue and control other creatures. This forms the link with the next riddle, *Lanterna* ('Lantern'), which turns on human use of another part of the ox or bull, the horn, from which is made the lantern cover. In this case, the horn becomes a container of light, a physical embodiment of an intangible aspect of the physical world:

> Cornibus apta cavis, tereti perlucida gyro,
> lumen habens intus, divini sideris instar,
> noctibus in mediis faciem non perdo dierum. (67.1–3)
>
> Fitted with hollow horn transparent in a smooth circle,
> Having light within, like a divine star.
> In the middle of the night, I do not lose the appearance of day.

The phenomenon of light and radiance is the central image of the next two riddles as well, and just as in *Lanterna*, the light is described as within the glass. In *Specular* ('Window Pane'), the window pane says 'perspicior penitus nec luminis arceo visus' (68.1) ('I am looked deep into and I do not prevent light being seen') and also that 'sol tamen emicat in me' (68.3) ('yet the sun shines within me'), while in *Speculum* ('Mirror'), the subject says 'fulgor inest intus radianti luce coruscus' ('radiance is within me, shining with flashing light'), so that the connection with the next riddle, *Clepsydra* ('Water Clock'), seems to be that it is also a human attempt to contain the ineffable, though in this case it is time rather than light.

From light and time, the riddles pick up on the water in *Clepsydra,* and shift to a focus on the four elements, starting with *Puteus* ('Well'). From there, Riddles 72–6, *Tubus* ('Pipe'), *Follis* ('Bellows'), *Lapis* ('Stone'), *Calx* ('Lime') and *Silex* ('Flint'), are each written so as to stress that they are the product of, or interact with a combination of two (or more) of the elements earth, fire, air or water. In *Puteus*, *Tubus*, and *Lapis* the combination is earth and water; in *Silex* it is earth

and fire; in *Follis* it is fire and air; and in *Calx* it is earth, fire, and water. As in the 'light' group – and in what we shall see is a common pattern – most of these riddles conform but one deviates slightly. In this group, five out of the six riddles are concerned with human attempts to govern or direct the elements to their own advantage but in the sixth, *Lapis*, Symphosius tells of the transformation of stones into human beings:

> Deucalion ego sum, crudeli sospes ab unda,
> affinis terrae sed longe durior illa.
> Littera decedat: volucris tum nomen habebo. (74.1–3)
>
> I am Deucalion, safe from the cruel flood,
> Akin to the earth but much harder than it.
> Let a letter leave: I shall have the name of a flying thing.

Riddles 77–81, *Rotae* ('Wheels'), *Scalae* ('Ladder Rungs'), *Scopa* ('Broom'), *Tintinnabulum* ('Bell'), and *Lagena* ('Wine Jar') relate to *Follis* (Riddle 72) rather than the directly preceding riddle, *Silex*, in that they represent basic, everyday technology from the wheel to acoustics to the firing of clay and the invention of pottery. Riddles 82–3, *Conditum* ('Spiced Wine') and *Vinum in Acetum Conversum* ('Wine Changing into Vinegar') take their cue from the wine jar riddle, while Riddles 84–5 *Malum* ('Apple') and *Perna* ('Ham') broaden the theme to include other foodstuffs. Overall, there is an emphasis on those foods which humans treat to preserve or to make edible. Riddles 86–8, *Malleus* ('Hammer'), *Pistillus* ('Pestle') and *Strigilis Aenea* ('Bronze Strigil'), are all about abrasive instruments or tools but link back to the previous group through the pestle, an implement used in preparing food, while the *strigil* has an obvious connection with the following riddle, *Balneum* ('Bath House'). Similarly, *Balneum* links with *Tessera* ('Dice') – they are to do with leisure and pleasure. The gambling in *Tessera* leads naturally to *Pecunia* ('Money'). Again, this riddle emphasizes the relationship between nature and civilization. Money is made from metal taken from the ground which, in its incarnation as coins, may be used to buy earth. This recurrent theme underscores Symphosius' fascination with the difference between the human and the natural and, in particular, with the abstract value assigned to nature by humans. Land is valuable in itself (since it produces food, fuel, and metals) while money is the abstract representation of wealth; this riddle neatly juxtaposes the two.

Pessimistically – and in a sign of things to come – *Pecunia* introduces the 'human' riddles. Until now, human beings have appeared in the riddles only by implication as the presumptive makers of tools and food, the wearers of rings and shoes, and the users of lanterns and mirrors. Occasionally, they have appeared indirectly. For example, *Lapis* refers to the mythic Deucalion and to the myth of the creation of humanity, but the riddle is about stone, not humans and it is not told from their perspective. More commonly, humans appear as incidental figures in

the existences of animals and objects. Thus, the key tells us that it minds, and is minded by, the master, while the weevil describes himself as bringing no joy to farmers. By contrast in Riddles 92–5, *Mulier Quae Geminos Pariebat* ('Woman in Labour with Twins'), *Miles Podagricus* ('Gouty Soldier'), *Luscus Alium Vendens* ('One Eyed Garlic Seller') and *Funambulus* ('Tightrope Walker'), human beings become riddle subjects in their own right for the first time. It is one of the most interesting sequences in the *Aenigmata* and it marks a change in the whole tone and significance of the cycle. There is a new mood of self-conscious pathos, psychological dislocation, decay, disfigurement, a personalized sense of individual destiny, of the past and the future and, unlike the overwhelming majority of the riddle subjects, only two of the four humans tell their own story. Interestingly, the humans are all depicted in various kinds of extremity or duress. The soldier is old, disabled and no longer able to fight. The woman in labour with twins 'paene peregit' (92.3) ('nearly perished') and tells us simply: 'plus ego sustinui quam corpus debuit unum' (92.1) ('I have sustained more than one body should'). The garlic seller has been disfigured, though we are not told how. He is one of the two humans who do not speak for themselves and his helplessness at his fate is almost mocked by the narrator of the riddle who concludes, 'Qui quod habet vendit, quod non habet unde parabit?' (94.3) ('He who sells what he has, whence will he buy what he does not?'). The last of the group, the tightrope walker, is the most positively portraited but here there is a sense of distance, in sharp contrast to the imaginatively engaged portraits of the other riddle subjects. The tightrope walker represents a different kind of extremity, negotiating the margins of what is possible by walking 'aera per medium' (95.2) ('through the middle of the air'):

> Inter lucifluum caelum terrasque iacentes,
> aera per medium docta meat arte viator.
> Semita sed brevis est, pedibus non sufficit ipsis. (95.1–3)
>
> Between light-flowing heaven and the low-lying earth,
> A traveller passes through the air by expert skill.
> But the path is narrow; it is not sufficient for his feet themselves.

These four characters are without mythic or literary precedent. They appear to be the unique literary creations and perhaps the product of direct observation. Although their activities are generic, their depictions are individual. They are not type characters. So, while the soldier and woman in labour are engaged in universal human activities associated with survival, and the one-eyed garlic seller and the tightrope walker in the almost equally universal occupations of commerce and entertainment, Symphosius has drawn four distinct psychological portraits. The one-eyed garlic seller and the tight-roper walker are both marked as obviously exceptional but even the solider and the woman in labour, who are both engaged in what are, perhaps, the defining tasks of their genders, are exceptional. The soldier is old and infirm and lacks the definitional ability of a soldier,

the ability to fight. The woman, by contrast, is performing the definitional role of women in many ancient societies by giving birth. In fact, she is surpassing her role in that she is giving birth to twins – regarded as a prodigy in the ancient world. All four, then, stand in the starkest contrast to the most famous riddle on humans in the ancient world, the Sphinx's riddle which, interestingly, is one of the few famous ancient riddles that Symphosius did not adapt for his collection. The riddle of the Sphinx, to which the answer is 'Human Being', describes the generic facts of human development and aging in their most universal form:

> ἐστι δίπουν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τετράπον, οὗ μία φωνὴ,
> καὶ τρίπον, ἀλλάσσει δὲ φύσιν μόνον, ὅσσ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν
> ἑρπετὰ γίνονται, καὶ ἀν' αἰθέρα καὶ κατὰ πόντον.
> ἀλλ' ὁπόταν πλείστοισιν ἐρειδόμενον ποσὶ βαίνῃ,
> ἔνθα τάχος γυίοισιν ἀφαυρότατον πέλει αὐτοῦ.
>
> (Asklepiades frag. 21b 4–8)

> Two-footed and four-footed and three-footed upon the earth, it has a single voice, and alone of all those on land or in the air or sea it changes form. And when it goes supported on three feet, then the speed of its limbs is weakest.[14]

It seems that such a generalizing riddle may not have suited the purposes of a poet fascinated by human diversity. In the *Aenigmata* Symphosius' focus, at least where human beings are concerned, is always on instances of anomaly and difference rather than on generic types or common traits. It is possible that the riddle did not appeal for another reason, too. It places humans at the centre of creation whereas, Symphosius, always depicts them on the peripheries. This is true both of their place in the scheme of the world and the schema of the riddles themselves. They are placed towards the end of the collection, which, though it suggests on the one hand that they are towards the pinnacle in the hierarchy of things (or perhaps the *rerum natura*), it also focuses on them as liminal and problematic figures.

Tantalizingly, the following riddle in the *Aenigmata* is lost. Widely agreed to be an interpolation, *De VIII tollas VII et remanet VI* maintains the correct number of one hundred riddles. However, as a mathematical riddle, it does, in some ways, fit quite nicely with the preceding riddles, as mathematics is a theoretical and pre-eminently human activity. As the only unsolved riddle in the collection, this riddle has been the source of considerable speculation. Alcuin, writing in the ninth century, seems to know the answer but, unhelpfully, only adds to the mystery by including it in his *Disputatio Regalis et Nobilissimi Iuventis Pippini cum Albino Scholastico* but without supplying the solution. Instead, Pippin 'solves' it

14 T. Gantz, *Early Greek myth: a guide to artistic and literary sources* (Baltimore, 1993), p. 496. Gantz cites Asklepiades' version as the earliest source.

enigmatically, by telling Alcuin simply that 'Pueri in scholis hoc sciunt' ('the boys in school know that').[15] It is most usually solved by modern scholars as a description of Roman finger notation: 'If a person with his two last fingers lowered for 8 raises the little finger, the one which by itself indicates 7, he now has his hand in the proper position for 6.'[16] This solution was first proposed by Gesner and Kraus in 1720, and although others have been proposed in the meantime, this is in many ways the least problematic. Ohl also argues that the riddle refers to a kind of finger mathematics, though his solution is slightly different in the details: 'hold up one hand, spreading thumb and forefinger so as to form a V; these plus the three remaining digits can be read as VIII. Depress the V and two digits; one is left, which, plus the five on the other hand, makes six.'[17]

This leaves the final four riddles, and the four most elusive riddle subjects of the *Aenigmata*: *Umbra* ('Shadow'), *Echo* ('Echo'), *Somnus* ('Somnus/Sleep') and *Monumentum* ('Tombstone'). Each of these is at a remove from something else; each exists because of an absence. A shadow is the reflection of, but is not, a solid body; an echo is the reflection of, but is not, the voice; and the dreams of sleep (the real subject of *Somnus*) are the reflection of, but are not, our waking life. Indeed, Symphosius tells us that sleep shows 'varias … figuras' (99.1) ('various images') not only of waking life, but also of imagined, and often fearful, things. *Monumentum*, the final riddle, is a marker, if not a reflection of, death. It exists because of death and is the most important sign of absence in European culture. The tombstone interrogates the conception of the human from another vantage: the body is in the grave, the name is on the tombstone, but the human is gone. So *Monumentum* marks the gap between life and death but also between language and the reality:

> Nomen habens hominis post ultima fata relinquor;
> nomen inane manet, sed dulcis vita profugit. (100.1–2)
>
> I remain, preserving the name of a man after death
> The hollow name remains, but sweet life has fled.

It is a perfect final riddle. The writing on the tombstone links *Monumentum* back to the 'writing' theme at the beginning of the collection – or, as it is now demonstrated to be, the cycle. Since *Monumentum* is part of the initial grouping, it is as much part of the beginning of the sequence as its end. This circularity is confirmed by the echoing of the lemmata of the first and final riddles, a relation of assonance which neither shares with its neighbour. The opening pair is *Graphium/ Harundo* and the closing pair is *Somnus/ Monumentum*. Thus, *Monumentum* completes the circle by forming a half rhyme with *Graphium* and so the collection loops back upon itself.[18]

15 C.H. Beeson, *Primer of medieval Latin* (London, 1925). **16** J.H. Turner, 'Roman elementary mathematics: the operations', *Classical Journal,* 47 (1951), 63–74 and 106–8, at p. 106. **17** Ohl, *Enigmas*, p. 131. **18** John Donne uses a similar structure in *La Corona*. *La Corona* is a

The writing of the *stylus* is ephemeral, while the pathos of *Monumentum* comes from the futility of the attempt to transcend the ephemeral by erecting a lasting monument to the dead individual. Yet, as we have seen, the riddle also envisages that even death gives way to life: '[v]ita tamen superest morti' (100.3) ('[n]evertheless, life survives death after the time of life'). Like the Phoenix who claims in one of the earlier riddles that '[v]ita mihi mors est, morior si coepero nasci;/sed prius est fatum leti, quam lucis origo' (31.1–2) ('[l]ife to me is death; I die if I begin to be born;/ But the doom of death is before the beginning of life'), *Monumentum*, proclaims that life and death are part of an endless cycle in which endings and beginnings are inextricably entwined.

The early riddles of Symphosius' collection are often (though not always) light-hearted, in the vein of the witty and linguistically dexterous *Graphium*. However, as the collection progresses towards *Monumentum,* the riddles become increasingly sombre.[19] The body of the *Aenigmata* is a catalogue of the empirical and the finite but in his final riddles, Symphosius looks beyond this. At the very end of the collection, Symphosius asserts that '[v]ita tamen superest morti post tempora vitae' (100.3) ('[n]evertheless, life survives death after the time of life'). This final line of the *Aenigmata* is also a return to the Saturnalian context of the *Praefatio*. It expresses the festival's celebration of, on the one hand, time, seasonal, and cyclical change, and misrule and reversal on the other. Unlike a teleological view in which events build upon each other in a linear progression towards an ultimate goal, the Saturnalia celebrates a world constantly in flux, always moving on and always returning. Temporarily, the high-born are mocked and the low-born raised to power. The festival of Saturn, the god of time, celebrates the turning of the year and so enshrines the conception of circular or cyclical time. Within this circular conception, Symphosius emphasizes images of reversal, renewal and return.

Ultimately, it is this cyclic conception of the world that informs every aspect of the *Aenigmata* and is its overarching theme. The opening image is of the seasons (re)turning: 'Annua Saturni dum tempora festa redirent' (*Prae* 1) ('When the time of the feasts of Saturn was making its annual return'). Similarly, the first riddle is about a cycle, this time, of writing itself. The *stylus* writes and erases and writes again (1.1–3). Even Symphosius' syntax enacts reversal; the undoing of the *stylus*' actions is positioned before their doing, 'altera pars revocat quidquid pars

cycle of poems in which the last line of every poem is reprised as the first line of the next. The final poem, 'Ascension', ends with the line 'Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise'. This becomes the first line of the first poem, giving the poem its circular 'crown' structure. A.J. Smith (ed.), *John Donne: the complete English poems* (London, 2005). **19** The three final riddles, *Umbra*, *Echo* and *Somnus* have morbid overtones. In addition to signifying 'shadow', *umbra* may refer to the ghosts of the dead. In the plural the word can refer to the Underworld. *Echo* too is imbued with gloomy associations since the nymph, Echo, loses the power to speak for herself as she loses her corporeal form and transforms into an intangible sound – a kind of death. Finally, sleep and death are indissolubly linked in ancient thought. In the *Iliad* they are described as twins (Hom. *Il*. 16. 681).

altera fecit' (1.3) ('one part undoes what the other has done'). Later, in *Murra*, the final line of the riddle also reverses the order in which events occurred. Symphosius speaks first of the 'laetus honor frondis' (48.3) ('happy glory of green boughs') that is, of the tree which Myrrha[20] eventually becomes, and then of the, as yet, untransformed woman as the 'imago doloris' (48.3) ('image of sorrow'). As we shall see, this narrative of Myrrha's transformation is part of an intertextual fabric of aetiological myths which underpins the collection, all recounting new beginnings from old endings.[21] So, the *Aenigmata* expresses reversals and cycles in every way; in its mythic intertext, ideas, images, word play, syntax and, perhaps most significantly, in its structure. To begin and end this encyclopaedia with riddles on writing defines the *Aenigmata* as an exploration through writing of the nature of things.

There is another, equally important, consequence of the structure of the cycle, which is that it creates multiple viewpoints. One of the most striking aspects of the *Aenigmata* is that Symphosius endows inanimate things and animals with a voice and consciousness. Animal subjects and objects speak directly in the first person and the audience is encouraged to identify with them and their concerns. In fact, there are only ten riddles (*Flumen et Piscis*, *Pediculus*, *Pons*, *Tubus*, *Silex*, *Rotae*, *Balneum*, *Luscus Alium Vendens*, *Funambulus*, and *De VIII tollas VII et remanet VI*) which are not written in the first person and, significantly, most of these are *not* about animals, but about human figures or the products of human civilization. In fact, the exceptions prove the rule: *Pediculus*, for example, is a third-person animal riddle but here Symphosius is retelling an old riddle (Homer's riddle) rather than composing a new one. So not only is it more closely associated with culture than with a genuine attempt to imaginatively identify with lice but Symphosius has also retained the original third-person perspective because the riddle does not work without it.[22] The range of first person narratives means that the overwhelming effect of the *Aenigmata* is to force us to see in new ways and from new perspectives. More interestingly still, the riddles tend to alienate the audience from the familiar human perspectives and align us instead with the animal, vegetable, mineral, meteorological (and sometimes even the man-made) Other; a radical reconceptualizing of the world fitting for a misrule festival. In most of the human riddles, the human figure is not distinguished from the elements in their environment: the mother from her twins, the garlic-seller from his garlic, the soldier from his battle line. Thus, their physical boundaries and distinct human identity are blurred. Indeed, in *Mulier Quae Geminos Pariebat*,

20 'Myrrha', the most usual Latin word for 'myrrh', is the name usually given to the nymph. When referring to the resin or the plant, I have used the usual English spelling, 'myrrh'. Symphosius, characteristically, blurs the issue by using the less common Latin word for myrrh, '*murra*'. **21** Aetiological myths explain the origins of things, most usually through the transformation of a person or creature. **22** Symphosius often reworks traditional, ancient paradoxes, many of which, if they are not in the first person already, are easily transferred into it. *Pediculus* and *Flumen et Piscis* are exceptions to this rule.

the mother begins by telling her story in the first person, but retreats into the third person: 'tertia paene peregit' (92.3) ('the third nearly perished'). Here we see her alienated from herself by her own anguish. In Symphosius' representation, humans are distant and physically removed by contrast with the vividly realized psychological immediacy of, for instance, the vine in *Vitis*.

Having alienated the audience from the normative human perspective, Symphosius' riddles encourage us to adopt the viewpoint and stance of a range of Others. Rather than present us with a hierarchical view which privileges the human perspective, Symphosius seems to delight in giving a voice to all who are usually denied it. In the case of *Echo*, Symphosius subverts the myth in which Juno curses Echo so that she cannot speak for herself and devotes the entire riddle to Echo telling her own story:

> Virgo modesta nimis legem bene servo pudoris;
> ore procax non sum, nec sum temeraria linguae;
> ultro nolo loqui, sed do responsa loquenti. (98.1–3)
>
> An extremely shy girl, I observe well the law of decency.
> I am not impudent of mouth, nor rash of tongue;
> I do not wish to speak on my own initiative, but give answers to a person who speaks.

Interestingly, it is clear that Juno has already cursed her; Echo describes her inability to speak for herself; an intriguing paradox in a riddle collection full of the accounts of language-less animals. Interestingly, too, she uses this power of speech to reject Juno's rationale for cursing her by stressing her own morality.

From riddle to riddle, the reader is forced to shift perspectives and inevitably allegiances as well. Each new perspective may be the opposite of the previous one, tangential to it, or only slightly divergent from it. This dynamic multiplicity ensures that the *Aenigmata* cannot be reduced to dichotomies any more than to a single perspective.

ENTITLED SOLUTIONS IN THE *AENIGMATA*

In the light of this, I would like to return to the question with which I started, why write solved riddles? As the complexities of the structure and allusions of the *Aenigmata* make clear, Symphosius is interested in engaging his audience in intellectual challenges. In fact, he spells it out in his *Præfatio:*

> Annua Saturni dum tempora festa redirent
> perpetuo semper nobis sollemnia ludo,
> post epulas laetas, post dulcia pocula mensae,
> deliras inter vetulas puerosque loquaces,
> cum streperet late madidae facundia linguae,

> tum verbosa cohors studio sermonis inepti
> nescio quas passim magno de nomine nugas
> est meditata diu; sed frivola multa locuta est.
> Nec mediocre fuit magni certaminis instar,
> ponere diverse vel solvere quaeque vicissim.
> Ast ego, ne solus foede tacuisse viderer,
> qui nihil adtuleram mecum quod dicere possem,
> hos versus feci subito †discrimine vocis†.[23]
> Insanos inter sanum non esse necesse est.
> Da veniam, lector, quod non sapit ebria Musa. (Præ. 3–17)
>
> When the time of the feasts of Saturn was making its annual return –
> always a ritual of endless fun for us –
> after joyous banquets, after the sweet drinking cups at the table,
> between revelling old women and prattling slaves,
> when the eloquence of drunken tongues resounded far,
> then the garrulous crowd in eagerness for foolish speech
> long pondered over I know not what frivolities under grand names
> but frivolous were the many things said.
> It was no ordinary matter, but resembled a mighty contest;
> each one in turn to put various questions or to solve them.
> But I, not to seem the only one to be disgracefully silent,
> who had brought nothing with me which I was able to say,
> I improvised these verses […]
> It is necessary not to be sober among the insane.
> Be indulgent, reader, because the drunken Muse shows no sense.

Here Symphosius stresses that the whole point of the occasion is for the audience to ponder the answers at length and that it 'nec mediocre fuit magni certaminis instar,/ ponere diverse vel solvere quaeque vicissim' (*præ.* 11–12) ('it was no ordinary matter, but resembled a mighty contest; each one in turn to put various questions or to solve them.'). However, rather than making his audience guess a simple answer, it seems that Symphosius has found a way to use this aspect of his riddles, as he has with every other, to express and enact his vision of diversity. Typically, a riddle starts with ambiguity; its disparate clues suggest various possibilities, none of which turn out to be completely satisfactory, but ultimately, the conundrum is resolved by a single answer. So, a solved riddle is an expression of certainty. In this sense, riddles tend to move from a complex of potential answers to a single, right answer. By contrast, each riddle in the *Aenigmata* begins with a simple entitled 'answer' but, I suggest, as the riddle

23 Many reconstructions of this line have been suggested; indeed, almost every edition reads it differently. None, however, is entirely satisfactory. See Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii*, p. 4.

unfolds, this initial 'answer' is increasingly problematized. Symphosius uses language in such a way that although the clues are (in most cases) consistent with the stated answer they are suggestive of other answers as well. Thus Symphosius' riddles move their audience, not from complexity to certainty but in the opposite direction, from certainty to complexity.

Although entitled solutions[24] became a standard, generic feature later on, it was evidently unusual in Symphosius' time.[25] Ancient critical works on riddling suggest that the very idea of presenting a solution defeated the purpose of a riddle. Aulus Gellius says of his riddle[26] that 'reliquimus inenarratum, ut legentium coniecturas in requirendo acueremus' (*Noctes Atticae*, XII, 6, 1) ('I have left it unanswered, in order that I might whet the reasoning of my readers in seeking for an answer.') In order to avoid both negating the purpose of the riddle, and leaving the riddle unanswered, he advises his readers to look up the answer for themselves: 'Hoc qui nolit diutius aput sese quaerere, inveniet quid sit in M. Varronis *De Sermone Latino ad Marcellum* libro secundo' (*Noctes Atticae*, XII, 6, 3), 'He who does not wish to puzzle himself all day will find the answer in the second book of Varro's *On the Latin language, addressed to Marcellus*.'[27]

So, in this respect, Symphosius' *Aenigmata* are a significant break with generic conventions. However, it seems that he may have been picking up on another literary play that had arisen around riddling. Because it was not unusual for riddles in the ancient world to become widely known – just as with modern riddles or jokes – writers would retell the riddle, but play off against the universally known answer by supplying another that fitted the clues but broke the audience expectation.[28] Although, so far as I am aware, scholars have not identified this strategy as a typical kind of ancient riddling, many examples of it may be found

24 This surprising aspect of Symphosius' riddling has attracted almost no scholarly interest. Howe has written on the same feature in Aldhelm, although there the feature is not so surprising since Aldhelm is following Symphosius' model. See N. Howe, 'Aldhelm's *Enigmata* and Isidorian etymology', *Anglo Saxon England*, 14 (1985), 37–59, at p. 37. **25** As noted in the introduction, this feature was probably copied from Martial's *Xenia* – as Bergamin notes, these epigrams have 'in alcuni casi titoli identici a quelli di Simposio' ('in some cases identical titles to those of Symphosius'). Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii*, p. xix. **26** Gellius' riddle consists of three verses, just like Symphosius' riddles: 'semel minusne an bis minus sit nescio,/an utrumque eorum; ut quondam audivi dicier,/Iovi ipsi regi noluit concedere.' (XII, 6, 3); 'I don't know if he's minus once or twice,/or both of these, as I once heard it said,/he who would not give way to King Jove himself.' However, as we see, the comparison ends there, for Gellius' riddle is constructed around a play on words, unlike Symphosius, whose riddles usually lack such a 'trick' but instead rely on enigmatic, partial or metaphorical descriptions of things. **27** Gellius' solution to this perennial problem for anyone writing down riddles is particularly ingenious. However, there are many possibilities. By the late Renaissance collections of riddles such as *Riddles of Heraclitus and Democrates* were being published with solutions printed *below* the riddle itself so that the answer came *after* the question, while the modern convention is to print solutions in microscopic font upside down at the bottom of the page. **28** Not surprisingly, this also happens with modern riddles and jokes. Essentially, it is a textual strategy that works on the same principle as a meme.

in ancient sources, enough to suggest that it may well have been a common kind of word play. In fact, in *The dinner guests*, Cynulcus, a Cynic philosopher, specifically refers to this technique of playing a new solution off against a universally known answer when he speaks of a 'a well-known riddle about a fish recast as an insulting joke directed at a rival musician'[29] or about the hetaera who 'recasts the riddle posed by the Sphinx and solved by Oedipus… into an obscene advertisement for her sexual expertise.'[30] However, we also have literary examples. For instance, we know from Athenaeus that the following well-known riddle was variously answered 'bear', 'eagle', 'serpent', or 'dog':[31]

> τί ταὐτὸν ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ ἐν θαλάττῃ (Athen. 10.453 b)
>
> What is the same in the sky, on the earth, and in the sea?[32]

In *Wasps* Aristophanes adapts this riddle in order to mock the cowardice of Kleonymos who is supposed to have dropped his shield so as to escape more quickly and save himself during the battle of Delium in 424 BCE. The slave, Sosias, says that men may now ask each other a new riddle:

> τί ταὐτὸν ἐν γῇ τ' ἀπέβαλεν κἀν οὐρανῷ
> κἀν τῇ θαλάττῃ θηρίον τὴν ἀσπίδα (lines 23–4)
>
> What is that brute which throws away its shield alike in air, in ocean, in the field?[33]

The implication in the original riddle of the boundless powers of that any creature which could inhabit the earth, the seas, and the heavens, becomes a measure of boundless cowardice. Athenaeus quotes a similar example, this time of Antiphanes' reworking of the riddle which the fishermen ask Homer. This riddle runs:

> ὅσσ' ἕλομεν λιπόμεσθα, ὅσ' οὐχ ἕλομεν φερόμεσθα (*Cert.* 325)
>
> The ones we caught we left behind, the ones we missed we carry.[34]

The answer is, of course, 'lice', but Antiphanes adapts – rather more elaborately than Aristophanes – it so as to give it a different solution:

29 L. McClure, *Courtesans at table: gender and Greek literary culture in Athenaeus* (New York, 2003), p. 270. **30** Ibid., p. 266. **31** 'τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶν ὁμωνυμία καὶ γὰρ ἄρκτος καὶ ὄφις καὶ αἰετὸς καὶ κύων ἐστὶν ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐν γῇ καὶ ἐν θαλάσσῃ' (Athen. 10.453 b) ('This involves the use of equivocal words; for the bear, the serpent, the eagle and the dog are found in the sky, on earth and in the sea.') Gulick (trans.), *Deipnosophists,* p. 555. Gulick explains that the bear is 'the Great and Little Bear, also the bear-crab' the snake is the 'constellation Serpens, also a kind of fish, Ophidium' and the eagle is the 'constellation Aquila, also *Myliobatis aquila*, a kind of ray'. **32** Ibid., p. 555. **33** B. Rogers (trans.), *Aristophanes: Wasps* (London, 1924), p. 411. **34** M. West (trans.), *The contest of Homer and Hesiod* (Harvard, 2007), p. 351.

> …ὁπότε προστάξαι τέ τις
> εἰπεῖν ἐφεξῆς ὅ τι φέρων τις μὴ φέρει,
> ἐγέλων νομίζων λῆρον οὐκ ἄν γενόμενον
> οὐδέποτέ γ', οἶμαι, πρᾶγμα παντελῶς λέγειν,
> ἐνέδρας δ' ἕνεκα. νυνὶ δὲ τοῦτ' ἔγνωχ' ὅτι
> ἀληθές ἦν φέρομεν γὰρ ἄνθρωποι δέκα
> ἔρανόν τιν', οὐ φέρει δὲ τούτων τὴν φορὰν
> οὐδείς. σαφῶς οὖν ὅ τι φέρων τις μὴ φέρει,
> τοῦτ' ἔστιν, ἦν θ' ὁ γρῖφος ἐνταῦθα ῥέπων. (Athen. 10. 448 f–449 b)
>
> … whenever a man enjoined us to guess in succession what somebody brought which he did not bring, I used to laugh, thinking he was talking drivel of a thing which could never by any possibility happen, just to catch us. But today I have come to realize that it is true after all; for we are ten men contributing to a club, and yet not one of us contributes any contribution of these viands. Plainly, then, what somebody brings which he does not bring is this, and that riddle applies to us here.[35]

Here again, the audience was obviously familiar with Homer's riddle and its usual solution so, as in Aristophanes, the play between the two solutions is the source of the joke.

Interestingly, in all these cases, the writer adapts the well-known riddle so as to comment on a current situation, which perhaps, suggests that this kind of riddling was particularly used as a mechanism of topical social critique – certainly it is a form well-suited to it.[36] However, the drawback with this technique is that it is only possible to use in the retelling of riddles that are well-known to the audience and since Symphosius' riddles are largely original, his audience could not possibly know the answers. In his case, it is only possible to use the technique by first establishing the answers to his riddles in the lemmata and then problematizing them as each riddle unfolds. It is an ingenious solution and it implies that, we should at least consider the possibility that, despite the lack of overt political statements and despite his self-effacing *præfatio*, that Symphosius was interested in using his *Aenigmata* as a vehicle for commenting on cultural and social debates.

The adaptation of the technique so that it can be used with original riddles has one other effect; it means that the comic aspect inherent in those instances where the writer plays off against a famous riddle is not present here. Usually,

35 Gulick (trans.), *Deipnosophists,* pp 533–5. **36** Tellingly, playing alternative answers against a riddle's 'real' answer is a common feature of later riddles in the Symphosian tradition. It is most obviously found in the Obscene riddles of the Exeter Book, though some critics even detect it in the riddles of the Child ballads. See D. Atkinson, *The English traditional ballad: theory, method and practice* (Burlington, 2002). It is perhaps also present in Thomas Wyatt's 'A riddle of a gift given by a lady'.

the fact that audience would be anticipating the well-known answer right up to the point where they are surprised with a new solution produces a comic effect which comes from disappointed expectations. However, in Symphosius' work, the audience is faced with an 'answer' before they know the question. So rather than being abruptly surprised by a punchline, reading the riddle involves a continuous comparison between the already established answer and each new clue. Rather than a funny confusion, the effect here is disconcerting. Since these clues do not always seem to entirely confirm the stated answer, the process is contemplative, and the audience feels progressively more uncertain. Rather than displacing one answer with another, Symphosius' text encourages us to see that the entitled solution is one among many possible answers. The audience's certainty is replaced by the sense that the riddle – and the world – may be more complex than it at first appeared.

The plurality inherent in the proliferation of possible answers to any single riddle is reinforced by the plurality of the content and imagery of the *Aenigmata* themselves. For example, many of the riddle subjects define themselves as both singular and plural. Sometimes this is in rather modest, and not especially significant ways, as in *Rotae* or *Scalae*. In *Rotae*, the wheels proclaim 'labor omnibus unus' (77.2) ('a single task is for all'), while in *Scalae*, the ladder's rungs describe themselves as 'concordi fabrica quas unus continet ordo' (78.1–2) ('those who one row held in a united shape'). However the idea takes a more philosophical expression in *Centaurus* where the creature declares, 'dissimilis mihi sum, quia non sum unus et unus' (39.2) ('I am unlike myself because I am not one and one').[37] It is perhaps not surprising, that Symphosius most consistently chose to use such imagery in those riddles that refer to mythic ideas, both Christian and Greek. In some sense, these are the riddles which most directly address religious questions and therefore questions about the nature of the world. Given the political and cultural debates which dominated Symphosius' north Africa, it is significant, but not surprising, that Symphosius' pluralism is most evident here.

CHRISTIAN IMAGERY IN THE *AENIGMATA*

It may seem surprising that a pagan such as Symphosius would write riddles with Christian allusions, however, as Bergamin argues, Symphosius was deeply influenced by Christian philosophers and theologians such as Augustine, whose influence she argues is pervasive throughout the *Aenigmata*.[38] What is less surprising is the aspect of Christianity that seems most to have interested him; the idea of

37 In this phrase 'non sum unus et unus' we see Symphosius' characteristic negation of a statement yet to be made. See below. The full riddle runs: 'Quattuor insignis pedibus manibusque duabus, /dissimilis mihi sum, quia sum non unus et unus;/ et uehor et gradior, quia me mea corpora portant.'; 'Distinguished by four feet and two hands,/ I am unlike myself because I am not one and yet I am one;/ I both ride and walk, because my body carries me.' **38** Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii*, p. 180.

the triune god, an idea which must have seemed to him to epitomize plurality. (Indeed, Bergamin suggests that of all Augustine's work, it is *De Trinitate* which had the greatest influence on the *Aenigmata*.) We have already seen this in the fascination with the centaur as a creature which can describe himself as 'non sum unus et unus' ('I am not one and one'), however, the most striking example of this uniting of the singular and the plural is in Symphosius' triune riddles, *Conditum*, *Mulier Quae Geminos Pariebat* and *Tridens*, each of which bears a title which does not reflect the solution hinted at in its 'Trinitarian' imagery. These are especially complex riddles and it is worth considering them closely, particularly in terms of their mechanics and imagery.

The first is *Conditum* ('Spiced Wine'), a riddle which, in Bergamin's view, is constructed around an extended double play on the 'termini della questione dogmatica trinitaria'[39] ('terms of the dogmatic question of the Trinity'):

> Tres olim fuimus qui nomine iungimur uno;
> ex tribus est unus, et tres miscentur in uno;
> quisque bonus per se: melior qui continet omnes. (82.1–3)
>
> Once we were three who are joined by one name
> Out of three comes one, and three are mixed in one;
> Each good in itself: better he who has all.

Here Symphosius has clearly privileged the symbolic since this is, in fact, a rather odd recipe for spiced wine as we can see by comparing it to other ancient recipes. The late antique cookery manual, *De Re Coquinaria*, begins with a far more elaborate version made up of many more ingredients, while Pliny devotes Book 14 of *Historia Naturalis* to a range of complex variations, all of which also involve a large number of ingredients. The fact that Symphosius' riddle refers to fewer ingredients – Symphosius does not even make it clear *which* three substances 'miscentur in uno' (82.2) ('are mixed in one') – suggests, as Bergamin has, that he has in mind the work of his contemporary, Apponius, who regards *conditum* as a metaphor for the Trinity (*Cant.* 11, 20). Spiced or mixed wine was a common metaphor for the Trinity among Christian writers in late antiquity; it is even used most famously, by Saint Augustine in *De Trinitate*. Augustine uses the metaphor of three ingredients to illustrate the relationship of amor ('love'), mens ('mind') and notitia ('knowledge'), which, he writes, is itself an 'imago trinitatis' (Aug. De Tri. 9, 18) ('image of the Trinity'). It is significant, not only that Symphosius uses this imagery, but that he emphasizes the same aspects as Augustine; that the drink is both one and three and also that the parts are mixed, yet separate:

> Num ergo sicut ex vino et aqua et melle una fit potio et singula per totum sunt et tamen tria sunt. (Aug. *De Tri.* 9, 7)

39 Ibid.

> It is, then, as one drink is made from wine and water and honey, and each is through the whole, and yet they are three things.

The next riddle, *Mulier Quae Geminos Pariebat*, draws similarly on an image which has specific significance in the Christian tradition; the image of the woman in labour with twins which Jesus uses in the *Gospel of John* in speaking of his own death and resurrection:

> Mulier cum parit, tristitiam habet, quia venit hora eius; cum autem pepererit puerum, iam non meminit pressurae propter gaudium, quia natus est homo in mundum.
> Et vos igitur nunc quidem tristitiam habetis, iterum autem videbo vos, et gaudebit cor vestrum (John 16:21–2)
>
> A woman, when she is in labour, hath sorrow, because her hour is come; but when she hath brought forth the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. So also you now indeed have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice.

What is striking here is that the pregnant woman, a universal image that might have been used in any number of ways, describes herself, like Jesus, as part of a trinity: 'tres animas habui' (92.2) ('I had three souls'). Moreover, she describes her labour in parallel terms. At the point of crisis, Jesus asks 'My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?' (Mt 27:46) and 'yielded up the ghost' (Mt 27:50), while the woman also describes herself as abandoned by the other two souls of her trinity at her greatest moment of suffering: 'discessere duae' ('two left'), while 'tertia paene peregit' (92.3) ('the third nearly perished'). This last point is a dramatic divergence from the Christian story but for a non-Christian, it might seem that Jesus too 'paene peregit', since he dies but does not perish.

Finally, we come to *Tridens*; perhaps the least 'Trinitarian' of Symphosius' triune riddles. As with the others we find the repetition of the idea of the three-in-one: 'Tres mihi sunt dentes, unus quos continet ordo' (64.1) ('I have three teeth, held by one row'). The trident claims 'meque tenet numen, ventus timet, aequora curant' (64.3) ('and a divinity wields me, the wind fears me, the seas attend me') and while the obvious referent is the god Neptune, it is, perhaps significant that in Matthew the astonished crowds exclaim of Jesus, 'Qualis est hic, quia venti et mare obediunt ei?' (Mt 8:27) ('What manner of man is this, for even winds and sea obey him?'). However, what makes the riddle most interesting is its context. And here we return to the question of the interaction between pagan and Christian traditions. For, while the first two 'trinitarian' riddles seem to be playing consciously with Christian ideas, perhaps even commenting on them, this riddle repeats the paradox rather aimlessly. It seems, simply, that it had become part of the vocabulary of Symphosius' riddling. This may even be reflective of a wider cultural association. Ausonius also exploits the riddlic potential of

the triune in his *Griphus Ternarii Numeri*. In this text Ausonius, who is sometimes compared to Symphosius,[40] refers directly to the Trinity in a way that is 'not mocking or blasphemous, but typical of the author's broad-minded urbanity'.[41] This seems to me equally the spirit of Symphosius' use of Trinitarian imagery and, perhaps, reflects a shift in our understanding of pagan and Christian interaction during this period. Interestingly, Sogno argues that religion was secondary to politics in determining the alliances and friendships of the elite in late antiquity[42] and this seems to be reflected in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* in which a Christian, Evangelos, is among the guests at the feast.[43]

Although by no means the major theme, Christian imagery, allusion, and intertext are certainly ubiquitous in the *Aenigmata*. The existence of such imagery exemplifies Symphosius' engagement with the whole spectrum of ideas in currency in late antiquity. It may also reflect Stroumsa's suggestion that thinkers in late antiquity understood all 'myths as riddles';[44] an understanding that would make Christian 'myths' an obvious source.[45] Bergamin points to Christian echoes in the rain's description of itself in *Pluvia* '[e]x alto veniens' (9.1) ('I come from on high').[46] Guarducci has even argued for a Christian subtext in *Coclea*.[47] I suggest that *Speculum* and *Specular*, *Funambulus*, *Clavis, Caliga* and *Vitis*, and finally *Vinum in Acetum Conversum* should be included on such a list since each exhibits overt Christian imagery. Riddles like *Specular* and *Speculum* inevitably engage with Saint Paul's pronouncement that we see God 'per speculum in enigmate' (1 Cor 13:12) ('through a mirror in a riddle'). *Specular* begins 'perspicior' (68.1) ('I am looked through') perhaps an aural play on Paul's phrase 'per speculum'; certainly, it echoes his meaning. A similar kind of glancing, highly literate word play occurs in *Funambulus*. Symphosius describes the tightrope walker, who passes between heaven and earth, travelling a 'narrow way'. Symphosius' phrase, 'semita … brevis est' (95.3) ('the path is narrow') could not have less in common with Jesus' phrase, 'arta via' (Mt 7:14). However, Symphosius' rather startling syntax allows him, in the preceding phrase, to place 'arte' and 'viator' side by side

40 Ohl, *Enigmas,* p. 15. **41** R.P. Green (ed.), *The works of Ausonius* (Oxford, 1991), p. 445. **42** C. Sogno, *Q. Aurelius Symmachus: a political biography* (Ann Arbor, 2006). **43** Macrobius makes no definite statement of Evangelos' religion. However, the name is suggestive, as is the fact that he is initially unaware that the Saturnalian feast is taking place. In addition, Macrobius attributes to him attitudes that pagans regarded as typical of their Christian contemporaries. Macrobius does not seem to feel an incongruity in including Evangelos in the pagan festivities. Indeed, although Evangelos arrives, as I have said, without realizing that a feast is taking place, he does not scruple to join the festivities; on the contrary, he seems rather offended at not being invited with more enthusiasm. **44** G. Stroumsa, 'Myth as enigma: cultural hermeneutics in late antiquity' in G. Hasan-Rokem & D. Shulman (eds), *Untying the knot: on riddles and other enigmatic modes* (Oxford, 1996), pp 271–83, at p. 271. **45** At least one pagan philosopher, Porphry, actually classifies much Biblical material as riddles. See R. Berchman, *Porphyry against the Christians* (Leiden, 2005). **46** Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* p. 92. **47** M. Guarducci, 'La Chiciola Cristiana', *Rivista di Filologia e di Istruzione Classica*, 119 (1991), 447–56.

so that he achieves an aural echo of 'arta via'. This may seem like rather attenuated word play, but it is related to a kind of riddling described by Athenaeus in which the aim is to construct words out of the syllables of a line of poetry. This being so, we may assume that such rarefied and virtuoso word play enjoyed a certain currency in late antiquity.[48] The striking image of the 'way' which leads the tightrope walker 'aera per medium' (95.2) ('through the middle of the air') is also resonant with the Christian belief that the saved will meet God 'in aera' (1 Thes 4:17) ('in the air'). Thus, Paul writes to the Thessalonians: 'deinde nos qui vivimus qui relinquimur simul rapiemur cum illis in nubibus obviam Domino in aera et sic semper cum Domino erimus' (1 Thes 4:17) ('Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet Christ, into the air, and so shall we be always with the Lord.').

Another example of Christian echoes may be found in *Caliga* ('Boot'). Here, Symphosius returns to the Paschal imagery of *Mulier Quae Geminos Pariebat*. The riddle subject is described in terms that recall the crucified Christ: 'exanimis, lacerata, ligata, revulsa/ dedita sum terrae, tumulo sed condita non sum' (56.2–3) ('now lifeless, cut, tied, stripped/ I am consigned to the earth, but not buried in the tomb'). A more complex and ambiguous use of this imagery, is found in *Vitis*. Like the boot, the vine implies that it is buried but will not remain in its tomb: '[n]olo sepulcra pati: scio me submergere terrae' (52.3) ('I do not wish to suffer the grave; I know how to plunge under the earth'). Both *sepulchre* and *patior* (the etymon of 'passion') are familiar in the Christian religious vocabulary and the paradoxical idea that the subject of the riddle does not suffer the grave *because* it can plunge under the earth perhaps recalls Christ disappearance from the sepulchre in order to descend to Hell. The inevitable link between Christ and the vine, established by Christ's words in John 15: 'ego sum vitis vera' ('I am the true vine') prompts and reinforces this set of associations.

Since the *Aenigmata* is so specifically set in the context of the drunkenness of the Saturnalia celebrations, *Vitis* inevitably conjures associations with wine. So, we might be tempted to read this riddle as disrespectfully drawing on religious imagery only to supply a comically licentious answer instead. However, this is not at all the tone adopted in the riddles themselves. Rather, like Ausonius, Symphosius exploits the parallel between the wine and vine imagery present in both the Christian and pagan religious traditions; a point underlined by the placement of *Vitis* the primary ingredient in wine, after the riddle on flour, *Farina*, the primary ingredient in bread. *Vinum in Acetum Conversum* seems to allude quite overtly to the ideas surrounding the Eucharist in its account of vinegar changing into wine: 'sublatum nihil est, nihil est extrinsecus auctum' (83.1) ('Nothing is taken away, nothing is added') yet its nature is changing; 'quod fueram, non sum; coepi, quod non eram, esse' (83.3) ('What it was, it is not, it begins to be what it was not'). Although it cannot be regarded as a direct echo (or a source), it is intriguing to note how close this idea is to that expressed in *De Mysteriis* by Saint

48 Gulick (trans.), *Deipnosophists,* pp 578–81.

Ambrose. He here writes of the Eucharist: 'non hoc esse quod natura formavit, sed quod benedictio consecravit: majoremque vim esse benedictionis quam naturae; quia benedictione etiam natura ipsa mutatur.' (*De. Mys.* 9, 54) ('this is not what nature made, but what the blessing consecrated, and the power of blessing is greater than that of nature, because by blessing nature itself is changed.')[49] Even if this is not a direct allusion, Symphosius seems to be picking up on an idea that must have been intriguing to a pagan audience, and particularly to Symphosius, himself, who so clearly has a marked interest in metamorphoses of all kinds.

This way in which Symphosius' riddles seem to draw upon or allude to a current idea is typical of so many of Symphosius' Christian echoes. Although it is often hard to argue for direct intertextuality, Symphosius seems to be responding to a trope that must have been part of the intellectual discourse in his time among Christian theologians. Perhaps the most interesting example of this may be found in *Clavis*, a riddle often dismissed as an example of essentially trivial linguistic dexterity.[50] The riddle itself runs:

> Virtutes magnas de uiribus affero paruis
> Pando domos clausas, iterum sed claudo patentes
> Seruo domum domino, sed rursus seruor ab ipso. (4.1–3)
>
> I bring great merits with little strength
> I open shut houses, but I also shut open ones.
> I guard the house for the house-holder but in return I am guarded by him.

This paradox appears in countless Christian hymns and prayers. The earliest extant of these, and the most famous, is in Isaiah 22:22: 'dabo clavem domus David super umerum eius et aperiet et non erit qui claudat et claudet et non erit qui aperiat' ('And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open').[51] There seems to be an echo, too, in the Fourth Advent Antiphon, *O Clavis David*. In it Jesus is the key (he is addressed as 'Clavis David') which, though not bound, has the power to unbind:

49 H. Romstein (trans.), *Nicene and post-Nicene fathers: a select library of the Christian Church*, 2nd series. Vol. 10; *Ambrose: select works and letters* (Edinburgh, 1896). **50** M. Lapidge & J. Rosier, *Aldhelm: the poetic works* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 63. **51** Jesus' promise in Mt 16:19 draws on Isa 22:22: 'tibi dabo claves regni caelorum et quodcumque ligaveris super terram erit ligatum in caelis et quodcumque solveris super terram erit solutum in caelis' ('To you I will give the keys of the kingdom of the skies and whatever is bound upon the earth will be bound in the skies and whatever is freed on the earth shall be freed in the skies'). Later, addressing a more general audience, Jesus says: 'dico vobis quaecumque alligaveritis super terram erunt ligata et in caelo et quaecumque solveritis super terram erunt soluta et in caelo' (Mt 18:18) ('Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.')

> O Clavis David, et sceptrum domus Israël, qui aperis, et nemo claudit, claudis, et nemo aperuit: veni, et educ vinctum de domo carceris, sedentem in tenebris, et umbra mortis.[52]
>
> O Key of David, and rod of the House of Israel, who opens and no one closes, who closes and no one opens: come and lead those bound, lying in darkness, out of jail and the show of death.

In is interesting then that Symphosius' next riddle *Catena*, picks up where *Clavis* leaves off and continues the second half of the line from the Fourth Advent antiphon:

> Nexa ligor ferro, multos habitura ligatos;
> vincior ipsa prius, sed vincio vincta vicissim;
> exsolui multos, nec sum tamen ipsa soluta. (5.1–3)
>
> Bound, tied with iron, I will hold many bound.
> Myself bound first, yet bound I bind in turn.
> And I have freed many, yet I have not been freed myself.

The language is not as close to the second half of the antiphon as *Clavis* is to the first. Nevertheless, the fact that Symphosius has juxtaposed the two riddles seems too improbable a coincidence, especially as the shift from the imagery of opening and closing found in *Clavis* to the imagery of binding and unbinding is found widely across Christian literature, not only in the antiphon, but also in the Bible. Isaiah 22:22 emphasizes opening and closing, while the later passages from Matthew emphasize binding and unbinding.

Again, it seems too improbably a coincidence that these parallels could be accidence, given that the Advent Antiphons are sung on the days leading up to Christmas, which coincides with the Saturnalia feasts. Given the religious climate of the fourth and fifth centuries, it is difficult to believe that Symphosius could have been entirely unaware of this interplay; especially given that it seems to mirror so closely his own interests. This is an interplay which, in itself, enacts the pluralist ideology at the century of the *Aenigmata*.

CLASSICAL ALLUSION IN THE *AENIGMATA*

While Symphosius' use of Christian imagery suggests a curiosity about the religion and its ideas, his use of classical sources, unsurprisingly, betrays a much greater familiarity. He delights in puns on Greek words – in *Malum* ('Apple'), for example, he puns on μῆλον meaning 'sheep', while in *Beta*, not only is the title a bilingual pun but, according to Renhan, Symphosius' use of *tota* should make us think of τω τά.[53] However, he also plays with Greek and Roman myth

52 P. Guéranger, *The liturgical year* (Paris, 1879), p. 518. **53** R. Rehnan, 'Symphosius 41.1: a

in a range of intricate and highly complex ways. Like those riddles that draw on Christian imagery, these riddles also express plurality, but the game here is different and, again unsurprisingly, assumes a much greater familiarity with the source material on the part of the reader.

Perhaps the most striking indication of this is the fact that none of the apparently Christian imagery is fundamental to the mechanics of the riddles themselves, whereas it is in those riddles which use classical mythology. Two intricate and complex examples of Symphosius' use of classical myth in general, and of the relationship between mythic intertextuality and the mechanics of the riddle in particular, are found in *Lapis* and *Lagena*. *Lapis*, our first example, is particularly outrageous in its conceit and intertext. The riddle immediately breaks the cardinal rule of riddling by beginning with a direct statement of identity, 'Deucalion ego sum':

> Deucalion ego sum, crudeli sospes ab unda,
> affinis terrae sed longe durior illa.
> Littera decedat: uolucris tum nomen habebo. (74.1–3)
>
> I am Deucalion, safe from the cruel flood,
> Akin to the earth but much harder than it.
> Let a letter leave: I shall have the name of a flying thing.

This is such an unusual opening gambit that eighteenth-century editors such as Heumann, Lenglet, and Wernsdorf[54] preferred to adopt the doubtful variant 'Deucalionis ego sum'[55] ('I am of Deucalion') – a suggestions rejected by modern editors. Despite such an emphatic opening declaration, 'Deucalion' seems to be the wrong answer; certainly, it is in conflict with the entitled solution, but then, the entitled solution, 'lapis', is by no means a straightforward answer either. These two direct statements of the answer which *begin* this riddle are in direct and specific contradiction; according to the myth, Deucalion is the *only* human who has never been a stone, nor descended from someone who was. There is certainly a metonymic association through the myth of the re-creation of humanity after the great flood but that is not at all the same thing. Deucalion and Pyrrha, the sole survivors, pray to Themis that the human race might be restored. According to Ovid, the goddess answers with a pronouncement that is, in fact, a riddle in its own right:

> 'discedite templo
> et velate caput cinctasque resolvite vestes
> ossaque post tergum magnae iactate parentis!' (Ov. *Met.*, 1. 381–3)

literal interpretation', *Classical Quarterly*, n.s., 31 (1981), 471. **54** *L. Caecilii Firmiani Lactantii Symposium*, ed. C. Heuman (Hanover, 1722); N. Lenglet du Fresnoy (ed.), *Lactantii Opera*, II (Paris, 1748), and C. Wernsdorf, *Poetae Latini Minores*, III (Altenburg, 1782). **55** Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* p. 53.

> 'Leave the temple, and with veiled heads and loosened robes throw behind you as you go the bones of your great mother.'

Distressed by what she believes is an instruction to desecrate her mother's grave, Pyrrha refuses to obey, until Deucalion realizes that their 'magna parens' is the earth itself, and that the 'bones of the mother' must refer to the stones that are, in a sense, the earth's skeleton. Thereupon, Deucalion and Pyrrha fulfil the goddess' oracular[56] command and repopulate the earth. The story of Deucalion was well-known in late antiquity but in this case, since it is recounted in *Metamorphoses*, a text with which Symphosius was familiar. In fact, he plays on the image of the 'magna parens' a few riddles later in *Scopa* when he describes the broom as 'Mundi magna parens' (79.1) ('Great mother of cleanliness'). The pun turns on the word *mundi*; if read as a noun it would mean 'of mankind' suggesting the Ovidian 'magna parens', but if read correctly as an adjective it means 'of cleanliness' and it refers to the riddle's solution, a broom. As in Ovid, the 'Great Mother' turns out to be other than she seems. Themis' words seem to refer to Pyrrha's mother when they actually refer to the earth; in *Scopa*, the figure that appeared to be the earth, is actually merely a broom. While the myth of the repopulation of the world explains the link between Deucalion and 'stone', its paradox turns on the fact that Deucalion and Pyrrha are both descended from the primal Titans, so they of all humankind do not find their genesis in stones, even metaphorically speaking. The metaphor is only appropriate to the post-diluvian humans born from Deucalion and Pyrrha's stones.[57] Because these are the humans who, mythologically, populated the world, it was a recognized *topos* in ancient literature that λᾶας 'stone', cognate of *lapis*, is etymologically linked to λαός, 'people'. Apollodorus concludes his telling of the story of Deucalion and Pyrrah: 'ὅθεν καὶ λαοὶ μεταφορικῶς ὠνομάσθησαν ἀπὸ τοῦ λᾶας ὁ λίθος' (Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.7.2) ('This was how people came to be called "laoi", by metaphor from the word "laas", "a stone"').[58] However, the 'lapis' of the riddle's lemma is not (and cannot be) Deucalion, even though it is his intervention that brings about its metamorphosis into a human being and this seems to be alluded to in the last line of the riddle which, in a final twist, tells us that if one letter were to be taken away 'volucris quoque nomen habebo' (74.3) ('I shall have the name of a flying thing'). The answer to this riddle within the riddle is 'bee'; *lapis* without the first letter is *apis*. However, because of the context of the story, a *lapis* is already a 'flying thing' by virtue of having been thrown by Deucalion or Pyrrah. There is no need to take a letter away because the riddle within the

56 Athenaeus actually includes an oracle related by Plato, in his list of riddles which suggests that there is a link in the Ancient World between riddles and the language of oracles. See Gulick (trans.), *Deipnosophists,* pp 568–9. **57** Ovid stresses the difference between those human before and after the flood. He writes that the rock-born humans demonstrate their origins in their strength and endurance. See Ov. *Met.* 1, pp 414–15. **58** R. Hard (trans.), *Apollodorus: The library of Greek mythology* (Oxford, 1997), p. 37.

riddle may also be solved by the riddle's lemma, *lapis*. So, while *lapis* with a letter taken away is a flying thing, so is *lapis* without the letter taken away; it's both a contradiction in the riddle's clues and in its mythic references because in the myth the stones are not transformed into flying things, they are transformed *from* flying things into human beings. In the riddle, when a stone is no longer a stone it is a bee (*apis*), in the myth when a stone is no longer a stone it is a human being. As in *Echo* where, as we have seen, Symphosius defies Juno, there is something rather mischievous about this switch; Symphosius transforms a rock into a living thing, not with the help of a god but through his own ability with words. More importantly, at the end of the riddle it is still not quite clear what the question was, nor the answer. Was it Deucalion, stone, a bee, humans, the magna parens, flying things or perhaps something else again?

Lagena draws on the same aetiological mythological matrix as *Lapis* and at least some of the same tricks. Both riddles are concerned with parentage and each begins with what is apparently a direct statement of identity. Bergamin observes that the riddle subject proclaims its lineage in 'tono epico'[59] ('epic tone'): 'Mater erat Tellus, genitor fuit ipse Prometheus' (81.1) ('My mother was Tellus, my progenitor has been Prometheus himself').[60] Since this is the standard form of identification and introduction in the ancient world, this is, perhaps, an even greater violation of the riddle genre than the direct naming in *Lapis*. This outrageous opening line seems to echo the god Dionysos' identification of himself in the opening scene of Aristophanes' *Frogs* as 'Διόνυσος, υἱὸς Σταμνίου' (Ar. *Bat.* 22) ('Dionysos, son of Flagon');[61] itself a parody of heroes' introductions. Again, in a characteristically Symphosian twist, while Aristophanes has Dionysos proclaims descent from a wine jar, Symphosius has a wine jar claim descent from gods (the primal Titans, Tellus and Prometheus). The mechanism is the same: in *Frogs* the *stamnos* is metaphorically Dionysos' progenitor, in *Lagena* the goddess Tellus and the titan Prometheus, stand metonymically for earth and fire, the two defining elements required for pottery. As in *Lapis*, the metaphor is displaced. Just as Deucalion is *not* the stones he throws, Prometheus is *not* the fire he steals from the gods. The parallel continues: Deucalion has stones before he throws them away, his father, Prometheus, has fire but gives it away. Symphosius identifies each with what he no longer has. These 'displaced' personifications allow a confusion between the sign and signified which, in the case of *Lagena*, is particularly unsettling. It leads us to imagine that the riddle subject is the product of incest; Tellus, Prometheus' partner in engendering the wine jar, is also his mythic grandmother.[62] By using *tellus* rather than the more usual *terra*, Symphosius

59 Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* p. 179. **60** Symphosius makes Prometheus stand for the fire needed to engender the wine jar from the raw clay. This departs somewhat from the archaic Greek formulation in which Prometheus is the giver to humanity of divine fire stolen from the gods. It should be noted that the literal identification of Prometheus with fire is a typical late antique riddle strategy, see (Athen. 10.76). **61** J. Henderson (trans.), *Aristophanes: The Wasps* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), p. 11. **62** See T. Gantz, *Early Greek myth: a guide to artis-*

encourages the audience to think along these lines, since, although both *tellus* and *terra* may be used interchangeably to refer to either the earth or the titan, *tellus* is slightly more common when referring to the titan, *terra* when referring to the earth. In any event, this apparently improper parentage ends with the unnatural act of a mother destroying her child, 'mater mea me laniavit.' (81.3) ('my mother tore me to pieces').[63] On the other hand, if we read the mythological clues with a different emphasis we are confronted with a new answer. Glorie suggests that *Lagena* alludes to Propertius' description of Prometheus creating human beings by fashioning their forms from the earth (*tellus)* (*Elg.* 3.5,7–8).[64] In this reading '*tellus*' does not refer to the Titan (Tellus), but only to the earth (*tellus*) that she personifies. It also suggests that 'humanity' is an alternative answer to the riddle, rather than 'wine jar', since human beings are the 'child', so to speak, of 'tellus' and Prometheus.

The reference to Propertius exposes the conflict between the literal and the metaphorical readings of the riddle's terms and alerts us to the fact that *Lagena* offers three ways of reading the lineage of the wine jar, two of which are also answers offered in the riddle itself. The first is that both 'Tellus' and 'Prometheus' are understood metaphorically (earth and fire). This gives the solution announced in the lemma, 'wine jar'. The second is that both 'Tellus' and 'Prometheus' are understood literally as the two Titans, in which case the riddle subject would be an incestuous offspring that does not exist in the myth tradition. (Here Symphosius wickedly invites the audience to rack their brains – and their knowledge of myth – in order to recall a character who does not, in fact, exist.)[65] The third, follows Propertius, and mixes the literal and metaphorical so that Prometheus is literally the Titan, but Tellus is the clay from which humans were made, giving us a third answer to the riddle.

THE NAME AND THE THING: ETYMOLOGY AND AETIOLOGY IN THE *AENIGMATA*

As these last two examples demonstrate, Symphosius' riddles often embody what we might term the 'Aristotelian' conception of riddles as a genre that creates impossibility through the use of words.[66] In Aristotle's view, it is the word, rather than the thing itself, which creates the paradox, and it is the word, which, in naming the riddle subject, has the capacity to resolve a conundrum. Riddles of this kind rely on puns and other forms of word play for their paradoxes. In the most extreme manifestation, it is the word, the sign in and of itself, which proves

tic and literary sources (Baltimore, 1993), pp 40–1. **63** Incest is associated with riddling in many cultures. **64** Glorie (ed.), *Variae Collectiones Aenigmatum*, p. 703. **65** Athenaeus confirms that extensive knowledge of myth was a highly prized, much exhibited acquisition in late antiquity. **66** 'αἰνίγματός τε γὰρ ἰδέα αὕτη ἐστί, τὸ λέγοντα ὑπάρχοντα ἀδύνατα συνάψαι' (*Poet.* 22, 25–6) ('The essence of a riddle consists in describing a fact by an impossible combination of words.') *Aristotle*, trans. W.H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA, 1932), p. 85.

to be the solution to the riddle. Here the object is to guess the *word*, entirely dislocated from any specific meaning. We have already encountered an example of this kind of riddling in Athenaeus: 'What is the same in the sky, on the earth, and in the sea?'[67] The answer is not a single animal but rather a *word* which may refer to three different animals, one flighted or celestial animal, one land, and one marine. So, for example, the riddle was sometimes answered 'bear' since the bear is a land animal but there is also a constellation, Ursa Major, the Great Bear, and finally the marine animal, the bear-crab.[68] When Symphosius employs this kind of conceit he constructs clues which refer to any of the possible meanings of the answer-word. But more usually, Symphosius prefers to draw his riddles from metamorphosis stories where the protagonist's name becomes generic for whatever she or he has become. This works in the opposite way to Athenaeus' riddle since such stories or, more properly, aetiological myths, stress the idea that an essential connection does exist between the word and the thing itself, the name and named.

Taurus illustrates this technique well:

> Moechus eram regis, sed lignea membra sequebar;
> et Cilicum mons sum, sed mons sum nomine solo
> et vehor in caelis et in ipsis ambulo terris. (32.1–3)
>
> I was the cuckolder of a king, but followed wooden limbs.
> I am a Cilician mountain, but a mountain in name only.
> I ride in the heavens and walk on the earth itself.

Here the ambiguity turns on the fact that, depending on whether it is used as a common or proper noun, the riddle's solution '*taurus*', may refer to several different things – the riddle even tells us that, in some instances, the answer fulfils the clues 'nomine solo' (32.2) ('in name only'). The mythological bull who was transformed into a constellation as well as the ordinary farmyard animal are both *taurus* – which solves the clue: 'vehor in caelis et in ipsis ambulo terris' (32.3) ('I ride in the heavens and walk on the earth itself'). Here, as one of Symphosius' riddle subjects says in another connection, the different entities are 'nomine iung[untur] uno' (82.1) ('joined by one name'). The word *taurus* refers to no less than four entities: a generic bull, the mythological bull that coupled with Pasiphae, a constellation, and a mountain range. In the 'clues', Symphosius stresses the aspect unique to a particular one of each of the four entities. This makes the riddle as elaborate, complex, and deceptive as possible. For example, '[m]oechus eram regis, sed lignea membra sequebar' (32.1) ('I was the cuckolder of a king but followed wooden limbs') is only true of the bull which coupled with Pasiphae when she hid inside Daedalus' wooden simulacrum. Only the Taurus Mountains are Cilician mountains (32.2). Finally, alone of the four, the constellation *taurus* resides in the sky.

67 Gulick (trans.), *Deipnosophists,* p. 555. **68** Ibid., p. 555.

There is nothing to unify these disparate elements except that they share the word 'taurus'. There is an additional confusion that the mythological Taurus, Pasiphae's bull, later became the constellation and that, like the mythological creature, the male animal 'taurus', might also claim 'ambulo terris' (32.3) ('I walk on the earth') at one stage in his story. In these latter instances, the clear distinction between the multiple referents is blurred, placing even greater semantic stress on the single signifier *taurus*. This riddle makes an illustrative comparison with a later 'bull' riddle, Riddle 12, of the Exeter Book whose riddles are directly descended from Symphosius' *Aenigmata*, including translations of some of his riddles and are the subject of later chapters. In Riddle 12, as with *Taurus*, the clues are multiple; they refer to the animal and also to the different products made from the animal, for instance, to wine skins (ll. 5–6) and skin rugs (ll.7–9). But unlike *Taurus*, these clues refer to things with different names. *Taurus* depends on the idea that a single word can refer to a mélange of seemingly incompatible elements, Riddle 12 depends on the idea that a mélange of seemingly incompatible words ('wine-skin', 'skin-rug', 'beef') can refer to a single element, namely the bull. Regarding all the parts and the products made from the animal as identical, Riddle 12 is solved, not by the word as sign, but by the word as signifier of the physical matter which makes up the animal.[69]

The contrast serves to demonstrate Symphosius' delight in abstraction. *Taurus* works entirely in the realm of language, while Riddle 12 is grounded in an intimate and visceral interest in the physical world and in the specific processes involved in making things. When Symphosius composes a riddle about what one might think was a similarly concrete topic, such as *Vinum in Acetum Conversum*, Symphosius does not engage with the activities and accoutrements of vinegar production but develops a riddle around the various tenses of the verb 'to be'. Even riddles which take their subject from processed foodstuffs, such as *Beta* and *Perna* initially describe themselves using abstract language clues: the former begins '[t]ota vocor Graece, sed non sum tota Latine' (42.1) ('[w]hole I am called in Greece, but I am not whole in Latin'), the latter begins '[n]obile duco genus magni de gente Catonis' (85.1) ('I come from a noble lineage, from the gens of Cato'). Symphosius' fascination with words expresses itself in a relatively simple series of puns on '*taurus*', even here Symphosius plays with the relationship between the mythological Taurus both before and after his metamorphosis into a constellation.

A more complex example of Symphosius' investigation of the matrix between words and names on the one hand, and aetiological myths and ontol-

69 While most riddlers are relatively consistent in their riddling techniques, it is typical of Symphosius to employ as many, in as much variety, as possible. Symphosius uses a simpler version of Riddle 12 of the Exeter Book in *Testudo,* in which the living tortoise and the lyre made from it after death are regarded as identical, and in *Flagellumm* where the whip asserts '[d]e pecudis dorso pecudes ego terreo cunctas' (l. 66) ('I, who come from the animal's back, terrify all animals').

ogy on the other, is foregrounded in *Murra*. This riddle operates around two puns. The first is on '*murra*'. This is the name both of a mythological woman and of the tree and sap into which, according to myth, she is metamorphosed. A second pun on the word *lacrima,* the word for both a 'tear' and for 'sap', is intertwined with the first; the latter derived metaphorically from the former. Thus, the woman and the tree are designated by the same word, '*murra*', while Myrrha's tears and the sap of the myrrh tree are designated by the same word '*lacrima*'. By opening the riddle 'De lacrimis et pro lacrimis mea coepit origo' (48.1) ('My birth began from tears and for tears'), Symphosius plays on both puns; he puns on puns. The origin of myrrh, the precious ointment, is from the *lacrimae*, the resin of the myrrh tree. However, its origin is also in the tears (*lacrimae*) wept by Myrrha when she was transformed into the myrrh tree. The play is repeated in the second line in which the riddle subject claims: 'ex oculis fluxi, sed nunc ex arbore nascor' (48.2) ('I have flowed from eyes, but now I spring from a tree.') Here tears (*lacrimae*) flow from the eyes of Myrrha and resin (*lacrimae*) flows from the myrrh tree.

The riddle, *Murra*, as with so many of Symphosius' riddles, is dynamic. In the first two lines our understanding of the words, read sometimes with one meaning and then another, are kept in tension. Literally, the pun acts to produce two separate meanings. However, mythologically speaking, there is only one: Myrrha and her tears, and the myrrh tree and myrrh resin are all Myrrha. Yet, no sooner do we resolve the problem by recognizing them as being identical, than Symphosius forces us to separate them again. The final line of the riddle distinguishes the two entities and, by giving each a half line, divides them formally as well: 'laetus honor frondis, tristis sed imago doloris' (48.3) ('The happy glory of green boughs, but the sad image of sorrow'). Here Symphosius resolves the entities into a polarity marked by the oppositional qualities of joy and sorrow. Each half of the line grammatically mirrors the other so that the opposition is clearly expressed in the joyful and highly-prized resin on the one hand, and in Myrrha's grief on the other. Yet, here too, the only way to resolve the paradox is by reading Myrrha and myrrh as identical. And so, we are forced to oscillate in our reading again. Like *Taurus* where we also alternate between understanding the four entities as separate and identical, Symphosius keeps our understanding of this riddle, like the riddle subject itself, in metamorphosis.

CONCLUSION

It is no small irony that the *Aenigmata*, a cycle of what we should perhaps regard as anti-riddles, became the model for medieval English riddles. Since the riddles come to us apparently already solved, it is not clear what is 'in scirpo nodum', the 'knot in the riddle/rushes'. As we have seen, in many instances they develop from a single answer to suggest more and more answers as they progress and – worse still – often more plausible answers than the original, 'correct' solution.

The answers co-exist and this is reflected on a broader level in that, throughout the *Aenigmata*, Symphosius explores and enacts plurality in as many ways as possible; in his multiple ordering strategies, his multiple riddling strategies, in his juxtaposition of multiple mythic narratives within a single riddle, and finally though the adoption of multiple world views – a new one in each riddle. Perhaps this last is most remarkable of all: Symphosius seems to delight in avoiding his own perspective, as well as that of humans in general, in favour of those that are alien to him. Although Symphosius is never overtly political, it is interesting to consider his interest in plurality in terms of his probable intellectual context. The *Aenigmata* was probably written at time when the Roman empire was becoming increasingly Christian and when Christianity itself was increasingly stressing its monotheistic nature. The First Council of Nicaea (325CE) and the First Council of Constantinople (381CE) both debate and attempt to clarify the singular nature of God, as well as articulating a single, uniform, correct, true expression of faith in the development of the Creed. This emphatically singular view of the world is, of course, echoed again in the words of the Creed, 'Credo in unum Deum', 'I believe in one God'. In this context, it becomes clear why Symphosius might have been drawn to a form of riddling particularly associated with contemporary social commentary and his riddles themselves, with their emphasis on plurality, uncertainty, other/Other perspectives and the misrule and reversal of the Saturnalia, become inevitably political.

CHAPTER 3

De Creatura: Aldhelm's invention of the creation riddle

> sicut ergo ista contraria contrariis opposita sermonis pulchritudinem reddunt; ita quadam non verborum, sed rerum eloquentia contrariorum oppositione saeculi pulchritudo componitur.
>
> Just as that opposition of contraries bestows beauty upon language, so the beauty of this world is built upon the opposition of contraries through a certain elegance not of words but of matter.
>
> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei,* 11.18.

In all probability, it was Aldhelm's admiration that enabled Symphosius' riddles to achieve lasting influence. Modern scholars as well as medieval poets have read and considered Symphosius' *Aenigmata*, not so much for its own sake as from their profound regard for Aldhelm. Aldhelm's earliest known poetic work[1] – and sincerest flattery of Symphosius[2] – his collection of *enigmata* was included in the *Epistola Ad Acircium* which was sent to King Aldfrith of Northumbria (685–705).[3] Aldhelm's *Enigmata*[4] sits between his two metrical treatises *De Metris* and *De Pedum Regulis*[5] and illustrates the principles they outline. However, the greater purpose of the work is that it is designed to reveal the 'enigmata … clandistina' (*præ.* 7) ('secret riddles') of God, to see God 'per speculum in enigmate' (1 Cor 13:12) ('through a glass in riddles'). Fittingly, then, the *Enigmata* is made up of one hundred riddles culminating in a final, majestic riddle on creation. In composing this, Aldhelm invented the creation riddle. Given that riddles innately consider the nature of things, 'creation' is, in some sense, the most obvious riddle subject. Yet, it is Aldhelm who, apparently, first designs a riddle for the topic. I cannot find an example of one that predates his in any of the riddling traditions

1 E. Thornbury, 'Aldhelm's rejection of the Muses and the mechanics of poetic inspiration in early Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England,* 36 (2007), 71–92, at p. 72. **2** Aside from his imitation of Symphosius' *enigmata*, Aldhelm flatteringly describes Symphosius as 'Simfosius poeta, versificus metricae artis peritia praeditus' ('the poet Symphosius, endowed with knowledge of metrical skill'). Glorie (ed.), *Variae Collectiones Aenigmatum*, p. 371. **3** The identification of Acircius with King Aldfrith is now generally accepted. M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin literature, 600–899* (London, 1996), p. 7. **4** Please note the slight difference in spelling between the otherwise easily confused *Enigmata* of Aldhelm and *Aenigmata* of Symphosius.

that feed into Aldhelm's literary tradition – the Christian, Greek, Latin and Germanic. In a riddle collection that is almost entirely imitative of Symphosius' *De Creatura* is a remarkable and wholly original work. Moreover, it became perhaps the most popular riddle in Anglo-Saxon England – if the sheer number of extant versions is anything to go on – and the conception of *De Creatura* is so strong and its central paradox so ingenious that in the English tradition, to the best of my knowledge, no one ever devises another riddle on creation; all the extant creation riddles are variations on Aldhelm's central conception.

In many ways, Aldhelm is better known for his contributions to the riddle genre. Virtually all the formal elements of the Anglo-Saxon riddle genre appear to have been established by Aldhelm and writers such as Tatwine and Eusebius inherit Symphosius' form through their ardent imitation of Aldhelm. The particularities of Symphosius' form (number of riddles, entitled solutions, type of riddle subject) not to mention the riddle type itself – enigmatic, metaphorical descriptions of everyday things – becomes canonical through Aldhelm. Correspondingly, those aspects of Symphosius' collection *not* copied by Aldhelm – for example, uniform number of verses for each riddle – did *not* become canonical.[6] Aldhelm's imitation makes Symphosius the founder of a subgenre rather than merely the author of one of the many unusual texts found in the *Codex Salmasianus*. In accepting Symphosius' 'definition' of the riddle over other classical and Biblical models, Aldhelm made Symphosius' riddles definitional. Yet, arguably, it is not Aldhelm's faithful imitation that is most interesting but rather the ways in which he differs from, and develops, Symphosius' conception. For one, taking his cue from Symphosius' last few riddles that address intangible subjects like *Echo* (98) and particularly *Somnus* (99), Aldhelm extends into writing riddles on abstract concepts like *De Fato* (7) and *De Fama* (98). Ultimately, such topics were unpopular in England; neither later Anglo-Saxon vernacular riddles nor post-Conquest popular riddles show the influence of this aspect of Aldhelm's riddling. However, it was of tremendous contemporary significance. Abstract and especially theological topics became the hallmark of seventh-century clerical riddle writers.[7]

Among scholars, there has been a tendency to privilege Aldhelm's riddles over those of Symphosius and there has been considerable resistance to seeing Symphosius' collection as an ideological statement of equivalent weight to that of Aldhelm's *Enigmata*. Bitterli writes 'Aldhelm's concern is radically different

5 Although the *Enigmata* was apparently sent as part of this larger work, it is possible that it was written earlier. See Lapidge & Rosier, *Aldhelm*, p. 61. **6** Like Aldhelm's riddles, Tatwine's riddles are of varying length. Eusebius' riddles are mainly regular, though there is one exception. The later Exeter Book riddles also vary in length. **7** Eusebius writes riddles on such abstract topics as human characteristics including the virtues and vices. Tatwine's riddles are even more abstract and include riddles on subjects that range from philosophy and three-fold death to one particularly abstract riddle on historical, literal, moral and allegorical interpretations of the Bible.

from that of Symphosius, whose pragmatic pagan world Aldhelm challenged with his mystical contemplations of the Creation',[8] while Lapidge goes so far as to suggest that '[i]n view of the seriousness of Aldhelm's theme'[9] we should talk of Symphosius' *Riddles* and Aldhelm's *Mysteries*. In part the suggestion seems to be prompted by the fact that 'riddle' is pejorative in modern culture. Nevertheless, given that 'enigma' is a genre term, Lapidge's comment is a dramatic statement of cultural value and one that Aldhelm, at least, does not share; the term 'enigma', which he adopts from Symphosius, he uses both of his own work and also, more significantly, to refer to the profound but hidden truths of God. In part it is also because, while Symphosius' rather disingenuous *præfatio* disclaims any ideological purpose, Aldhelm's *præfatio* claims to reveal the 'enigmata … clandistina' (*præ.* 7) ('secret riddles') of God; it is perhaps not surprising that scholars have taken each poet at his word. Indeed, Lapidge and Rosier credit Aldhelm with 'the brilliant idea of casting his cosmology in the form of *enigmata*'[10] when, in fact, this is a formal aspect of the genre that originates with Symphosius and which, ironically, is not adopted by Aldhelm at all. It is integral to Symphosius' cosmology and ideology that it is expressed in the subtle matrix of relationships between the individual riddles, their neighbours and the collection as a whole but for Aldhelm, who understands Creation, not as pluralistic, but as the single, unified expression of God's vision, it is given full, complex and triumphant expression in his single, final, monumental riddle.

In fact, although Aldhelm's collection begins with 'four cosmological riddles [which] open a theological bracket that is triumphantly closed by the length and climactic creation riddle at the end',[11] within this frame the collection seems to wander rather randomly from topic to topic – as a glance at the final five riddle topics immediately preceding *De Creatura* will confirm. These five, *De Elefante* (Elephant), *De Nocte* (Night), *De Fama* (Fame), *De Elleboro* (Hellibore), *De Camelo* (Camel) bear no obvious relationship to each other, appear to be in no special order, and do not act to introduce the ideas of *De Creatura*. Moreover, Aldhelm's divers riddles are not always entirely consistent in their cosmology, particularly in those areas where pagan and Christian beliefs come into conflict. So, while some riddles, like *De Crismal*, are overtly Christian in subject matter, others rely so heavily upon allusions to classical mythology that they 'do not individually look like Christian poems'.[12] Aldhelm's treatment of the idea of the potentially problematic conception of fate is a case in point. In *De Fato*[13] Aldhelm unequivocally corrects what he plainly considers a dangerously unchristian misapprehension:

8 D. Bitterli, *Say what I am called: the Old English riddles of the* Exeter Book *and the Anglo-Latin riddle tradition* (Toronto, 2009), p. 21. **9** Lapidge, *Anglo Latin literature*, p. 9. **10** Lapidge & J. Rosier, *Aldhelm*, pp 65–6. **11** Bitterli, *Say what I am called,* p. 36. **12** J. Steen, *Verse and virtuosity: the adaptation of Latin rhetoric in Old English poetry* (Toronto, 2008), p. 90. **13** Lapidge and Rosier point out that the riddle makes use of a quotation from Vergil which refers to Fortuna, not Fatum. Further, Aldhelm's use of 'domina' implies a female personification, and though the Old English *wyrd* is feminine, the Latin *fatum* (neuter) is not. Lapidge and Rosier

> Facundum constat quondam cecinisse poetam:
> 'Quo Deus et quo dura vocat Fortuna; sequamur!'
> Me veteres falso dominam vocitare solebant,
> Sceptra regens mundi dum Christi gratia regeret. (7.1–4)
>
> It is well known that an eloquent poet once sang:
> 'where God and where hard Fortune calls, let us follow!'
> The ancients were falsely accustomed to call me mistress,
> Ruling the sceptres of the world until Christ's grace shall rule.

Yet in *De Fuso*, Aldhelm's spindle declares '[p]er me fata virum dicunt decernere Parcas' (45.6–7) ('through me, they say, the Parcae decide the fates of men'). In this riddle the criticism of pagan notions of fate is restricted to the casual disbelief implied by his use of the word 'dicunt'[14] and even this seems to cast doubt on whether the Parcae use a spindle to decide the fates of men, rather than on whether they decide the fates of men at all. This kind of incongruity is present throughout the *Enigmata*. Aldhelm's knowledge of classical literature is reflected in countless allusions, made vivid and animated by his love of it. His pedagogical instincts, on the other hand, oblige him first to explain these references, then to correct their heresy – as we see in his quotation and then criticism of Vergil in *De Fato*. This rather endearing fastidiousness can, however, be confusing and, as Steen notes, without the *præfatio* to give the *Enigmata* an unequivocally Christian purpose, a coherent cosmology does not readily emerge.[15]

Aldhelm's distillation of Symphosius' riddle century into a single riddle is important in two crucial ways. First, as I suggest above, condensing into a single riddle what Symphosius has done over the span of a hundred is in itself an expression of worldview. *De Creatura* is mono-focal in vision; the world seen in single point perspective. Second, true to his word, Aldhelm has written a col-

feel it so unlikely that Aldhelm would confuse the two that they suggest amending the manuscript from 'Fatum' to 'Fortuna', see Lapidge & Rosier, *Aldhelm*, pp 248–9. If they are correct, it makes Aldhelm's attitude all the more surprising. The concept of Fortuna had largely been reconciled with Christianity by writers such as Boethius so why reject it – but not the Parcae – with such vehemence? For a history of the concept of Fortuna, see J. Frakes, *The fate of fortune in the early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 1988). **14** Of course, it is difficult to know exactly what cultural context Aldhelm was writing to since the significance of fate (*wyrd*) to the Anglo-Saxons is a source of considerable controversy. Fifty years ago, Stanley argued that it is a primarily Christian concept in England and that poets such as Aldhelm understand *wyrd* in an exclusively Christian way. In fact, he goes further, arguing that idea of fate was introduced in England by Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*. Because all our Anglo-Saxon texts date from after Christianization there is not much evidence upon which to debate such a point. I would, however, point to the popularity of *wyrd* in the extant literature as suggestive of the concept being a congenial and familiar one. If Stanley is right and the concept of fate was entirely absent from Anglo-Saxon culture before Christianity, theirs is the only culture of which I am aware to have such an absence. See E. Stanley, *The search for Anglo-Saxon paganism* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 94. **15** Steen, *Verse and virtuosity*, p. 90.

lection of riddles literally *a causa metri* ('because of metrics'). The primary function of most of his riddles, and the focus of their didactic intent, is to aid students in Latin metrical composition. Aldhelm presents this aim as identical with expounding the divine mysteries of God. It is an obvious association, given that fluency in Latin gave monks access, effectively, to Christianity. Yet, riddles like *De Fato* demonstrate that the two aims are not entirely united. Indeed, in most of his riddles Aldhelm reveals himself to be concerned, sometimes with one aim, sometimes with the other. So, by exploring the divine mysteries in the framing poems, the *præfatio* and *De Creatura*, Aldhelm gives himself the freedom to become distracted by metrics in between.

In fact, aside from *De Creatura*, there are two other riddles, *De Terra* (Earth) and *De Natura* (Nature), which cover some of the same material as *De Creatura*, though without its grand scope. Neither *De Terra* nor *De Natura* display the same kind of inconsistency that exists between *De Fuso* and *De Fato,* but they do add weight to the proposition that Aldhelm does not ascribe equal importance to all his riddles. Unlike Symphosius' riddles in which sombre, serious, ridiculous, comic and mundane facets of creation are each given equal weight, Aldhelm's view is hierarchical. *De Creatura* is the final and most important riddles, while *De Terra* and *De Natura* describe subordinate parts of this whole. For example, in *De Terra* he claims:

> Altrix cunctorum, quos mundus gestat, in orbe
> Nuncupor (et merito, quia numquam pignora tantum
> Improba sic lacerant maternas dente papillas)
> Prole virens aestate, tabescens tempore brumae. (1.1–4.)
>
> I am called the nourisher of all things in my sphere which the world bears
> (and deservedly, because wicked children never so torment
> their mother's breasts with their teeth.)
> I am vigorous with offspring in summer, in winter-time I waste away.

Nothing here contradicts *De Creatura*. However, when creation makes an absolute claim for itself in *De Creatura* (such as the earth's assumption of the title 'Altrix cunctorum' ('nourisher of all things') Aldhelm is almost obsessively careful to stress that such power is within the context of a greater subjugation to God. The qualifying 'in orbe' ('in my sphere'), which is sufficient here, would not be enough in *De Creatura*. Similarly, in *De Natura*, significant authority is assigned to the riddle subject without even a mention of God:

> Crede mihi, res nulla manet sine me moderante
> Et frontem faciemque meam lux nulla videbit.
> Quis nesciat dicione mea convexa rotari
> Alta poli solisque iubar lunaeque meatus?

> Believe me, nothing remains without my guidance,
> and no eye shall see my face and shape.
> Who does not know that by my command turn the convex
> heights of heaven, the radiance of the sun and the courses of the moon?

Here nature almost boasts of its authority, which extends even to the heavens, while, by contrast, in *De Creatura*, God charges creation to guide and rule all the created world; whatever authority creation assumes is only 'dum pater arcitenens concessit' (l. 19) ('provided the bow-wielding Father allows').

DE CREATURA, ITS 'DEVICE' AND COSMOLOGY

De Creatura is the essence of the *Enigmata* and the ultimate expression of its purpose. As Lapidge notes,

> Aldhelm set out to reveal the hidden links between all creation – animate and inanimate – and by means of an intricate web of interlocking themes and metaphors to lead the reader to contemplate God's creation afresh. Drawing his subjects mainly from Pliny, Isidore, and his own observation of nature, Aldhelm wove them together in the final *enigma* which is 'Creation' itself.[16]

In *De Creatura* Aldhelm imagines the universe 'in a continual process of gestation, birth and growth', a process 'in which the whole of creation – animate and inanimate – participates'.[17] The riddle is made up of an all-encompassing miscellany of images: nectar, Chinese silk, worms, eagles, dung, curling irons, books, frost, feathers, flint, incense, golden bosses, crystal balls, lilies, offal and even the enigmatic and abstractly cosmographical *six* zones of the world all find their place. Unlike the later Old English riddle writers, Aldhelm draws on the imagery of man-made objects as often as natural imagery and, interestingly, he does not separate humanity from the created world. Even Symphosius, whose unhierarchical riddles do not assume human superiority, sets humanity apart but the humans of *De Creatura* are simply another detail of creation. Surprisingly, there is no sense of the overlordship God accords humanity in Genesis which grants us 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth' (Gen 1:26). Rather, the responsibility of guardianship belongs to creation itself which claims lovingly 'ego complector sub caeli cardine cuncta' (l. 8) ('I embrace all things beneath the pole of heaven') and further asserts:

16 Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin literature*, p. 9. **17** This disposition is demonstrated by sheer weight of imagery; '[n]early one third of the *Ænigmata* contain an explicit reference to birth'. Lapidge & Rosier, *Aldhelm*, p. 64.

> Omnia, quaeque polo sunt subter et axe reguntur,
> Dum pater arcitenens concessit, jure guberno. (ll. 18–19)
>
> All things which are under the sky and guided by heaven,
> while the bow-wielding Father allows, I rule by right.

De Creatura is built around a series of antitheses each of which creation, the riddle subject, surpasses. The paradox of *De Creatura* is that creation includes, transcends, and embodies every contradiction. Aldhelm describes creation as all its constituent parts and as a single entity simultaneously, and so attributes to it every quality in existence. More than that, creation exhibits each quality to a greater degree than the chosen exemplar. It is not only that creation is both hot and cold; it is hotter than a forge *and* colder than hoar frost. So rather than being simply an oppositional riddle ('what is hot and cold?')[18] it is, more complexly, both an oppositional and a comparative riddle: ('what could be hotter than a forge and colder than hoar frost?'). *De Creatura* constantly extends and exceeds every extreme and every contradiction and in so doing 'embraces the multitude of the world's riddles'.[19]

The oppositional nature of *De Creatura* separates it, not only from Aldhelm's other riddles in the *Enigmata*, but also from Symphosius' riddles. In the main, Symphosius and Aldhelm compose 'nonoppositional' riddles. That is to say, they compose riddles that derive their ambiguity either from describing their subject selectively so as to juxtapose incongruous characteristics, or from describing it metaphorically so as to misdirect the guesser. Such riddles are perfectly suited to Symphosius and Aldhelm because they emphasize the unnoticed yet remarkable characteristics of the mundane. But, as I have said, *De Creatura*, breaks the mould,

18 An oppositional riddle is a riddle that describes its subject in contradictory terms. It is the antithesis of a nonoppositional riddle that describes its subject partially or enigmatically but without introducing a contradictory or apparently 'impossible' element. Georges and Jones distinguish three subsets of the oppositional riddle divided by the kind of contradiction employed. The first, antithetical contradictives, form a paradox by describing two elements in direct contradiction. The second, privational contradictive, are formed by '[d]enial of an associated part' (99); to use Georges and Jones' example, 'what has hands but no fingers? [answer: clock]' (99). The third kind is a causal contradictive in which the contradiction derives from a described condition failing to produce its inevitable result. Again, to use Georges and Jones' example, 'what eats and eats and never gets full? [answer: a sausage grinder]' (p. 100). For a fuller definition of oppositional and nonoppositional riddles, see R. Georges & M. Jones, *Folkloristics* (Bloomington, 1995), pp 98–100. **19** Steen, *Verse and virtuosity*, p. 99. *De Creatura* mainly consists of antithetical contradictive and causal contradictive oppositional elements, though the description of the curling locks (see below) could be regarded as a privational contradictive element. Nonoppositional elements are scarcer. However, the description of creation as 'Senis, ecce, plagis, latus qua panditur orbis,/ Ulterior multo tendor, mirabile fatu' (ll. 61–2) ('See! Than the six zones by which the globe is spread out, I am stretched much farther, marvellous to tell'), stands outside an opposition and so, as a direct but implausible description might be regarded as a nonoppositional element.

even of Aldhelm's other riddles. In building *De Creatura* around a single genuine paradox Aldhelm anticipates future English riddling. Up until this point, the riddles modelled on Symphosius' riddles are distinguished from other riddles by their idiosyncratic form but they begin to make their return to the riddling mainstream. Symphosius' highly complex, intricate, enigmatic descriptions do not lend themselves to the folk memory nor invite folk adaptations. But a conception as strong, unified and brilliant as that of *De Creatura*, at once so subtle and so simple, does. Moreover, Aldhelm introduces an innovation that reconceives the 'oppositional' riddle genre itself. As noted above, most oppositional riddles use language to deceive the guesser into believing in a false contradiction, as in the famous riddle from the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* quoted in the previous chapter. That riddle encourages the reader to assume a contradiction that has not actually been stated; how can one take away what one does not have? But of course, on closer inspection we find that the riddle never claimed that the thing was not in the carrier's possession, only that he did not *catch* it. This is a trick of language and expectation, a way of playing a colloquial use of language against its literal meaning. But in *De Creatura* the contradictory claims made for the riddle subject are not a linguistic sleight of hand. Each is perfectly true of creation. This is the real trick; all the contradictions are actually *true*, they are not the product of deceptive language. Steen argues that '[e]ach assertion is a hyperbole'[20] but there is no exaggeration in this riddle. The trick is there is no trick. *De Creatura* in every sense, then, embodies Aldhelm's vision of creation as an unfathomable riddle. In placing *De Creatura* at the end of his collection it makes it evident that, for him, there can be no greater riddle than a description of creation in plain terms.

The conception that creation encompasses all paradoxes is brilliantly simple, but its execution is more complex. *De Creatura* begins with the creation of creation and its cosmography. Aldhelm imagines creation as defined by its single, singular and hierarchical relationship to God but interesting, the chief characteristic of Creation is its plurality, that it is 'varium' ('manifold'):

> Conditor, aeternis fulcit qui saecla columnis,
> Rector regnorum, frenans et fulmina lege,
> Pendula dum patuli vertuntur culmina caeli,
> Me varium fecit, primo dum conderet orbem. (ll. 1–4)
>
> The Founder, who supports the ages with eternal columns
> Ruler of the kingdoms, restraining lightning bolts with his law,
> While the suspended heights of the wide-reaching skies revolve,
> Made me manifold, until first He founded the globe.

The next lines of the poem introduce the riddle's main device, the paradox that creation *is* every paradox. Perhaps surprisingly, Aldhelm's first opposition is vig-

20 Steen, *Verse and virtuosity*, p. 99.

ilance/sleep, apparently echoing Symphosius' phrase 'sua lumina claudit' (Symp. 99.3) ('close his own eyes') from *Somnus*:

> Pervigil excubiis: numquam dormire iuvabit,
> Sed tamen extemplo clauduntur lumina somno (ll. 5–6)
>
> Ever vigilant at the watch; never shall it be my pleasure to sleep,
> Nevertheless, immediately, my eyes are closed with sleep.

Vergil's description of the death of Orodes as a 'somnus' ('sleep') in which 'in aeternam clauduntur lumina noctem' (*Aen.* 10.754) ('in eternal night the lights [of his eyes] are closed') is also usually cited as a source for this passage, however, there are more compelling reasons for Aldhelm to give the dichotomy such prominence. This dichotomy perhaps occupies such a prominent place, in part, because of a misremembering of Augustine's comments on enigmata. At *De Trinitate* 15.9, Augustine claims that an enigma is a kind of allegory, so that while all enigmata are allegories not all allegories are enigmata. He illustrates this point with a quotation from 1 Thessalonians 5:6–8 which, he claims, is an allegory but crucially *not* an enigma. This quotation is to do with vigilance and sleep and is the first example given by Augustine after broaching the topic of enigmata. Perhaps this proximity inextricably linked enigmata and the vigilance/sleep dichotomy in Aldhelm's mind. Or, since Augustine says that only the very dull-witted could be so confused about the allegory's meaning as to think it a riddle, Aldhelm is making a rather scholastic joke at his own expense. However, it seems likely that Aldhelm's more compelling reason for beginning with the vigilance/sleep dichotomy is because of its Biblical resonance where it is a metaphor for distinguishing the good Christian from the bad. It is the dichotomy which illustrates the parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25:1–13) and in Mark 13:36–7 the faithful are commanded to watch 'ne cum venerit repente inveniat vos dormientes; quod autem vobis dico omnibus dico vigilate' ('Lest coming on a sudden, He find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch.') Similarly, St Paul writes 'hora est iam nos de somno surgere nunc enim propior est nostra salus quam cum credidimus' ('it is now the hour for us to rise from sleep. For now, our salvation is nearer than when we believed') (Rom 13:11) and St Peter, having been rebuked by Jesus for sleeping in Matthew 26:41, 'vigilate et orate ut non intretis in temptationem' ('Watch ye, and pray that ye enter not into temptation'), commands us 'sobrii estote et vigilate' ('be sober and watch') (1 Pet 5:8).[21] So, while *De Creatura* is dominated by physical dichotomies, it begins with a spiritual one.

Intriguingly, though, Aldhelm describes sleep and vigilance as though they are a 'physical' dichotomy and makes no attempt to elucidate its Biblical significance. If anything, he allows the martial overtones implicit in the word *excubia*

21 The First Epistle of Peter was thought to have been written by Peter in Aldhelm's time.

to come to the fore. It has also been suggested[22] that this passage echoes Vergil's description of Orodes' death in the *Aeneid*, an allusion which would further reinforce military associations: 'olli dura quies oculos et ferreus urget/ somnus, in aeternam clauduntur lumina noctem' (Ver. *Aen.* 10.745–6) ('to him cruel peace and inexorable sleep bears down upon his eyes, their light cut off in eternal night'). The next dichotomy also opposes inactivity and activity, but this time in a physical rather than 'spiritual' context. It also amplifies the martial undertone by making the qualities of cowardice/courage the subject of the opposition.

> Segnior est nullus, quondam me larbula terret,
> Setigero rursus constans audacior apro. (ll. 9–10)
>
> Nothing is more lethargic, at one time a ghost terrifies me,
> On the other hand, standing firm, I am braver than a bristly boar.

Interestingly, Aldhelm interrupts this natural progression with his *non sequitur* insistence that God stands outside his creation:

> Nam Deus ut propria mundum dicione gubernat,
> Sic ego complector sub caeli cardine cuncta. (ll. 7–8)
>
> For as God governs the universe with his own rule,
> so I embrace all things beneath the pole of heaven.

He makes a similar interjection, stressing that God is greater than his creation just a few lines later:

> Nullus me superat cupiens vexilla triumphi
> Ni Deus, aethrali summus qui regnat in arce. (ll. 11–12)
>
> No one coveting the banners of victory overcomes me
> Except God who reigns on high in his Heavenly citadel.

And again towards the end of the poem:

> Infra me suprave nihil per saecula constat
> Ni rerum genitor mundum sermone coercens. (ll. 63–4)
>
> Nothing stands in the world beneath nor above me,
> Except the Creator of all things governing the world with his word.

Aldhelm's anxiety to clarify the theology distracts from the elegant litany of oppositions that structure the riddle. Moreover, the martial imagery with which

22 R. Ehwald, 'Sources for Enigma 100 (L.A.1.2.100)'(1999), *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: world wide web register*, http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk.

Aldhelm begins the riddle suggests that this relationship, though essentially benevolent, has the possibility of becoming hostile. It also suggests that the world is similarly conflicted. We might see this tension prefigured in the first riddle of the *Enigmata*, *De Terra*, by the analogous relationship between the nurturer and the nurtured; the wicked children bite the breast that feeds them (see above). Neither the relationship between Creator and created, nor the notion that it *is* conflicted proves popular with later vernacular versions of the riddle. The urgency, then, of Aldhelm's repeated insistence that God is in all senses *beyond* his creation must be understood in terms of the culture war fought in England in this period to establish Christianity over Anglo-Saxon religion(s). Three hundred years later we find the same insistence in a clergyman like Ælfric; 'twa ðing syndon an is scyppend oðer is gesceaft'[23] ('these are two things: one is the Creator; the other is creation'). However, the fact that it is not reflected in the later riddles of the Exeter Book suggests that Aldhelm was not mistaken in the difficulty of this idea for the general populace.

When Aldhelm writes in the riddle's opening that God 'me varium fecit' ('made me manifold') he demonstrates an apparently Symphosian influence. However, as we see, Aldhelm is not expressing a Symphosian world view at all. Rather, *De Creatura* envisions the multiplicity of creation ordered by a series of dualities ruled by a restraining God, who curbs even lightening with his law (l. 2). The dualism of Aldhelm's conception of Creator and created is mirrored in the very form of the riddle's paradox, the litany of dichotomies. These dichotomies are inevitably expressive of an ideology in which one of the terms is privileged over the other. For while *De Creatura* has several relatively neutral oppositions such as 'Sum gravior plumbo: scopulorum pondera vergo;/ Sum levior pluma, cedit cui tippula limphae' (ll. 40–1) ('I am heavier than lead, I incline to the weight of rocks; I am lighter than a feather, to which a pond skater concedes'), there is a tendency towards oppositions in which Aldhelm's distastes reveal themselves. Aldhelm's dichotomies resolve themselves into positives and negatives, as in 'Pulchrior auratis, dum fulget fibula, bullis,/ Horridior ramnis et spretis vilior algis' (ll. 25–6) ('More beautiful than the gilt bosses on a shining brooch, more unkempt than brambles, viler than despised seaweed'). The strength of the dislike evident in Aldhelm's description of the seaweed has a moralistic edge, which is rather remarkable for a modern audience to whom seaweed is not generally so repulsive.

In some instances, Aldhelm's dichotomies speak to quite specific, even topical, cultural and religious values and concerns. For example, Aldhelm adapts Symphosius' *Pila*: 'non sum cincta comis et non sum compta capillis' (Symp. 59.1) ('I am not framed with locks nor am I adorned with hair') so as to reflect the moral connotations of hair and hairstyles of his own day. Symphosius, of course, is merely making the most of the notion of the ball's stuffing as a kind of 'anti-hair' which

23 *Catholic Homilies I. 20, 17. Ælfric's Catholic homilies: the first series,* ed P. Clemoes, EETS s.s. 17 (Oxford, 1997).

is inwards instead of outwards. But, for Aldhelm the image becomes one of crimped versus unadorned hair. Aldhelm wrote at length on questions of dress[24] in his most famous and important work, the prose *De Virginitate* where he contrasts the vanity of elaborate hair styles with the virtue revealed by simple ones.[25] In particular, he is critical of those whose 'antiae frontis et temporum cincinni calamistro crispantur' ('locks on the forehead and ringlets at the temples are curled with a curling iron'). This disapproval emerges in *De Creatura* too:

> Cincinnos capitis nam gesto cacumine nullos,
> Ornent qui frontem pompis et tempora setis,
> Cum mihi caesaries volitent de vertice crispae,
> Plus calamistratis se comunt quae calamistro. (ll. 44–7)
>
> I bear no ringlets from the top of my head which would adorn my forehead with a fringe and my temples with bristles. As curly flowing hair flutters on my crown, it is more adorned with curls than [it would be] with a curling iron.

However, even in those instances where there is no obvious moral point to be made, Aldhelm's dichotomies are usually a positive opposed to a negative. This aspect of Aldhelm's riddling is a new addition to the Symphosian tradition. For although Symphosius is occasionally negative in his characterization of an animal, it is not part of a dichotomizing conception of the world in which one element in the pair is preferred over the other. Symphosius describes creation in a hundred tiny facets, some of which are more beneficial or congenial to humans than others. But since humanity is by no means accepted as the measure of things and since the riddles are not written from a human perspective, there is no implication of moral worth or turpitude. The characteristic of *De Creatura* arises naturally from Aldhelm's distillation of the Symphosian century of riddles. In presenting the world in a hundred facets, Symphosius truly imagines creation made 'varium' and, as we have seen, his ordering of the subjects implies a circular, not hierarchical or dualistic structure. By contrast, Aldhelm has focused its infinite variety into a single, unified series of dualistic binaries, each side of which naturally tends towards a (moral) extreme.

In fact, most of Aldhelm's dichotomies can be understood in terms of a 'ruling' high/low contrast. The disposition to privilege one term over another

24 J. Blair, *The church in Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford, 2005), p. 113; G. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2004), and B. Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon royal houses* (Leicester, 2003), p. 147. The controversy over the issue of dress is attested by the extent of Bede and Aldhelm's writing on the subject. Nor was it solved within Aldhelm's lifetime. Issues of dress feature in the correspondence of Boniface and Archbishop Cuthbert and are mentioned in the 747 *Clofesho* canons. **25** For a general discussion see H. Mayr-Harting, *The coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia, 1991), p. 194. For a discussion of Anglo-Saxon attitudes to dress, see Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*.

characteristically expresses itself in the contrast between the heavenly heights and infernal depths, so that the positive side of Aldhelm's dichotomies tend to be associated with height, while the negative side is associated with depths. For example, in the opposition between the fast and the slow which occurs just before the halfway mark of the poem, each of the exemplars of speed belongs in the skies:

> Plus pernix aquilis, Zephiri velocior alis,
> Necnon accipiter properantior (ll. 35–6)
>
> More swift than eagles, quicker than the wings of Zephyrus
> And indeed, speedier than a hawk.

By contrast, the slow are lowly, in every sense:

> …horrens
> Lumbricus et limax et tarda testudo palustris
> Atque, fimi soboles sordentis, cantarus ater
> Me dicto citius vincunt certamine cursus. (ll. 36–9)
>
> … the horrid
> Earthworm and the snail and the slow swamp-turtle
> And the black beetle, offspring of vile dung
> Excel me running in a race quicker than the telling.

The disgust with which Aldhelm writes of the slow, earthbound creatures suggests that he has been drawn into delineating a different dichotomy from the fast/slow dichotomy originally projected. The true dichotomy here seems to be between the heavens, and the glorious, swift graceful creatures that belong in such a realm on the one hand, and earth and the filthy, slow and repulsive creatures that burrow in the dirt on the other. This association runs through the riddle. We find it again in the opposition between the whale and the worm: '[g]randior in glaucis ballena fluctibus atra/ Et minor exiguo, sulcat qui corpora, verme' ('larger than a black whale in the grey waves, and smaller than the meagre worm which gnaws through corpses'). The worm is associated with the disturbing decomposition of death and the description of the whale as *atra*, which in addition to 'black' also implies 'terrible', 'deadly', 'squalid' and 'unlucky', is used particularly in connection with the underworld. This dichotomy is especially telling in that it is expressed in terms of creatures that both live in depths of one kind or another and are equally subject to Aldhelm's dislike.

It is not surprising that Aldhelm's dichotomies gravitate towards high/low oppositions since this fundamental division is at the heart of the 'imaginary geography' of *De Creatura*: 'Altior, en, caelo rimor secreta Tonantis/ Et tamen inferior terris tetra Tartara cerno' (ll. 21–2) ('behold! Higher than Heaven, I explore the secrets of the Thunderer and yet, lowlier than the earth, I examine foul

Hell'). As we have seen, the poem begins with an image of God in the heavens and a few lines later we are told that God 'aethrali summus … regnat in arce.' (l. 12) ('reigns on high in his Heavenly citadel') and so the high/low dichotomy is an implicit expression of the ever-present distinction between Creator and created. Indeed, creation describes itself specifically as including everything lower than God: 'Sic ego complector sub caeli cardine cuncta' (l. 7) ('so I embrace all things beneath the pole of heaven') and 'Omnia, quaeque polo sunt subter et axe reguntur,/ Dum pater arcitenens concessit, jure guberno' (ll.18–19) ('all things which are under the sky and guided by heaven, provided the bow-wielding Father allows, I rule by right').

So, Aldhelm's literary and imaginative investigation of the limits of creation is focused on a vertical axis. Although he includes the horizontal axis – for example, when he writes early in the poem: 'Latior, en, patulis terrarum finibus exto' (l. 27) ('behold! I stretch out broader than the wide-spreading ends of the earth'). Nevertheless, images involving the horizontal axis carry far less imaginative weight and are allotted far less space in the poem. And even in those Aldhelm disrupts the horizontal so that it never becomes an important measure of creation. For example, in the poem's only other reference to the horizontal we read:

> Ut globus astrorum plasmor teres atque rotunda
> Sperula seu pilae necnon et forma cristalli;
> Et versa vice protendor ceu Serica pensa
> In gracilem porrecta panum seu stamina pepli.
> Senis, ecce, plagis, latus qua panditur orbis,
> Ulterior multo tendor, mirabile fatu (ll. 57–62)
>
> I am made smooth and round like the orb of the stars
> Or even a globe of a ball or a crystal sphere.
> And, on the other hand, I am extended out just like Chinese silk
> Stretched out in a slender thread or the fibres of a garment.
> See! Than the six zones by which the globe is spread out,
> I am stretched much farther, marvellous to tell.

When creation imagines itself stretching horizontally like a thread, it is opposed, not to an image of narrowness (as later riddles did), but to an image of circularity. It opposes an apparently infinite straight line to an infinite curved line, a circle in an almost a geometrical, mathematical opposition rather than an expression of the horizontal axis. In fact, the dominant image becomes that of a globe; a shape that does have a vertical axis, as Aldhelm himself points out at line 7 when he writes of the *caeli cardo*, the 'pole of heaven' in an image which pre-figures later images of God above the globe found in the Psalter World Map (BL Add. MS 28681, f. 9v and f. 9r) or the Hereford *Mappamundi*. Further shifting away from the horizontal, the tactile immediacy of the different materials, the delicate, evanescent silk and the smooth, hard crystal, establishes a secondary,

competing dichotomy, while the very next line returns us to an overtly vertical image:

> Infra me suprave nihil per saecula constat
> Ni rerum genitor mundum sermone coercens (ll. 63–4)
>
> Nothing stands in the world beneath nor above me,
> Except the Creator of all things governing the world with his word.

Aldhelm's attitude to the horizontal axis even pervades his grammar; passages dealing with the horizontal axis are uncharacteristically passive. Aldhelm first uses the first-person singular passive in line 28, 'concludor', 'I am confined', to convey his original image of wide/narrow: 'in media concludor parte pugilli' (l. 28) ('I am confined in the middle of a fist'). The next thirty lines, like the rest of the poem, features active verbs until the horizontal opposition at lines 57–62. Suddenly, the text shifts to passives: 'plasmor' ('I am formed'), 'protendor' ('I am stretched out') and 'tendor' ('I am stretched') and even the third person form, 'panditur' ('it is spread out'). But, it is the first-person singular passives that are so distinctive and so intriguing because Aldhelm's overall conception of creation is marked by dynamic action. Creation soars swifter than eagles, hawks and even fleet Zephyrus, consumes more than Cyclopes, burns hotter than flames and shines brighter than Titan's orb. Aldhelm's creation boasts of the feats it has undertaken at God's behest, such as the guarding and guiding of all things beneath Heaven. The dynamism of the conception proved so luminous for the imaginations of later poets that they exceeded it in their reworkings until creation is envisioned as possessing such agency and energy that it is almost the creative force rather than the sum of created things. Yet whenever Aldhelm broaches the horizontal dimension he imagines creation, not as acting, but as being acted upon. In *De Creatura* those things that occupy the horizontal axis submit themselves to be shaped and directed, while the vertical axis is teeming with those beings revelling in base depths or more virtuously aspiring to heights. This is very much an addition born of Aldhelm's own view of the world and it is almost entirely absent from his model, Symphosius, who only includes the notion of height a handful of times, for example, in *Tegula*, *Pluvia* and *Scalae*, and always without great cosmological significance.

Aldhelm imagines the physical world as an analogue of the spiritual one. In both its imagery and its form, *De Creatura* expresses a vision of the world as dualistic and hierarchical, divided between high and low, good and bad, ruling and ruled. All these are refractions of the fundamental dichotomy: Creator and created. God stands outside his manifold creation, just as he does in the Psalter Map, not only the epitome of its heights but also its foundation:

> Conditor, aeternis fulcit qui saecla columnis,
> Rector regnorum, frenans et fulmina lege,

> Pendula dum patuli vertuntur culmina caeli,
> Me varium fecit, primo dum conderet orbem. (ll. 1–4)
>
> The Founder, who supports the ages with eternal columns
> Ruler of the kingdoms, restraining lightening bolts with his law,
> While the suspended heights of the wide-reaching skies revolve,
> Made me manifold, until first He founded the globe.

CLASSICAL AND CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE

One aspect of the *Enigmata* that has particularly attracted scholarly interest is Aldhelm's use of classical and Christian traditions. Taking their cue from Aldhelm's vigorous denial of the power and divinity of classical gods, scholars have read the *Enigmata* in terms of a culture war. Steen suggests that that the enigma as a genre 'stems ultimately from biblical enigmata',[26] and further, that this allowed Aldhelm license to draw from classical, pagan sources without the risk that this might be misunderstood as an endorsement of them. However, in this, Steen ignores the fact that Aldhelm names Symphosius (who is not mentioned by Steen) as a source for the *Enigmata* (Ald. *De Metris* 75.21–76.1) and that, amid the tremendous popularity of riddling in Anglo-Saxon England, interest in riddles and riddle contests from the Bible is conspicuous by its absence. Aldhelm's mention of Biblical precedents only underlines the fact that he has not reworked Biblical riddles, nor has he adopted their form but, like many other Anglo-Latin riddle writers, Aldhelm did rework riddles from Symphosius and adopted his riddle form. A good illustration of just how little interest there seems to have been in Biblical riddles is found in the example of the most famous Biblical riddle, the riddle Samson sets for his bride's family. Murphy suggests that Exeter Book Riddle 17 may allude to this riddle[27] but if it does, all it shares is the answer – the device is quite different. It is notable too, that in his translation of Judges, Ælfric translates the passages up to the riddle episode and those after it but has, seemingly consciously, removed the riddle. The Old English Judges omits 14:6–15:7. Moreover, the attempt to establish Christianity in Aldhelm's England is not being waged against Roman paganism but rather by Germanic paganism and while Aldhelm's own anxiety about heterodoxy may stem from his anxious love of classical literature, linked to a further anxiety that in engaging with this culture in his own works he may lead others astray, it is the Germanic gods who are the real rivals to Christianity in England. And the Germanic gods are entirely absent from the *Enigmata* – a significant clue in understanding Aldhelm's cultural project. All publicity is good publicity and Germanic religion(s) get none at all from Aldhelm's riddles. By contrast, although he is dismissive of classical figures, Aldhelm is usually rather

26 Steen, *Verse and virtuosity*, p. 90. **27** P. Murphy, 'Leo and Beo: Exeter Book 17 as Samson's lion', *English Studies*, 88 (2007), 371–87.

carefully informative, providing clarifying and contextualizing information about them.

Instead of regarding the *Enigmata* as a battleground for the classical versus Christian, it makes sense to take Aldhelm at his word when he says that his joint objectives are to teach Christianity *and* classical literature. As Thornbury notes, Aldhelm proudly compares his own endeavours in bringing Latin poetry to England with Vergil's in *Georgics*, of bringing agricultural-didactic poetry to the Latin-speaking world.[28] It is one thing for ancient Christian theologians, like Jerome, writing in the context of the Christianized Roman Empire to disavow the pagan Roman past (as he does, for example, in his letter to Eustochium in 388 where he proudly claims he has not so much as handled the works of the great Roman writers in fifteen years),[29] but for Aldhelm the struggle is to *disseminate* classical literature and learning, not eradicate it. This is attested not only by his words but also by his actions in positioning his riddles between two treatises on metrics – and indeed by his use of quantitative metre. For although he claims that he is simply teaching metrics through the riddles, an understanding of metrics is an aspect of appreciating classical literature as well as an education in composing Latin poetry. Aldhelm's use of classical allusions, figures and motifs, all carefully glossed and expounded, reveals him as an evangelist for classical literature as well as for Christianity.

The overt rejection of classical influence in Aldhelm's *præfatio* – rather than, as Steen suggests, composing poetry in the riddle genre – establishes the Christian framework of the *Enigmata* and allows him license to engage with classical literature in greater depth than he might otherwise have thought advisable. The *præfatio* is dense with classical allusions including, significantly, reference to the Muses.[30] Indeed, the *Enigmata* is, in fact, the first English text to allude to the Muses, though, as Thornbury notes, 'with peculiarly characteristic irony, Aldhelm's poem is not only the first English text to introduce the Muses: it is also the first to reject them.'[31] This manoeuvre is typical of Aldhelm. He is concerned to disavow the Muses lest it appear that he is writing under their influence, but in doing so he provides the reader with a very full account of the ideas and imagery associated with them in Latin literature. He neatly resolves any theological issues by making God his 'muse' and the source of poetic inspiration. It is he who breathes 'munera'

28 See *Aldhelmi Opera,* ed. R. Ehwald (Berlin, 1919), p. 202, and Thornbury, 'Aldhelm's rejection', 1–2. **29** 'Nostis enim et ipsae, quod plus quam quindecim anni sunt, ex quo in manus meas numquam Tullius, numquam Maro, numquam gentilium litterarum quilibet Auctor ascendit: et si quid forte inde dum loquimur, obrepit, quasi antiqui per nebulam somnii recordamur.' (Commentarius in Epistolam ad Galatas, Prologus, PL26 c.307–8, 399–411, 308–12) ('For you yourselves know that it is more than fifteen years since I have held Tully [Cicero] or Maro [Virgil] or any gentile/pagan author in my hands; and if any should steal in while we speak, we recall them as if through the cloud of an ancient dream.') **30** A. Orchard, 'Poetic inspiration and prosaic translation; the making of *Cædmon's Hymn*' in J. Tosell & E. Tyler (eds), *Studies in English language and literature – 'doubt wisely': papers in honour of E. G. Stanley* (New York, 1996), pp 402–22, at p. 406. **31** Thornbury, 'Aldhelm's Rejection', 72.

('gifts') of divine origin 'stolidae … menti' ('into the dull mind') of the poet. The Christian God proves to be a stern, sober, sombre and vengeful muse – Aldhelm's fourth line, 'Horrida nam multans torsisti membra Behemoth' (l. 4) ('for in punishment you tortured the horrible limbs of the Behemoth') leaves this unambiguous. God is a muse in the greatest contrast to the Roman Muses, or indeed to Symphosius' famously drunken Muse ('ebria Musa'). Moreover, Aldhelm unequivocally rejects any influence which might not proceed from God, or from the desire to understand his divine mysteries:

> Castalidas nimphas non clamo cantibus, istuc
> Examen neque spargebat mihi nectar in ore
> Cynthi sic numquam perlustro cacumina, sed nec
> In Parnasso procubui nec somnia vidi. (*Prae.* 10–13)
>
> I do not proclaim my verses to the Castalian nymphs,
> And no swarm has sprinkled nectar in my mouth;
> Equally, I do not wander over the peaks of Cynthus, nor
> Have I lain down on Parnassus, nor seen visions.

This statement is understandably read as a rejection of the Roman poetic ethos – and indeed, it is – but, in a text which, after all, introduces the muses to Anglo-Saxon England, such a rejection could more effectively have been achieved by passing over them in silence. Instead it seems significant that Persius, from whose work the *praefatio* draws, links bad poetry with a decline in morality, an idea which informs all of Aldhelm's poetic endeavours. In this sense, Aldhelm's approach to classical literature is individual, but it is also a product of his society. From the beginning, it was recognized that the conversion of England would be a gradual process. In his letter of 597 Pope Gregory writes of Anglo-Saxon pagans:

> duris mentibus simul omnia abscidere impossibile esse non dubium est, quia et is, qui summum locum ascendere nititur, gradibus uel passibus, non autem saltibus elevatur. (Bede *Hist. Eccl.* 1. 30, Greg I. *Epistl.* 11. 76)
>
> There is no doubt that it is impossible to cut away everything at once from their stubborn minds; because he who struggles to climb to the highest place, is raised by degrees or steps, not by leaps.

In this letter Pope Gregory specifically instructs Mellitus, who is on his way to join Augustine's mission in England, to allow pagans to keep their temples and some of their rites, but in the name of Christ, and so to affect a gradual conversion. As Church argues, Pope Gregory probably knew very little about Anglo-Saxon religion(s) and that his approach to paganism was modelled on Old Testament accounts of conversion and his own Roman experience.[32] Never-

32 See S. Church, 'Paganism in conversion-age Anglo-Saxon England', *History*, 93 (2008),

theless, this attitude is echoed in the approach to cultural politics found in the *Enigmata* where pagan material is used, paradoxically, as a means of Christianization. There is another aspect of Gregory's letter that has implications for the kind of cultural negotiations undertaken in *De Creatura* and the *Enigmata* as a whole. Gregory stresses that while pagan temples may be saved, the idols within them must be destroyed.[33] Herren argues for an equivalent literary strategy in Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* against Roman paganism:

> In a long passage in the metrical *De Virginitate* dealing with the martyr Julian, Aldhelm records the destruction of the metal images of the Roman gods, naming each of them and recording some of the myths attached to them singly. He interrupts this long excursus with a description of the destruction of the idol of Dagon (1 Kings [1 Sam], 5:1–5), a deed accomplished by the 'vengeance of the Thunderer.' And then: 'It was in no other wise that the Ruler of Olympus raged against the pagan gods, whose shattered power fell to the ground, so that no one was free of the terrible danger, as the consequence of this writing reveals in its present manner.' The appropriation of terms such as 'Thunderer' and 'Ruler of Olympus' to the Judaeo-Christian God … is, therefore, more than a literary device … The true Jove has ousted the false one, and is the rightful bearer of the name.

Like Herren, it seems to me that Aldhelm is waging a kind of sophisticated culture war in this passage, but its terms are not as straightforward as Herren suggests. The passage presents the Christian God – whose iconography is not overwhelmingly meteorological – as 'the Thunderer'. Admittedly, in Hannah's prayer, which precedes the two passages upon which Aldhelm draws in the metrical *De Virginitate* and which foreshadows them, she says 'The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; against them He will thunder [tonabit] in heaven' (1 Sam 2:10).[34] Nevertheless, this is not a significant or common association. Here, Aldhelm serves Gregory's policy of assimilating pagan gods to the Christian God by his emphasis on the notion of the Christian God as a thunder god, relegating older, pagan thunder gods to an inferior place inside, not above, creation. Herren notes the value of this tactic, but, like Steen, he believes that the target is Roman paganism. He writes 'Moderns were not the first to realize that by controlling nomenclature and terminology one controls the battlefield of ideas'[35] and in particular, he reads Aldhelm's use of terms such as *tonans* ('the Thunderer')

162–80. **33** *Epist.* 11. 76. **34** Interestingly, Hannah's prayer also contains an image of God establishing the pillars on which the earth rests: 'For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's and on them He has set the world' (1 Sam 2:8). This is the image of God with which Aldhelm opens his creation riddle, so it seems likely that he was familiar with the prayer. The image only occurs four times in the Bible, always in books of the Old Testament: once in Samuel, twice in Job (Job 9:6; 26:11) and once in Psalms (Psalms 75:3). **35** M. Herren, 'Aldhelm the

for God and *Olympus* for Heaven as a way of pitting the 'Christian Thunderer against the pagan one (Jupiter)'.[36] Since, as I note above, and as Aldhelm's own explanations and clarifications of Roman myth make clear, Roman paganism does not seem to have been a significant religion. Far more significant in terms of Anglo-Saxon culture wars is the fact that Thor, a thunder god who inspired countless English place names (and a day name),[37] is omitted entirely. Instead, in line with Gregory's policy, Aldhelm describes the destruction of Roman idols and of Dagon with the heavy implication that this will be the fate of all pagan idols – all without a single reference to Germanic gods. Aldhelm's deafening silence denies all credibility to the Germanic gods who were the real target of Gregory's policy and the manifest representatives of paganism in Aldhelm's England.

The passage in *De Virginitate* is indicative of Aldhelm's desire to spread knowledge of the classics. For here we see, once again, that in his rejection of classical pagan deities, Aldhelm is remarkably informative in naming them and listing their mythic achievements. He imagines the world populated by lesser gods who have been defeated and subjected by the Christian God. Interestingly, Aldhelm does not deny the exploits of classical gods and heroes, but rather asserts that they have been superseded by the new, victorious Christian God. Here Aldhelm seeks to demonstrate that, despite the obvious power required to perform their mythic feats, not one of the pagan gods is able to defend him or herself against the power of the Christian God. But in fact, Aldhelm is actually describing a pantheon of warring gods in which the most powerful, the Christian God, overthrows the others. By relating the story of Jupiter's overthrow of Saturn as well, Aldhelm makes the Christian God the last in a line of gods struggling for dominance. In this construction, just as he does in *De Fusa* when he says that the spindle of fate was 'sceptra regens mundi dum Christi gratia regeret' (7.4) ('ruling the sceptres of the world until Christ's grace shall rule'), the Christian God is the successor to the pagan gods.

This construction would run the risk of allowing the Christian God to be dismissed as the most recent, rather than the last, in the line of warring gods. However, the Christian God is distinguished from his pagan predecessors in that he exists outside creation while they can only exist within it, hence the overriding importance of this idea in *De Creatura*. God stands above creation, ruling it and, as Aldhelm makes clear (ll. 11–12), is able to defend his rule with force. Creation, on the other hand, is full of the figures of pagan mythology; Cyclops, Vulcan, Zephyrus, and Phoebus all appear. As in the passage in *De Virginitate* (above), in *De Creatura* each exemplifies some excellence or prodigious capacity; the appetite of Cyclopes, the heat of Vulcan, the speed of Zephyrus and the

Theologian' in K. O'Brien O'Keeffe & A. Orchard (eds), *Latin learning and English lore: studies in Anglo-Saxon literature for Michael Lapidge* I (Toronto, 2005), pp 68–89, at p. 75. **36** Herren, 'Aldhelm the Theologian', p. 75. **37** Mayr-Harting, *The coming of Christianity*, pp 25–6.

radiance of Phoebus. With the exception of the Cyclopes' gluttonous consumption, their qualities are implicitly admired. They belong to the vertical axis, to the high side of the high/low dichotomy and they epitomize what is energetic and brilliant. Inevitably, however, they all are surpassed by creation and, ultimately, by God Himself. Their presence explains Aldhelm's repeated assertion of God's separation from, and overlordship of, his creation in a poem whose expression of ideology is otherwise implicit rather than exegetical – take, for example, Aldhelm's treatment of the images of the vigil and of the locks; in each case he completes the image without sermonizing or propounding its meaning. This model of a world populated by classical figures but dominated by God is an analogue of Aldhelm's hope for Anglo-Saxon culture: primarily and devoutly Christian but versed in and illuminated by classical learning.

CONCLUSION

Like Symphosius, Aldhelm uses the interrogative, interactive, nature of riddles to reinforce a social agenda. In his case, this ranges from improving classical learning to instilling greater modesty of dress. In fact, some of Aldhelm's ideological points are so topical that his purpose is not always apparent except to an educated audience of his own period. Consequently, many passages proved so perplexing to later audiences that they were glossed, 'fixed' or otherwise altered and misunderstood. *De Creatura* is not accidentally ideological. To express and convince us of his view of God is one of the stated purposes of Aldhelm's riddle collection. It might seem, then, that in the persisting influence of his creation riddle, Aldhelm achieved his aim. Yet, although all English creation riddles are constructed around Aldhelm's conception and even share the rudiments of his structure, they did not preserve his basic cosmological understandings or theological conviction. Perhaps inevitably, each expresses a different understanding of the world, each typical of at least some aspect of the thinking of their own time. Aldhelm's creation riddle type has persisted, but over the centuries of its influence it has not proved a vehicle for Aldhelm's ideology. On the contrary, Aldhelm's brilliant riddle form, riddle device and riddle *topos* has been put to the service of new, different world views.

CHAPTER 4

The Exeter Book: three vernacular versions of the creation riddle

> Ealle ðas ðing synd mid anum naman genemnode gesceaft
> … All these things are with one name named; 'creation'
> Ælfric, *De Fide,* 1.20, 19.

D*e Creatura* inspired at least three vernacular retellings. These survive in the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501), which was given to the Cathedral in 1072 by Leofric, and probably compiled around the 960s or 970s, though establishing the dates of its constituent poems is rather more difficult. Among these are ninety-four[1] riddles – the largest collection of Old English riddles – arranged in two sequences. The manuscript is damaged in several places and given that the end of the codex has suffered fire damage, it may well have been intended as a century of riddles on the model of earlier Anglo-Latin collections. Because the Exeter Book riddles probably had more than one author, and, in fact, individual riddles may have been composed by more than one poet,[2] they present a more complex corpus but, arguably, more interesting as well. They are in the vernacular, they lack entitled solutions, and have what Orchard terms an 'apparently eclectic nature',[3] that is, the riddles often repeat topics and do not display any obvious thematic structure. These three points suggest some interaction with oral tradition but, naturally, different riddles exhibit different levels of orality. Some are highly literary, while others were probably 'orally composed at an early stage in their evolution'.[4] This difference is reflected in their subjects and the specialist knowledge they reveal. The Exeter Book riddles diverge from the increasingly abstract, theological or grammatical *topoi* of Eusebius and Tatwine's riddles and instead, these riddles often demonstrate a high degree of familiarity with the agricultural and domestic tasks of everyday life. Moreover, in structure they tend (though not always!) to be shorter and more memorable; another move in the direction of traditional pop-

1 The number of riddles is still a matter of scholarly debate. I follow the numbering of Bernard Muir, see B. Muir (ed.), *Exeter anthology of Old English poetry* (Chicago, 2006). **2** See A.R. Riedinger, 'The formulaic style in the Old English riddles', *Studia Neophilologica,* 74 (2004), 30–43. **3** A. Orchard, 'Enigma variations' in K. O'Brien-O'Keefe & A. Orchard (eds), *Latin learning and English lore* (Toronto, 2005), pp 284–304, p. 286. **4** Riedinger, 'Formulaic style', p. 32.

ular riddling. The collection is intriguing, among other reasons, because it seems to demonstrate the transformation of the culture of surrounding the highly literary riddles of Symphosius and Aldhelm into that of the popular riddles of post-Conquest England. The absence of solutions may well indicate that these riddles were known well enough for the answers to be deemed an unnecessary inclusion in the manuscript. Moreover, their 'apparently eclectic nature' indicates a significant shift, from a focus on riddle topics, to one of riddling itself. Without entitled solutions it is impossible to be sure of what structure, if any, the collection was intended to have, but the presence of multiple riddles on seemingly the same topic suggests that the intention was not programmatic; another clear break from those earlier Anglo-Latin collections composed by a single author.

Although some of the Exeter Book riddles apparently treat the same subjects, they rarely rely on the same paradox for their riddlic obscurity. However, the three on creation – Riddle 40, Riddle 66 and Riddle 93 – are an exception to this principle. Like *De Creatura*, their shared paradox is that every quality and every extreme is true of some aspect of Creation and so all contradictions may be said to be true of creation. Ælfric expresses the same idea when he writes 'ealle ðas ðing synd mid anum naman genemnode gesceaft' (Ælf. *De Fide*. 1.20, 19) ('all these things are with one name named; Creation'), suggesting that this perception of the world was reasonably common in the tenth century – including among those outside the political, ecclesiastical and scholarly elite, if Riddles 66 and 93 are indeed popular riddles, as they appear to be. Although all three are 'versions' of *De Creatura*, they are at different stages of adaptation. Riddle 40 is a 'translation', Riddle 66 a reworking and Riddle 93 is so significantly altered that, without the intermediate Riddle 66, the connection to *De Creatura* might never have been guessed. These three texts are spaced at thirds delineating the collection and although each depends on the same paradox, each reflects a different cosmological and cosmographical understanding. Riddle 40 describes the world through a series of vignettes expanded from Aldhelm's dichotomies. Interestingly, Riddle 66 excludes God, focusing solely on creation which is conceptualized as a single anthropomorphic, dynamic, speaking, vivifying force and rather than viewing creation in the infinite disparate details of the microcosm, Riddle 66 distils the natural world into its large, structural elements and maps it accordingly. The final text, the highly fragmentary Riddle 93, appears to have further distilled creation into a litany of comparatives,[5] suggesting that the emphasis has shifted from image to attribute and is concerned with the qualities of creation (its brightness, speed, etc.), rather than its constituent parts; celestial bodies, plants and animals. Whether or not these three texts were composed in sequence, they represent an idea in progress. We see this transformation take

5 For a recent discussion of the comparative and superlative riddle type, see I. Konstantakos, 'Trial by riddle: the testing of the counsellor and the contest of kings in the Legend of Amasis and Bias', *Classica Et Mediaevalia,* 55 (2005), 85–138, at pp 126–8.

place, especially in the use of 'basic images such as inside/outside, open/closed, high/low, and so forth, to which symbolic meaning is always attached'.[6]

ANGLO-SAXON TRANSLATION PRACTICES

In order to understand the relationship of the three texts to each other, it is important to consider Anglo-Saxon translation practices. As Thijs notes, Anglo-Saxon translators often added 'comments and explanations' or even engage with what he terms 'creative literary rendering'. Consequently, Anglo-Saxon translations exhibit 'a whole *scala* of approaches ranging from literally close to freely paraphrasing.' He concludes that in many instances 'the term "transformation" would be more suitable than "translation"'.[7] The variety of this creative and interpretive approach was amplified by the fact that Anglo-Saxon translators faced very particular issues. Translations of Latin texts became necessary in England around the middle of the seventh century,[8] long before it did in cultures where the vernacular was close enough for Latin texts to remain comprehensible. So early English translators were without contemporary precedents for their endeavours. In the ninth century, King Alfred's translators,[9] whose brief was part of a larger project to reverse the slump in learning and religion, took Saint Jerome's careful translation methodology as a model, but by the time of the Exeter Book a century later, the need for this kind of precision had diminished. Alfred's programme had been effective. Many key texts had been translated which, in combination with a resurgence in learning, allowed for the adoption of a more creative attitude, especially in relation to a text like *De Creatura*, which is neither scriptural nor Biblical. This shift in approaches to translation and translation practice is typical and, in fact, both Stanton and Thijs posit that the rather free Roman attitude to translation of Greek texts may be understood in terms of the familiarity of the Roman audience with both the original language and the original texts that were being translated. It is tempting to speculate then, that the borrowing from, and elaborating on, previous riddle texts evident in the Exeter Book riddles may be in part due to the audience's familiarity with those texts – another indication that these texts circulated in popular and oral culture.

Riddle 40, composed in the context of this post-Alfredian approach to translation, is really an elaboration of *De Creatura*. Its original form appears to have been considerably longer than Aldhelm's poem. Indeed, as Klein notes of the only other translation of an Aldhelm riddle – and it is equally true of this one – 'it makes the original paradox wholly its own'.[10] Similarly, O'Brien O'Keeffe notes, 'the Old English poet's technique sacrifices literal accuracy for poetic effect' and gives, as an example, the passage in which 'the poet omits to translate the image of the race

6 Michelet, *Creation,* p. 4. **7** C. Thijs, 'Early Old English translation: practice before theory?', *Neophilologus,* 91 (2007), 149–73, at p. 151. **8** Ibid., 151. **9** R. Stanton, *The culture of translation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 101. **10** T. Klein, 'The Old English translation of Aldhelm's riddle *Lorica*', *Review of English Studies*, ns, 48 (1997), 345–9, at p. 345.

in Aldhelm, line 39, developing instead the idea of speed'.[11] This attitude is present throughout the text. The translator almost always retains Aldhelm's original images, although their context and significance is often altered. Here translation becomes an opportunity for the same kinds of embellishments that are inherent in oral reproductions (performances) of texts. Indeed, by Anglo-Saxon standards, Riddle 40 is surprisingly exacting. DiNapoli observes that:

> among the various Old English poems that translate a source with which they can be compared, Riddle 40 stands out in how closely it follows its original. The Anglo-Saxon authors of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, *Elene*, and *The Phoenix*, to name the most prominent examples, consistently take enormous liberties with their sources, at points rendering them virtually new works. This cannot be said of Riddle 40, despite its omissions and occasional rearrangements.[12]

Consequently, where shifts in emphasis or nuance do occur, they are especially revealing and, because of the nature of the riddle's subject they also express important conceptual and philosophical differences.

By contrast, Riddle 66 is a condensed reworking of Riddle 40 and, by DiNapoli's reckoning, it is an example of a translation that has become a 'new work', though the two texts are clearly linked by phrases and other formulaic elements in common. The central image of Riddle 66, Creation embracing the fields, for example, is an adaptation of Riddle 40 lines 50–3 that begin with a repeated formulaic couplet (ll. 50–1 and ll. 82–3), the only repeated element in that poem:

> Ic eorþan eom æghwær brædre,
> ond widgielra þonne þes wong grena;
> folm mec mæg bifon ond fingras þry
> utan eaþe ealle ymbclyppan (ll. 50–3),

I am broader everywhere than the earth and wider than the green field; a hand may move me and all of me be enclosed easily between three fingers.

The corresponding lines in Riddle 66 run:

> Ic eom mare þonne þes middangeard
> læsse þonne hondwyrm …
> … Sæs me sind ealle
> flodas on fæðmum ond þes foldan bearm,
> grene wongas. (ll. 1–5)

I am greater than this middle-earth, less than a hand-worm […]. All the seas' tides are in my embraces and the earthen breast, the green fields.

11 O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'The text of Aldhelm's Enigma no. c', 62. **12** DiNapoli, 'Depth perception', p. 439.

Moreover, the image of smallness in Riddle 66 is a quote from Riddle 40, lines 95–6,[13] and includes the unusual word *hondwyrm*. The word only appears a few times in the Old English corpus;[14] notably once a piece in Riddles 40 and 66, once in a medical text (as one would expect) and once in the *Corpus Glossary* where it is a translation for *Ladascapiae briensis*.[15] As Bradley notes,

> as hondwyrm ('hand-worm') means the itch insect, it seems natural to guess that *scapiae* is some sort of corruption of *scabies*. Perhaps *lata scabie* may have occurred in some prose passage alluding to Vergil *Geo*. 3. 299 ('glacies ne frigida laedat molle pecus, *scabiem*que *ferat*') and have been mistaken for a plural noun. Confusion of name between the disease of sheep and that of human beings would, I suppose, be natural enough.

The word is used in Riddle 40 as a translation of Aldhelm's *verme* (l. 66) – more usually translated by its Old English descendant, *wyrm*. This kind of internal evidence suggests that Riddle 66 is a reworking of Riddle 40, rather than of *De Creatura* in either an oral or written form.

No such obvious linguistic connection marks what remains of Riddle 93 as belonging to this series of increasingly 'transformed translations'. Rather it was identified as such on the basis of its structure by Frederick Tupper, who noticed its similarity to *De Creatura*, Riddle 40 and Riddle 66. He writes, 'the few surviving phrases of this badly damaged fragment exhibit a striking likeness to the comparatives of the "Creation" riddles'.[16] It is also true that Riddle 93 shares a common vocabulary of images, a similar implied conception of Creation and, of course, a central paradox. However, in its fragmentary state it is impossible to tell where it sits in the transformation spectrum.

ANGLO-SAXON BIBLICAL IMAGES OF CREATION

Before turning to the Exeter Book riddles, it is also worth considering what other models might have influenced their cosmologies aside from *De Creatura*. The most obvious of these is, naturally, the account in the Bible. Here God creates the world by separating out the elements in order, first the high from the low (the heavens from the earth), then the light from the dark, structured into days and nights. Then he separates the sky from the waters, then the waters from the land and plants it with vegetation. Then the sun and moon, the sea creatures and birds, and then the animals of the earth. Finally, he creates humans:

13 '…læsse þonne se hondwyrm' ('less than a hondwyrm'). **14** *Old English Corpus*, ed. A. di Paolo Healey, 2005. **15** H. Bradley, 'Remarks on the Corpus Glossary', *Classical Quarterly,* 13 (1919), 89–108, at p. 91. This theory that the mistake may derive from a prose version of the *Georgics* is rather interesting given the other parallels between the *Georgics* on the one hand and Riddle 40, and its original, *De Creatura*, on the other. **16** F. Tupper, *The riddles of the* Exeter Book (Darmstadt, 1968), p. 238.

> Et dixit Deus: Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram: et dominetur piscium maris, et volatilium cœli, et omnium pecorum, et omnis terræ, et omnium reptilium repentium super terram. Et fecit Deus hominem; ad imaginem Dei fecit eum: masculum et feminam fecit eos. Et benedixit eos Deus dicens: Crescite, et multiplicamini, et implete terram; et dominamini eius, et principamini piscium maris, et volatilium cœli, et omnium pecorum, et omnis terræ, et omnium reptilium repentium super terram. (Gen 1:26–8)
>
> And God said. 'Let Us make man in Our image and likeness, and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and all cattle, and of all the earth, and all creeping creatures which creep on the earth.' So God made man; after the image of God He made him; male and female He made them. And God blessed them, saying, 'Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and all cattle, and of all the earth, and all creeping creatures which creep on the earth.'

Here humans are the last, perhaps crowning, achievement of God's creation and are given dominion over the earth. However, in ninth century vernacular versions of this story, humans are given even greater importance. As Lee notes,

> The mythological explanations of the condition of human blessedness symbolized by the guest-hall of Eden and of the second, ruined world under demonic influence are set out clearly in *Genesis A* (22–77, 92–234, 852–964), *Genesis B* (246–441a, 442–851), and *Christ and Satan* (1–21, 22–364). In three closely related stories: the account of the way in which the fall of the angels leads to the creation of the dryht to replace the fallen angels, now become exiles, by creating the world.[17]

In this account, humans are not the final addition to creation, they are the reason for it. God makes all those things beneath 'the pole of heaven' for humans:

> þa þeahtode þeoden ure
> modgeþonce, hu he þa mæran gesceaft,
> eðelstaðolas eft gesette,
> swegltorhtan seld, selran werode,
> þa hie gielpsceaþan ofgifen hæfdon,
> heah on heofenum. (*Genesis A*, ll. 92–97a)
>
> Then considered our Lord, in his mind-thoughts, how he might remake that great creation, for a better people, the homelands, the heaven-bright seats, that the arrogant ones gave up, high in heaven.

17 A. Lee, *Gold-hall and earth-dragon:* Beowulf *as metaphor* (Toronto, 1998), p. 44.

We have already seen that humans do not hold this kind of centrality in Aldhelm's account of Creation. Nor can this be dismissed as Aldhelm regarding humans as set apart from Creation by virtue of their dominion over it and therefore not to be included in any description of it. *De Creatura* does contain images of humans but only as minor, peripheral elements in a much grander scheme. Interestingly, in the Exeter Book riddles, which may well be more-or-less contemporary with *Genesis A*, humans are even more marginalized, problematic figures. It seems that Symphosius' implicit attitude towards humans as figures who are always problematic in the scheme of Creation is yet another aspect of this particular riddle genre which he established.

RIDDLE 40

Riddle 40 'was probably not translated into Old English before the tenth century',[18] nearly three hundred years after the composition of *De Creatura*, and, with the exception of a couple of repeated or formulaic phrases, Riddle 40 shows very few signs of orality. The poem, which differs from Aldhelm's original in its tone more than its structure, describes Creation in an eclectic series of detailed and luscious vignettes apparently exemplifying various abstract qualities, presided over by ever-present God. The end of the text is missing, leaving us without its rendering of some of the most interesting and cryptic elements of Aldhelm's imagery. It would have been fascinating, for example, to see what the vernacular poet made of Aldhelm's comments about colour – a subject hardly touched upon by Symphosius and therefore Aldhelm's own particular addition – in the light of Casson's observation that the Anglo-Saxons were far more interested in brightness than in colour,[19] while the end of the vernacular translation might have been able to shed some light on one of Aldhelm's most perplexing images, the 'senae plagae' ('six zones'), which must be some kind of reference to the five Vergilian 'zonae' (the two polar regions, the equator and the two remaining areas on either side of the equator) in the *Georgics* (1. 233), also mentioned by Ovid at the beginning of *Metamorphoses* (1.32–51.) Yet, if Aldhelm means to refer to Vergil, why use 'plagae' instead of 'zonae', especially when the more obvious connection of number is gone? Alcuin, who is greatly indebted to Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, may offer a clue when he refers to the six 'paries' (scribal error for 'pars' perhaps?) in the *Disputatio regalis et nobilissimi invenis Pippin cum Albino scholastic* which are revealed to be left, right, above, below, in front, behind, perhaps suggesting that these six 'directions' reflect Alcuin's understanding of this passage in Aldhelm? Or, perhaps that Aldhelm's 'plagae' do indeed refer to the Vergilian 'zonae' and Aldhelm has added the Earthly Paradise as a sixth zone – six being the number of earthly perfection, though if the alteration in number is Aldhelm's

18 Steen, *Verse and virtuosity*, p. 91. **19** See R. Casson, 'Colour shift: evolution of English colour terms from brightness to hue' in C.L. Hardin & L. Maffi (eds), *Colour categories in thought and language* (Cambridge, 1997), pp 224–39.

own coinage, why does he not explain it as he so often does when he feels that a point is obscure? Conversely, if the idea was common in Aldhelm's period, why have no other references to 'six zones' survived? All in all, a vernacular translation such as that presumably lost in the manuscript corruption of Riddle 40 might have been extremely illuminating.

Even without the ending, however, the difference in tone between Riddle 40 and *De Creatura* is obvious. The undercurrent of tension between Creator and created, always present in Aldhelm's riddle, is replaced by a view of God mentoring his Creation. *De Creatura* describes God as 'frenans' (l. 2) ('restraining') the natural world 'lege' (l. 2) ('with law'), where Riddle 40 imagines that 'healdeð ond wealdeð' (l. 5) ('he holds and guides') the world. Rather than an image of control exerted from above, the vernacular translator dispenses with the vertical axis and amplifies the idea of embrace. So, where Aldhelm's Creation claims, 'ego complector sub caeli cardine cuncta' (l. 8) (I embrace all things beneath the pole of heaven), Riddle 40 imagines a more complex image:

> ic mid waldendes worde ealne
> þisne ymbhwyrft utan ymbclyppe (ll. 14–15)
>
> I, with the Master's word, all this worldcircle utterly embrace around.

The circularity and breadth of this embrace is enacted in the two *ymb-* prefixes: 'ymbhwyrft utan ymbclyppe' ('worldcircle utterly embrace around'). Although the Old English *clyppan* and the Latin *completere* both have the same essential meaning, 'to embrace', the Old English verb also includes the sense of 'to honour, prize or cherish',[20] an additional meaning which contributes to the poem's overall sense of a gentle and affectionate mutuality between Creator and created.

Interestingly, for Michelet, the dominant aspect of this image is one of confinement. For her there is great significance in the image of God,

> … eorþan ond heofones,
> healdeð ond wealdeð, swa he ymb þas utan hweorfeð (ll. 4b–5)
>
> … he holds and rules earth and heaven, just as he wanders about around them.

She argues that 'the mention of God wandering around Creation further emphasizes the idea of enclosure, for this image materializes the sky as a vault on which one can walk.'[21] However, it does not seem implicit that God's wanderings are confined to the vault of heaven, rather he seems to wander throughout his creation. Moreover, the strict demarcation between high and low of *De Creatura* is

20 See J.R. Clark Hall, *A concise Anglo-Saxon dictionary* (Cambridge, 1960). **21** Michelet, *Creation*, p. 56.

replaced by the more tactile, flexible accommodating image of an embrace. Where *De Creatura* stressed the perimeter, Riddle 40 focuses on movement which, in itself, is inherently non-confining. Its associations are with freedom and fluidity. Even if we understand God's movements to define the boundaries of Creation, it is not an image of restriction, limitation, or confinement. Not surprisingly, this different ethos is mirrored in Riddle 40's depiction of a gentle, nurturing relationship between God and Creation and the riddle itself is marked by a greater sense of wonder. In *De Creatura*, Aldhelm's precise mind goes straight to the riddle's paradox in his first words about creation, that God 'me varium fecit' (l. 4) ('made me manifold'), whereas Riddle 40 stresses the awe-inspiring: 'He mec wrætlice worhte æt frymþe' (l. 6) ('He made me miraculously at the beginning').

This difference in emphasis between *De Creatura* and Riddle 40 is present throughout. *De Creatura* stresses the pivotal oppositions contained within Creation in clean elegant Latin and saves elaboration for those passages which either describe the glory of God, or appeal to it. So, each opposition is stark and deliberate. By contrast, the poet of Riddle 40 sees every image as an opportunity to give full reign to his powers of description. The basic structure of *De Creatura* becomes a frame for his own lively, abundant observations and experience of the world – it is no wonder that the Exeter Book riddles are so often considered in terms of what they reveal about the material culture of the Anglo-Saxons and the conditions of their everyday lives. Riddle 40 is always expanding on *De Creatura*. Where Aldhelm in a single phrase and with remarkable economy writes 'grossas et graciles rerum comprenso figuras' (l. 20) ('I embrace the coarse and the fine forms of things'), the vernacular poet writes:

> swa me loef fæder læde æt frymþe,
> þæt ic þa mid ryhte reccan moste
> þicce ond þynne; þinga gehwylces
> onlicnesse æghwær healde. (ll. 34–7)
>
> … so the dear Father led me at the beginning that since then I might justly guide the thick and thin: of each thing everywhere I assume the likeness.

While Riddle 40's 'þicce ond þynne',[22] conveys the variations in size of Aldhelm's 'grossas et graciles', it fails to suggest the further opposition being drawn between the gross and coarse on the one hand and the delicate and fine on the other. The vernacular vision suggests a more nurturing relationship between Creation and its constituent parts. Here the prosopopoetic voice tells us that God charged it to 'ryhte reccan' both the thick and the thin. The stark dichotomy of Aldhelm's original is further blurred when the vernacular poet adds that 'þinga gehwylces/ onlicnesse æghwær healde' ('of each thing everywhere I

22 In fact, O'Brien O'Keeffe criticizes this translation, noting that it 'misplaces the referent of Aldhelm, line 20, *grossas et graciles … figuras*.' O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'The text of Aldhelm's Enigma no. c', 63.

assume the likeness'). Creation is no longer conceived of as encompassing two opposites, but rather as containing everything everywhere; all the extremes and all the exquisite nuances and mediocre mundanities in between.

Cavell notes a similar tendency when she comments on the difference between the Aldhelm's image of the Chinese silk and the more complex image of creation being woven in Riddle 40. She writes:

> The textile image is a metaphor rather than a simile; creation is quite clearly *gewefen* (woven). While this reference to weaving likely stems from the Latin text's depiction of cloth, the difference between the two references are interesting. The Latin lines are concerned with the out-spread nature of cloth, with attention given to the type and fineness of that cloth. The Old English, on the other hand, refers directly to weaving, and applies this woven nature to creation itself. It is not spread out *like* cloth; rather, it *is* skilfully woven, with every thread incorporated into the grand patter. The difference may be partly due to old English poetry's preference for metaphor rather than simile, but there is a significant distinction in the choice to emphasize the method of construction as opposed to the product.[23]

In this way, Riddle 40's greater emphasis on narrative and its digressive sensuous evocation largely erases Aldhelm's polarizing vision. It encourages a less dualistic, exclusionary, and divisive view of the world. Each extreme is separated from the next by an extended descriptive passage. Since descriptive passages often include details unrelated to the ostensible demonstration, the contrast is inevitably blunted. Consequently, the effect is not of a world divided into good and evil along a number of axes, but rather of a unified Creation, some parts of which are found to be more delightful than others. In this respect Riddle 40 is a return to the more theriocentric atmosphere of Symphosius' riddles. The shift is not seismic but certainly noticeable. For example, when Aldhelm uses the sows as illustrative of abundance, the animals are not seen in their own terms but rather in terms of their value to humans. In fact, Aldhelm betrays a slight distaste towards the animals and especially towards what he perceives as their gluttony. However unpleasant Aldhelm finds the spectacle, their ever-fattening flesh is essential to the human food supply and the cause of joy among the swineherds:

> Pinguior, en, multo scrofarum axungia glisco,
> Glandiferis iterum referunt dum corpora fagis
> Atque saginata laetantur carne subulci (ll. 48–50)

> See! I swell up fatter by far than the grease of the sows as they stuff their bodies again with acorn-bearing beech and the swineherds are delighted by the fattened flesh.

23 M. Cavell, *Weaving words and binding bodies: the poetics of human experience in Old English literature* (Toronto, 2016), p. 254.

The equivalent passage in Riddle 40 marks the end of the legible manuscript, but as far as we can tell, the poet has kept most of the elements of Aldhelm's original. However, crucially, Aldhelm's swineherds are gone and the joy he attributes to them has been transferred to the pig who 'wynnum lifde' ('lived joyfully') in the beechwood. Moreover, the pig is no longer a member of a herd, but rather a single, we might say, Platonic pig, which stands for the porcine condition. Aldhelm, with poetic discipline, uses the image of the sows solely to illustrate his point; the abundance of their food produces an abundance of flesh which in turn promises an abundance of meat for human consumption; since they are sows, their health also reflects their ability to produce piglets, thus increasing the herd and therefore the human food supply. Whereas, the vernacular poet is distracted by imagining the pig and what the world might seem like to such a creature:

> Mara ic eom ond fættra þonne amæsted swin,
> bearg bellende, [þe] on bocwuda,
> won wrotende wynnum lifde
> þæt he… (ll. 105–8)
>
> Greater I am and fatter than the mast-fed swine, the grunting hog, dark rooting, that lived joyfully in the beechwood so that he …

The poet takes obvious delight in this behaviour. By using the word *bearg*, which implies a male not a female animal, the vernacular poet instantly dispenses with the idea of the pigs as a symbol of abundance and fertility, while the other word he uses to refer to the pig, *swin*, may include wild animals. Far from a domesticated animal, reared only to be slaughtered for human consumption, the vernacular pig is autonomous and joyful. This may seem like a rather whimsical point to make so much of, but it reveals a true ideological difference. Aldhelm's view is philosophical and theological, the vernacular poet engages in an imaginative empathy that is subversive in its power to reimagine and revision the world.

Interestingly – and further to this point – the vernacular poet has also removed Aldhelm's other reference to human food. Where Aldhelm has creation proclaim itself 'tostis…mollior extis' (l. 43) ('I am softer than cooked offal'), the vernacular poet replaces it with 'hnescre ic eom micle halsrefeþre,/ seo her on winde wæweð on lyfte' (ll. 80–1) ('I am much softer than the down, which here on the wind floats on high'). O'Brien O'Keeffe has cited some infelicities in the Rawlinson manuscript from which the translator was working that may account for this in part, but she concludes that in view of marginal glossing that clarifies the obscured words, such problems are not enough to explain it fully. She writes, whether 'he wished to avoid "snædelðearm" or "bæcðearm", the Old English words for *exta* – neither apparently ever used in poetry – or whether baked or twisted entrails did not make sense to him, it is impossible to know.'[24]

24 O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'The text of Aldhelm's Enigma no. c', 70.

The excising of the swineherd and the transformation of the livestock into a single, possibly wild, pig in combination with the removal of this image of cooked human food is intriguing. The swineherd and his herd are images of farming; images of the transformation of nature through human habitation and civilization. They are markers of culture and humanity, the 'cooked' to use Levi-Strauss' term.[25] The vernacular poet's avoidance of images of civilization is especially apparent in his treatment of Aldhelm's image of the curled locks in which civilization is contrasted with its absence:

> Cincinnos capitis nam gesto cacumine nullos,
> Ornent qui frontem pompis et tempora setis,
> Cum mihi caesaries volitent de vertice crispae,
> Plus calamistratis se comunt quae calamistro. (ll. 44–7)

I bear no ringlets from the top of my head which would adorn my forehead with a fringe and my temples with hair even though luxuriant hair flows from my elegant crown, more curled than that produced by curling irons.

As we have seen, for Aldhelm curled locks are a sign of unchristian vanity, but the image is also concerned with civilization and its technology. In Riddle 40 the curled locks are no longer an image of civilization:

> Ne hafu ic in heafde hwite loccas
> wræste gewundne, ac ic eom wide calu;
> ne ic breaga ne bruna brucan moste,
> ac mec bescyrede scyppend eallum;
> nu me wrætlice weaxað on heafde
> þæt me on gescyldrum scinan motan
> ful wrætlice wundne loccas. (ll. 98–104)

I have no white locks on my head excellently curled, for I am completely bald; nor am I allowed to possess eyebrows or eyelashes, for the Shaper sheared me of them all; now curled locks grow marvellously from my head that shine on my shoulders most marvellous.

Instead, here the image expresses the dichotomy of bald/hirsute, though the underlying idea seems to be concerned with age/youth. All in all, it is rather unsettling. Where other creatures have been imagined as whole, this image focuses on disembodied body parts, the hair, the eye lashes and the eyebrows that are further 'disembodied', literally rather than figuratively this time, by God. Interestingly, the poem's overt image of age and youth is also illustrated with a human image: 'Ic eom micle yldra þonne ymbhwyrft þes/ oþþe þes middangeard meahte gewe-

25 See C. Levi-Strauss, *The raw and the cooked*, trans. J. & D. Weightman (New York, 1969).

orþan,/ ond ic giestron wæs geong acenned /mære to monnum þurh minre modor hrif' (ll. 42–5) ('I am much older than this earthly circle, or than this earth might become and yesterday I was new born, splendid to men, from my mother's womb.') Here too, humans are anomalous. Here, age is a positive quality in the natural world and which the world will continued to be strengthened by – but it is a quality that weakens humans. Although the human here illustrates the positive quality of youth, it is a quality which all whose reading or hearing the riddle are excluded from; they used to be as young but are no longer.

These strange, oblique, and slightly disturbing images of humans stand in dramatic juxtaposition to the poem's treatment of the animal world. In place of Aldhelm's offal image, for example, the vernacular poet substitutes the feather present in Aldhelm several lines earlier as the first of two exemplars of lightness. Consequently, the vernacular treatment of that earlier passage includes only Aldhelm's pond-skater and not the feather. Characteristically, and in the strongest possible distinction from the human images, the elaboration of the pond-skater image includes a greater sense of its miraculous nature; it is a creature which 'on flode gæð' (l. 77) ('walks on the water'). Though the growth of the *loccas* is described as 'wrætlice' (l. 104) ('marvellous') it is not the man but God who has such power, where the pond-skater has abilities that are marvellous by their own nature. The vernacular poet even tells us that the pond-skater makes his crossing 'fotum dryge' (l. 77) ('with dry feet'); an observation stressing a new wet/dry opposition, while emphasizing his remarkable talent, and also, apparently, showing an empathetic interest in his comfort. These marked editorial changes consistently remove or transform images of the human world, replacing them with natural ones. The treatment of the sole surviving vestige of humanity, the locks of hair, betrays a conflicted, ambiguous attitude. A further consequence of the vernacular poet's mixing and matching is that an image of lightness ends up masquerading as an image of softness (in place of the expunged offal). The feather is described as *hnesce* ('soft') but imagined as light:

> hnescre ic eom micle halsrefeþre,
> seo her on winde wæweð on lyfte. (ll. 80–1)
>
> I am much softer than the down, which here on the wind floats on high.

Aldhelm's original use of the image – 'Sum levior pluma, cedit cui tippula limphae' (l. 41) ('I am lighter than a feather, to which even a pond-skater concedes') – continues to influence the vernacular poet's imagination, but all possibility of dichotomy is defeated at a stroke, for in order to keep the opposition at its strongest, the image must be focused and succinct and instead the vernacular poet allows himself to become distracted by the feather floating in the wind.

The addition of an elemental aspect – the air on which the feather floats – is especially significant in the context of the previous two images, both of which the poet elaborates in relation to a primary element: the flint that strikes fire and,

before that, the insect who walks on water. Thus, when the poet moves from the pond-skater on the water, to the flint striking fire, to the feather floating on the air, to the broad Earth and the wide fields, he has completed a quaternity of elements in the context of the breadth of Creation. This must have been the middle point of the poem – although the vernacular poet alters and expands on *De Creatura* in Riddle 40, he is reasonably faithful in preserving the proportions – and it is significant that it is at this point that the vernacular poet dispenses with Aldhelm's template, establishes a cyclic structure of elements and gives pride of place to a formulaic phrase, rather than a more literary construction:

> Ic eorþan eom æghwær brædre
> ond widgelra þonne þes wong grena. (ll. 82–3)
>
> I am everywhere broader than the earth and wider than the green field.

As noted above, this is the only formulaic repetition in the poem (ll. 50–1, 82–3) and one of the few signs of orality in what is one of the more 'literary' of the Exeter Book riddles. It is also the source and basis of the opening line of Riddle 66. Here, in Riddle 40, the broad green field is followed by an equivalent water image (borrowed from a concluding section of *De Creatura*) which matches the grandeur of the description of the fields: 'Mara ic eom ond strengra þonne se micla hwæl,/ se þe garsecges grund bihealdeð' (ll. 92–3) ('I am greater and stronger than this huge whale that watches the ocean's floor'). The whale's size and massive power opens a contrast with the last water image, the tiny pond-skater. Thus, the elemental images are framed in the context of the great/small dichotomy, not Aldhelm's high/low dichotomy; a fundamental movement away from Aldhelm's morally-charged vertical hierarchy.

This series of expansive, elemental images in Riddle 40 is, perhaps, the most important divergence from Aldhelm's world view. It represents both an ideological shift and a corresponding shift in what Michelet terms 'imaginary geography' since, as she notes, there are 'meanings inherent in the opposition between high and low'.[26] These meanings are linked to the symbolism of the Christian cross which 'as the saving bridge between divinity and humanity plays a key role … by dividing and shaping reality into four parts or four directions.'[27] Jolly further points out that the sign of the cross was often present on boundary markers and so was used to mark geographical as well as symbolic space, amplifying the resonance of this imagery in the riddles. The cross does not divide the world into four equal parts of directions. The Christian cross (unlike various pagan equilateral crosses) lengthens and stresses the vertical axis as the connection between the Divine and human, just as Aldhelm does in *De Creatura*.

26 Michelet, *Creation,* p. 5. **27** K. Jolly, 'Tapping the power of the cross: who and for whom?' in C. Karkov, S. Keefer & K. Jolly (eds), *The place of the cross in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp 58–79, at p. 63. Jolly points out that the sign of the cross was often present on boundary markers and so was used to mark geographical as well as symbolic space.

Although God encircles creation in Riddle 40, the focus and emphasis of the image is not on limitation or confinement as it is in *De Creatura*. In Aldhelm's image creation stretches out but, ultimately, is limited by its relationship to the vertical axis. Creation is defined as what exists below, beneath the pole of Heaven. Aldhelm privileges the high as the realm of God, over the low, the mortal realm of his creation. But though Riddle 40 is not without the vertical axis – in the middle of the poem the riddle-subject declares 'Hyrre ic eom heofone' ('I am higher than Heaven') – the vision of creation here is more complex.

RIDDLE 66

Riddle 66 is often dismissed as a shorter version of Riddle 40. Michelet, for example, in accordance with her larger thesis concerning the depiction of space in Anglo-Saxon poetry,[28] describes Riddle 66 as 'a short poem revolving around the notion that the world is an enclosed area'. She writes that the:

> original space of creation is enclosed, properly filled, and settled. But this arrangement is constantly challenged and is never allowed to endure. The sense of space that can be reconstructed from the Creation scene as narrated in Old English verse suggests an insecurity about boundaries, a constant fear of the outside (considered as a threat), and an anxiety to secure everything in its proper place.[29]

And yet, in many ways, an examination of the imagery of Riddle 66 itself seems to suggest that it is concerned with excess rather than confinement. Riddle 66 describes itself as:

> Ic eom mare þonne þes middangeard
> læsse þonne hondwyrm, leohtre þonne mona,
> swiftre þonne sunne. 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.

I am greater than this middle-earth, less than a hand-worm, lighter than the moon, swifter than the sun. All the seas' tides are in my embraces and the earthen breast, the green fields. I touch the foundations, I sink under hell, I soar over the heavens, the glorious realm; I reach wide over the

28 Michelet, *Creation*, p. 63. **29** Ibid., p. 60.

> homeland of angels; I fill the earth abundantly, the entire world and the streams of the oceans with myself. Say what I am called.

The vertical and horizontal axes of older versions of the riddle have vanished and instead space is imagined stretching out and then shrinking in every direction simultaneously. In Riddle 66 the comparison is no longer between two fixed points as it is in Riddle 40's 'Hyrre ic eom heofone' (l. 38) ('I am higher than Heaven') joined by the present form of the verb to be, stressing the static state of things, rather here creation is 'mare' (l. 1.) ('greater'). Even this word is not limited; creation appears to be *mare* in every respect, not just in physical terms. Michelet argues that 'the narrator further contains the invisible universe by sinking under hell, flying above the heavens, and stretching out over the angels' dwellings. Creation is personified as a presence outside what is created, a presence that holds it together.'[30] However, although creation can travel far and wide through the world there is nothing to suggest that it is outside the created world, only that it can extend beyond specific elements of it. Moreover, what is significant about creation's claim, 'helle underhnige, heofonas oferstige' (l. 6) ('I sink under hell, I soar over the heavens'), is not that it confines created things with its action, but rather that it is active. It is a swooping, soaring force not a physical entity. The nascent conception of creation in *De Creatura* and Riddle 40 as embracing and circling is realized here, fulfilling and exceeding middle-earth. It describes itself in a series of verbs; *hrindan* ('to push'), *underhnigan* ('to sink under'), *oferstigan* ('to climb over'), *ræcan* ('to reach'), *fyllan* ('to fill, to replenish'). It is a conception of creation that Irving links to the Harrowing of Hell and the Ascension, and to the paradox of God's perspective in which the world is constantly and simultaneous about to be made, in the making, and made. Irving describes it as the 'action operating in time and out of time, always in process, always already completed, always hoped for'.[31]

This understanding of creation and its powers is a marked divergence from Riddle 40. In Riddle 40, a restraining God 'healdeð ond wealdeð' (l. 5) ('holds and guides') all the heavens and the earth and although creation too embraces the earth in Riddle 40, it is only by God's command:

> Þisne middangeard meahtig dryhten
> mid his onwalde æghwær styreð;
> swa ic mid waldendes worde ealne
> þis ymbhwyrft utan ymbclyppe. (ll. 12–15)

> This middle-earth, the mighty Lord with his authority everywhere steers; so I, by means of the Master's word, all this circle of earth embrace.

30 Ibid., p. 60. **31** E. Irving, 'The advent of poetry: Christ I' in *Anglo-Saxon England,* 25 (Cambridge, 1996).

In Riddle 40, even when creation is declaring its power, 'Eal ic under heofones hwearftre recce' (l. 33) ('I rule all under the circle of heaven') it is only because, 'swa me loef fæder lærde æt frymþe' (l. 34) ('so the dear Father led me at the beginning'). However, in Riddle 66, creation seems to be an entirely free force, moving and expanding as it chooses. Where the creation of Riddle 40 claims modestly that it is 'widgielra þonne þes wong grena' (l. 51) ('wider than the green field') the creation of Riddle 66 is expansive: 'Sæs me sind ealle/ flodas on fæðmum ond þes foldan bearm,/ grene wongas' (ll. 3–5) ('All the seas' tides are in my embraces and the earthen breast, the green fields') and the idea is so important that it returns as the final image: 'eorþan gefylle,/ ealne middangeard ond merestreamas/ side mid me sylfum' (ll. 8–10) ('I fill the earth abundantly, the entire world and the streams of the oceans with myself.') Even 'pole of heaven', the limiting feature of *De Creatura*, does not bound Riddle 66's creation, which declares 'wuldres eþel, wide ræce/ ofer engla eard' (ll. 7–8) ('the glorious realm, I reach wide over the homeland of angels').

The absence of the Creator/creation dichotomy in Riddle 66 is reflected in a shift away from, though not a complete abandonment of, oppositions. The first three lines, which are ostensibly made up of two oppositions, illustrate the point:

> Ic eom mare þonne þes middangeard
> læsse þonne hondwyrm, leohtre þonne mona,
> swiftre þonne sunne. (ll. 1–3)
>
> I am greater than this middle-earth, less than a hand-worm, lighter than the moon, swifter than the sun.

The first opposition is in the adjectives *mare* and *læsse*, but, significantly, not in the images which illustrate them. The reverse it true of the second; the adjectives *leohtre* and *swiftre* are not in opposition, though the images *mona* and *sunne* are often used as opposites. Yet the very fact that the poet uses this ancient dichotomy to illustrate qualities (lightness and swiftness) which are not dichotomous, or even opposed, demonstrates that his thoughts are tending away from the dualism of *De Creatura* and Riddle 40. This development is intriguing since the oppositional structure is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition. As Augustine writes in *Civitate Dei*:

> sicut ergo ista contraria contrariis opposita sermonis pulchritudinem reddunt; ita quadam non verborum, sed rerum eloquentia contrariorum oppositione saeculi pulchritude componitur. (11, 18)
>
> … just as that opposition of contraries bestows beauty upon language, so the beauty of this world is built upon the opposition of contraries through a certain elegance not of words but of matter.

More importantly, oppositions are at the heart of the Biblical account of creation. Genesis describes God first separating out the oppositions – the heaven from the earth, the light from the dark, the land from the sea – that are seminal to the conception of creation in Riddle 40 and its model, *De Creatura*.

Yet in some significant ways, Riddle 66 actually becomes more, not less, like the creation of Genesis. For example, the imagery of Riddle 66 is closer to the cosmographical imagery of Genesis than is Aldhelm's miscellany of sea-weed and honey, Cyclopes and Vulcan's forge, curly locks and Chinese spun silk, golden bosses and cooked offal. Riddle 40 shifts towards elemental imagery of Genesis but, like *De Creatura*, it contains a wealth of detail. However, Riddle 66 is dominated by the same cosmological imagery found in the Biblical account of creation; the *mona* ('moon'), *sunne* ('sun'), *sæs* ('seas'), *flodas* ('floods'), *wongas* ('fields'), *grundum* ('the ground'), *helle* ('Hell'), *heofonas* ('the heavens'), *eorþan* ('the earth') and *merestreamas* ('streams of the oceans'). Moreover, the structure which moves from the general to the particular, mirrors exactly the structure of the creation in Genesis.

Neither Riddle 66's strength of conception nor the simple elegance of its structure is matched in later creation riddles. Yet it was tremendously influential. A small token of this is the survival of almost all the comparatives of Riddle 66 in the later ballad versions of this riddle, in which each comparative becomes a riddle in its own right. More fundamentally, the innovations in this text were copied and extended in later texts, in particular, the later texts exhibit the more cosmographical imagery of Riddle 66 and its shorter and more memorable structure. This elemental, dichotomous imagery encouraged the further abbreviation of the creation riddle, so that the various elements were easily solidified into a series of even smaller and more memorable parts – what Dundes calls 'units of worldview'[32] – which are the typical of oral literature. These formulaic fragments could then be reused and reordered to form the basis of future creation riddles.

RIDDLE 93

Finally, we come to Riddle 93. After the expansive Riddle 66, this unfortunately incomplete riddle seems rather modest. Despite the Postmodernist literary project to rescue and re-evaluate texts excluded because of their fragmentary nature from a canon which values the whole, Riddle 93 has been ignored because after all, what can be gleaned from a few words? In fact, it is so fragmentary that it is rarely discussed – rarely mentioned even in passing. Both Michelet and Wehlau, who are interested in the cosmology of creation riddles, consider Riddles 40 and 66 at some length without ever mentioning 93[33] and it has often been excluded from translations on the grounds that so little survives that a translation would be meaningless.[34] However, in terms of the development of the creation riddle

32 Dundes, 'Folk ideas', pp 93–103. **33** Michelet, *Creation*; R. Wehlau, *The riddle of creation: metaphor structures in Old English poetry* (New York, 1997). **34** Crossley-Holland's excellent

and indeed in terms of clues to the cosmological conception of the Exeter Book riddle poet(s) these few fragments offer some tantalizing hints:

> Smeþr[. . . . . .]ad,
> hyrre þonne heofon[. . . . . .
> . . . . .] glædre þonne sunne,
> [. . . . .]style,
> smeare þonne sealt ry[. . . . .]
> leofre þonne þis leoht eall, leohtre þon w[. . . .]
>
> Smoother…
> Higher than Heaven….
> … brighter than the sun,
> Sharper than salt …
> Dearer than all this light, lighter than the w[ind]

Even with so little to work from, there are some inferences which may be drawn. For example, the fragment partially demonstrates the order of the comparatives which, in itself, is revealing. For example, the large celestial comparatives 'hyrre þonne heofon' (l. 2) ('higher than heaven') and 'glædre þonne sunne' (l. 3) ('brighter than the sun') did not begin the riddle. In fact, both come after 'smeþr' (l. 1) ('smoother'), which suggests that towards a structure more like that of Genesis which would place the celestial imagery first.

A measure of how far this ordering strays from our own sense of cosmology is revealed by Williamson's reconstruction and translation of the riddle, which, in fact, amount to cultural corrections. Riddle 93 is particularly vulnerable to such 'correction' since many of the similes upon which its comparatives rest remain expressions in everyday speech, though they do not always retain their comparative form; 'heavy as lead', 'black as pitch', 'hotter than Hell', 'hard as rock' (or alternatively, 'rock-hard') and 'cold as ice'. So, ironically, the failings of this translation make it immensely illuminating of both the cosmology of Riddle 93 and our own:

> I am higher than heaven, brighter than sun,
> Harder than steel, smoother than …
> … sharper than salt,
> Dearer than light, lighter than wind.[35]

This translation assembles the celestial elements at the beginning of the riddle, first the heavenly spheres, then the heavenly bodies, just as in Genesis (Gen 1:1–31). Williamson has relocated 'style' from the second half of the fourth line of

translation of the Exeter Book riddles is such an example, see K. Crossley-Holland (trans.), *The* Exeter Book *riddles* (London, 1979). **35** Williamson, *Feast of creatures*, p. 153.

our fragment to the beginning of the second line of his text. Worse, he has completed this line by appropriating the '*smeþr*' comparison from the first line of the fragment and his inference that 'harder' is the missing comparative adjective accompanying 'style' seems gratuitous. Moreover, the reconstitution of the widely separated elements 'steel' and 'smoother' as two halves of the same line, gives the impression that it is to do with the properties of kinds of materials used by humans. Williamson's translation implies a movement from the great to the small, from the celestial to the base materials which make up daily human life; exactly the progression that a modern audience might expect. But the cosmology of Riddle 93 is more complex. What, for example, could creation be '*smeþr*' than that could have the theological and cosmological importance to earn it a place above the images of the heavens and the sun? There is no other instance of *smeðe* in its comparative form in the Old English corpus,[36] so the comparison was not one common in Anglo-Saxon culture and, yet, it begins the riddle. Ultimately, it may not be possible to reconstruct definitively the missing pieces of this riddle. However, it is at least worth considering these puzzles, and, in analysing and articulating them, it becomes easier to find probable solutions, since we have a better idea of what we are looking for.

There are further observations that can be made of Riddle 93, again highlighted by comparing the riddle with other comparable texts, in this case, Riddle 40 and Riddle 66. As we have already seen, in Riddle 40 there is often a tension between the stated point of the comparison and the elaboration of that image by the poet, and in Riddle 66 the handful of comparatives are elaborated by longer passages of vivid description. But in Riddle 93 these comparative images are reduced further and are entirely 'one-dimensional'. It is clear from what remains of the manuscript that each half line had a noun and an adjective; a thing and a quality. That is to say, the poet has selected a single, and presumably defining, aspect of each image and this, and nothing else, is the point of its inclusion in the litany. The seven adjectives in Riddle 93 are: *smeþr* ('smoother'), *hyrre* ('higher'), *glædre* ('brighter'), *smeare* ('sharper'), *leofre* ('dearer') *and leohtre* ('lighter'). Since these are virtually all we have to go on, again, it is worth considering how they have been used in previous riddles and in the wider Anglo-Saxon literary corpus. The first, s*meþr* is not found in either Riddle 40 or Riddle 66, though both Aldhelm and Symphosius use a Latin equivalent, *teres* ('smooth'). Aldhelm uses it of the 'globus astrorum' (l. 57), the stars, and Symphosius uses it to describe the horn casing of the lantern in *Lanterna*. It is perhaps significant that both use it to describe the outer surface of something whose dominant characteristic (at least from the perspective of the authors) is luminosity. Given how difficult a smooth surface was to achieve in antiquity and the middle ages, and how highly prized smooth objects were, it is perhaps surprising that of the three Exeter Book creation riddle versions *smeþr* only occurs in Riddle 93. Perhaps its presence in

36 A. di Paolo Healey (ed.), *Old English Corpus* (2005). <http://quod.lib.umich.edu.elib.tcd.ie/o/oec>

predominantly man-made things is the reason for its exclusion from Riddle 40 and 66 both of which have such a marked focus on the non-human aspects of creation? The use of the next comparative adjective, *hyrre*, in *De Creatura* and Riddles 40 and 66 has already been much discussed. However, it is worth noting that it represents the vertical, potentially hierarchal, axis when a comparative involving the horizonal axis – width or breadth – seem to be absent from Riddle 93. Of course, because of the fragmentary nature of the poem, it is impossible to draw too definite a conclusion from its absence. *Glædre*, the next adjective, is interesting in that the image to which it refers, the sun, was given a different adjective in Riddle 66, *swifter*, a common paring in Old English poetry. Riddle 66 assigns *glædre*, which also carries the meaning of 'pleasanter' or 'kindlier', though its primary meaning is to do with brilliance, to the moon. *Smeare*, especially in the metaphorical sense in which it applies to salt, is absent from Symphosius' *Aenigmata*, *De Creatura*, and Riddle 40 and Riddle 66, though Aldhelm makes saltiness a comparative in its own right. *Leofre* is equally absent from Riddle 93's antecedents, though, as we shall see, it emerges again in later creation riddles. Interestingly, it is the first instance of what might be called a 'subjective' quality: Vulcan's forge is indisputably hot, but something may only be dear if it is *dear to* someone. *Leohtre* is more complex since we cannot be entirely certain whether it is used in the sense of 'brighter' or 'less weighty'. If Williamson is right that it is used in the latter sense (as I think he is), it would confirm the implication in Riddle 40 that the feather which 'on winde wæweð on lyfte' (l. 81) ('on the wind floats on high …') is an image of lightness, not softness. Because each adjective-and-image unit is made up of a single thing and a single quality, we might well expect this to have the effect of further polarizing the already dichotomized vision of *De Creatura*, Riddle 40, and, to a lesser extent, of Riddle 66. This is especially the case since Riddle 93 seems to exhibit a dualistic structure, in which each image is allotted a half-line. This seems to invite a complementary, opposite image in the corresponding half line. However, this does not seem to have been the case. In line 6, the only line in the riddle that preserves at least some part of both half lines, the two images juxtaposed by the half lines are not at all oppositional. Line 6 tells us that creation is 'leofre þonne þis leoht eall, leohtre þon …' ('dearer than all this light, lighter than …'), a paring which, rather than being dualistic seems to be associative. If we understand 'leohtre' as 'lighter' in the sense of 'less heavy', then the two elements are not dichotomous and if we understand it as 'brighter' then it seems that the image was actually intended to amplify the one before; a particularly intriguing possibility. While the presence of the *glædre* comparative, perhaps, makes it unlikely that the poet would give us another image of brightness, line 6, if nothing else, demonstrates the dangers of jumping to such a conclusion.

It is a great pity that no more of Riddle 93 survives, not only because of the insight it would offer into medieval visions of the world but also because, despite its simple, 'oral' structure, its images are strong and rather beautiful, and echoed in other Old English cosmological literature. For example, the *Vercelli Homily V*

includes a description of God's power towards the end which is closely related to that of Riddle 93:[37]

> his miht is ufor þonne heofon & bradre þonne eorðe & deopre þonne sæ & leohtre þonne heofones tungel (l. 194).[38]
>
> … His might is higher than heaven, and broader than the earth, and deeper than the sea and lighter than Heaven's star.

This passage from the homily might almost be framed as a creation riddle in its own right. It imagines God's might not as the destructive power which causes Noah's Flood but, like *De Creatura*, Riddle 40, Riddle 66 and Riddle 93, as *forgesceaft*, the creative power, the power that 'made the firmament' (Gen 1:7) and can far out-reach it. In the homily, we have a version of the 'creation comparatives' which, of course, conforms to the Christian structure, echoing the order of the images in Genesis: heaven, earth, sea, and then stars. Here God makes Heaven (Gen 1:1), mirrored in *Vercelli Homily V*'s 'ufor þonne heofon' ('higher than heaven'). In Genesis 1:10 he separates the land (cf., 'bradre þonne eorðe', 'broader than the earth'), from the sea (cf., 'deopre þonne sæ', 'deeper than the sea') and then in Genesis 1:14 sets the celestial bodies on their trajectory (cf., 'leohtre þonne heofones tungel', 'lighter than Heaven's star').

Of all the Exeter Book riddles, Riddle 93 is the first that is not characterized by vignettes or narrative. The highly visual, descriptive scenes epitomizing Symphosius' riddles and distinguish them from so many of the other riddles of the ancient world are here entirely abandoned in favour of a stable structure into which any number of formulaic elements may be fitted. These elements are amenable to alteration to suit the riddler and his or her social context. This marks the first serious breaking away from Symphosius' basic riddle form, the enigmatic description, and paves the way for other, more radical, shifts. It is this break that allowed the comparatives to be transformed into questions and separated into individual riddles, so that the question implicit in Riddle 93's statement that creation is 'hyrre þonne heofon' becomes the overt question 'what is higher than…?' in the ballad tradition.

CONCLUSION

What is perhaps most striking in all three visions of the world in the Exeter Book creation riddle versions is the position of humans. Or, more accurately, the lack of interest in situating humans in the schema of the world. It is a stunning omis-

37 It is impossible to be entirely sure of the relationship between these texts because of the difficulties associated with dating them accurately and precisely. See D.G. Scragg, 'The compilation of the Vercelli Book' in M. Richards (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon manuscripts* (London, 2001), pp 317–44. **38** D.G. Scragg, *The Vercelli Homilies and related texts*, EETS 300 (Oxford, 1992)

sion. As we have seen, the point of the creation story in Genesis is to explain the relationship of humans to God and to the created world. In Old English poetry more widely, humans are often depicted as overpowered by the natural world. Indeed, as Neville has argued, 'the natural world stands as a negative mirror for human capability, its power reflecting the unstated but apparent lack of human power.'[39] But in these riddles humans appear on the margins, a disruptive, violent force. DiNapoli points to an interesting example of this in the Exeter Book riddles' depiction of monastic culture, the culture, after all, which produced the Exeter Book itself, and, inevitably the culture of the scribe recording these riddles. DiNapoli argues that this was 'among the most logocentric ever known',[40] as the money and resources devoted to manuscript production in Anglo-Saxon England, if not the sheer number of riddles on writing, seems to confirm.[41] Yet, many riddles are implicitly hostile in their images of writing:

> On the one hand, such negatively-charged imagery of pens as misshapen foes plundering the inkhorn's hoard of ink could represent a conventional element of riddlic disguise intended to do no more than throw a would-be solver off the trail. Yet in its utter consistency it seems less arbitrary than that, and if the horn's fall from the stag's head is imaged as a kind of death, its new life in the scriptorium is simply never seen as a joyous resurrection but rather a torment, injured by knife and raided by marauding pens whose ancestry is traced back to the carrion birds that accompany the wolf in feasting on corpses after a battle. Why the act of writing should be regularly associated with such imagery is a question I simply wish to open at this point, to point out the link made between writing and acts of violence committed upon something that was once alive.[42]

Whatever it may reflect about changing cultures of literacy and orality, it also offers a stunning insight into the nature of the Exeter Book riddles. It is astonishing that in each riddle the subject is described entirely from its own point of view without reference to the interests of human society – we have already seen how images of human civilization and humanity are excluded from Riddle 40 and they are entirely absent from Riddles 66 and 93. In these images of writing and literacy the use of the natural world by humanity is seen as violent and ultimately inimical. The Exeter Book riddle-writers, writers themselves, men (probably) to whom literature was profoundly important, here imaginatively adopt a view of the world from an empathic perspective opposite to their own. The 'non-human' perspective of the Exeter Book riddles is a remarkable feat of self-

39 Neville, *Representations*, p. 21. **40** DiNapoli, 'Depth perception', 427. **41** See J. Scattergood, 'Eating the book: Riddle 47 and memory' in H. Conrad O'Briain, A. D'Arcy & J. Scattergood (eds), *Text and gloss: studies in Insular language and literature* (Dublin, 1999), pp 119–27; DiNapoli, 'Depth perception', 422–55; P. Head, *Representation and design: tracing a hermeneutics of Old English Poetry* (Albany, 1997). **42** DiNapoli, 'Depth Perception', 425.

conscious identification with the Other, a remarkable and paradoxically human feat. This feat is the direct legacy of Symphosius' riddles and to my mind represents an even more lasting and important influence than those no doubt important, definitely more quantifiable, elements of form and structure.

The Exeter Book riddles mark the moment when the creation riddle begins to return to popular culture. Aldhelm's adaptation of Symphosius marks its height as a literary riddle, while every development in the Exeter Book riddles – the absence of solutions, the use of the vernacular and the increasing simplicity of the image-and-comparative structure – makes it more suitable and usable in popular contexts. Tupper's observation that it is 'the comparatives of the "Creation" riddles'[43] that characterize them has long been accepted, and yet the implications of this have not always been recognized. It is this formal characteristic which separates the Exeter Book creation riddles from other forms of Anglo-Saxon wisdom literature such *The gifts of men*, *The fortunes of men*, and *Maxims I* and *II*, since in other respects, the creation riddles may be said to have more in common with these wisdom poems than with the other Exeter Book riddles. For example, both *Maxims II* and the creation riddles are concerned with the nature of creation and share a common imagistic vocabulary and both deal with the abstract characteristics of creation. However, where the Exeter Book creation riddles are comparative, *Maxims II* is superlative; a riddle type particularly common in Germanic riddling. Lines 3–10, in particular, could be the answers to a sequence of superlative riddles, such as 'what is swiftest in the air?', etc.:

> …Wind byð on lyfte swiftust,
> þunar byð þragum hludast. þrymmas syndan Cristes myccle,
> wyrd byð swiðost. Winter byð cealdost,
> lencten hrimigost he byð lengest ceald,
> sumor sunwlitegost swegel byð hatost,
> hærfest hreðeadegost, hæleðum bringeð
> geres wæstmas, þa þe him god sendeð.
> Soð bið swicolost, sinc byð deorost (ll. 3–10)

Wind in the air is the swiftest, thunder is sometimes the loudest, the powers of Christ are great, Fate is the strongest. Winter is the coldest, Spring frostiest and is the longest cold, Summer fairest of sunshine, the Sun is hottest, harvest the most prosperous it brings men the year's crops which God sends them. Truth is the most deceptive, treasure is the most precious.

This kind of superlative sequence inevitably expresses a world view that is more hierarchical, hegemonic and normative than comparative riddles. A superlative asserts the nature the world, while comparative riddles take the culturally

43 F. Tupper, *The riddles of the* Exeter Book (Darmstadt, 1968), p. 238.

accepted superlative answer to a question and problematize it by asking what thing could have its definitive quality to an even greater degree. The superlatives of the *Maxims II* assert 'winter byð cealdost' (l. 5), 'winter is the coldest', where the comparatives in Riddle 40 ask what is 'caldra þonne se hearda forst' (l. 54) ('colder than the rime frost'). Comparative riddles express a much more ambiguous, interrogative, searching view of the world and interestingly it is the element of the creation riddle which most obviously survived the Norman Conquest. The Exeter Book charts a greater and more dramatic development in the creation riddle than any we have seen thus far. The three riddle versions delineate a marked change in the conception of creation, the nature of God, and of his relationship to the finite world.

CHAPTER 5

Riddles wisely expounded: popular post-Norman conquest versions of the creation riddle

> Question and answer. Old ways are the best ways.
> Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

The Norman conquest brought – among other things – a marked shift in literary tastes in England. Riddles become marginalized from elite culture. They are no longer a form for saints and bishops, nor are they even thought to merit the vellum devoted to them in the Exeter Book. Instead, individual riddles are sometimes included in poetic miscellanies, or added in the margins of manuscripts, or, more commonly, found in popular literature. Post-Conquest versions of the creation riddle are found in medieval lyrics and later in the early modern ballads that developed out of the lyrics. Because ballads have a tune and are in rhyme, they are a particularly memorable, durable form of oral literature. Unlike a narrative that is remembered – or not – in terms of its broad structural elements, ballads must be remembered reasonably accurately to fit the tune and keep the rhyme. Nevertheless, far more even than the texts of the Exeter Book, this 'text', regarded as a single ballad by anthropologists and collected under the title *Riddles wisely expounded* (Child 1), is complex since it exists in numerous, primarily oral, versions. In *Riddles wisely expounded*, the implicit questions of Riddle 93 transformed into a dialogue sequence of explicit, agonistic questions and, unlike previous versions, the riddles are part of a narrative, a wit combat narrative in which the devil puts a series of questions (most of which derive from the non-interrogative Anglo-Saxon riddles, *De Creatura,* Riddle 40, Riddle 66, and Riddle 93) to a young girl who, with courage, ingenuity and good sense, solves them all. Here, finally, we encounter something which seems at least a little like a riddle to a modern audience. The devil poses a series of questions of the 'What is …?' variety and, although this form is quite different, there are marked similarities of language and imagery between *Riddles wisely expounded* and the Anglo-Saxon versions of the creation riddle. Perhaps not surprisingly, these have received little scholarly attention. By virtue of its narrative context, *Riddles wisely expounded* could not be more apparently different from the riddle texts of Symphosius, Aldhelm, and the Exeter Book. Yet, the ballad's riddle contest is, in fact, an oral

development of the Anglo-Saxon riddles whose underlying similarities to the 'Symphosian' literary tradition are more important than their differences.

The designation *Riddles wisely expounded* was adopted by Francis James Child who included it in his five-volume collection of ballads published between 1882 and 1898. Child's collection, which preserves some of 'the oldest surviving folk music in the English speaking world',[1] also includes several other riddle ballads.[2] *Riddles wisely expounded* is one of the most enduring and some of its riddles even made their way into other ballads, like 'Captain Wedderburn's courtship' (Child 46). It also has the distinction of being the first ballad in Child's collection and probably one of the oldest. Child collected versions spanning nearly five hundred years from 1430 to 1878 – and Bronson, who continued Child's project, collected American versions from as late as the mid-twentieth century. The earliest version collected by Child is in fact a medieval lyric entitled *Inter diabolus et virgo*, so the collection also allows us to witness some of the stages through which the narrative passed in its passage from the written into the popular tradition.[3] This corpus, then, charts in detail the transformation of *Riddles wisely expounded* from the late middle ages almost to our own time.

Despite McLane's warning that critical discourse around ballads has 'long served to install rather than surmount barriers: barriers between, for example, "oral tradition" and "literary culture", between illiterate "old women" singers and male literati, between notionally primitive pasts and polemically progressive presents',[4] there is a basis for the application of some of these distinctions to the ballads. The early modern ballads existed in the oral tradition in a period in British history which privileged literacy. Although they, occasionally, find their way into writing – the ballads 'often circulated from print to oral transmission and back again'[5] – it tends to be in 'low culture' forms, such as Broadsides. Even the fifteenth century version of *Riddles wisely expounded* found in the Rawlinson manuscript (MS D 328) under the name *Inter diabolus et virgo*, shows signs of low status: Howes notes what he terms the title's 'odd Latin' and queries, 'can *inter* be an abbreviation of *interrogant*?'[6] but perhaps it is more accurate simply to see it as bad Latin.

1 C. Darling, *The new American songster* (London, 1983), p. 4. **2** These Ballads are: 'The elfin knight' (Child 2), 'King John and the bishop' (Child 45), 'Captain Wedderburn's courtship' (Child 46), 'Proud Lady Margaret' (Child 47), and, one of the very few Arthurian Child Ballads, 'The marriage of Sir Gawain' (Child 31). Salz and Würzbach also regard 'The false knight upon the road' (Child 4) as a riddle ballad because it contains a verbal duel, a contest of insults. I have excluded it because, although it demonstrates the principles of riddling, it does not actually contain a series of questions and answers, nor even an explicit challenge as 'The elfin knight' does. See S. Salz & N. Würzbach, *Motif index of the Child corpus* (Berlin, 1995). **3** Child pioneered the methodology, now orthodoxy in all ethnomusicological and anthropological practise, of respectful fidelity to the actual words he heard in performance in the field without alteration or 'improvement'. **4** M. McLane, 'Dating orality, thinking balladry: of milkmaids and minstrels in 1771', *The Eighteenth Century,* 47 (2006), 131–49, at p. 131. **5** R. Perry, 'Brother trouble: incest ballads of the British Isles', *The Eighteenth Century,* 47 (2006), 288–307, at p. 290. **6** F. Howes, 'Folk song', *The Musical Times,* 102 (1961), 32.

Where all our previous texts were composed, or at least edited, by educated men, the opposite is likely to be true of *Riddles wisely expounded*. Ballads were primarily sung and composed by lower-class women. The musicological evidence suggests that these songs may have been 'women's songs'; their structure is most obviously suitable for accompanying traditional women's work. Lomax, like Symonds, suggests that 'the ballads have been women's songs, attached to the household and the fireside … If the men sang the old ballads, this was in the presence of women and was a recognition of feminine interest',[7] although Buchan and Rieuwerts have suggested that the idea of the ballads are a 'female genre' may be the result of prejudices among field recorders in combination with a range of social factors – including the lack of formal education for women which, according to Buchan, would make them more rooted in past oral traditions.[8] Whether women's songs represented the whole of the tradition or only half of it, it is certainly true that the material salvaged by field researchers *does* represent a women's tradition, since most of the material they preserved was collected from women. The point is illustrated by the case of Anna Gordon Brown, one of the most important and prolific sources of ballads for early collectors. Despite her vast personal repertoire of traditional Ballads, her father was completely unaware of the ballads. In response to seeing a book of ballads collected from his daughter, he wrote: 'Both words and strains were perfectly new to me … and proceeded upon a system of manners, & in a stile of composition, both words & music, very peculiar, & of which we could recollect nothing similar'.[9] While perhaps not all men were so excluded from the ballad tradition, it is rather striking that Anna Gordon Brown could have known nearly fifty ballads, which she claims to have learnt from the household servants, while her father had never heard a single one.

The same opposition of class and gender is found in the difference between the prospective audience for the riddles of Symphosius, Aldhelm, the Exeter Book, and for *Riddles wisely expounded*. In their erudite allusions and complex wit, Symphosius' riddles are addressed to an educated, well-read audience, Aldhelm challenges the *sophi* ('wise men') to answer *De Creatura*, and the Exeter Book riddles are left 'wisum woðboran' (Riddle 30, l. 24a) ('for a wise poet') to answer. However, *Riddles wisely expounded* is, like so many folk texts, dominated by socially disadvantaged or excluded heroines. The riddle genre, so obvious a vehicle for high culture learning and education in Aldhelm's England, becomes in *Riddles wisely expounded*, an equally obvious instrument for the figure of the clever young girl, who combines lack of physical strength with a range of social

7 A. Lomax, *The folk songs of North America in the English language* (London, 1960), p. 169. **8** See D. Symonds, *Weep not for me: women, ballads, and infanticide in early modern Scotland* (University Park, PN, 1997), p. 18; S. Rieuwerts, 'The folk-ballad: illegitimate child of the popular ballad', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 33 (1996), 221–6, at p. 223; and D. Buchan, *The ballad and the folk* (London, 1972), p. 76. **9** W. Montgomerie, *Bibliography of the Scottish ballad manuscripts, 1790–1825* (Edinburgh, 1956), pp 144–5.

disadvantages – her youth, her class, and of course her gender – and so must rely on her wits, to win out against the odds.

IDEOLOGY AND TONE IN *RIDDLES WISELY EXPOUNDED*

It has become common for scholars to trace the origins of riddle ballads back to the Exeter Book. However, by viewing *Riddles wisely expounded* as a creation riddle, I am breaking with the tendency to regard ballad riddling as primarily sexual in nature, even though some scholars have noted its cosmological imagery. Porter and Tiusanen, for example, note a link between the image of the 'tall tree' and mortality in other ballads where the significance 'lies in its major contrastive images, which set the vertical life-images of childhood – trees, sprouting leaves, and grass – against the horizontals of the grave and marriage bed in an astonishing counterpoint'.[10] However, Toelken's reading links *Riddles wisely expounded* not to the creation riddles but instead to the *double entendre* riddles in the Exeter Book known as the 'obscene' riddles.[11] Toelken argues that the riddles of *Riddles wisely expounded* depend on sexual metaphors and that the heroine 'must not only give an acceptable answer to each riddle but … she must also give the pure and virginal one.'[12] In his view, 'listeners find humorous tension between the obscenity inherent in the way the riddle is posed and the almost naïve innocence of her answer.'[13] In a development of this line of interpretation, Atkinson argues that since the riddle contest carries both rape and death as the punishment for failure, the riddle's similes allude simultaneously to ideas of sex and death: 'appropriate referents suggest themselves readily enough for concepts like "deeper than the sea" (grave/vagina) and "sharper than the thorn" (death/penis).'[14] However, it seems to me that simultaneous 'appropriate referents' do not 'suggest themselves' so readily for some of the other riddles in the sequence; it is difficult to discover ideas of *both* sex and death in 'softer than silk', 'greener than grass',[15] 'yellower than wax', 'louder than a horn', 'whiter than milk', 'better than bread' or even 'worse than a woman was'. More significantly, the connection with the obscene riddles seems tenuous given that *Riddles wisely expounded* clearly preserves the comparatives of the Exeter Book creation riddles, Riddles 40, 66, and 93 with their overriding imagery of Heaven and Hell, and of the features of the natural world.

10 G. Porter & J. Tiusanen, 'Performing resistance to the new rural order: an unpublished ballad opera and the Green Song', *The Eighteenth Century*, 47 (2006), 205. **11** B. Toelken, *Morning dew and roses: nuance, metaphor and meaning in folksongs* (Chicago, 1995), p. 111. **12** Ibid., p. 108. **13** Ibid. **14** Atkinson, *English traditional ballad*, p. 59. **15** In fact, a corrupted version of this riddle from a different ballad, 'Captain Wedderburn's courtship' does solve the riddle, 'death is greener than the grass' (Child 46B, l. 65). But in this case, the logic of the riddle's new context in a new ballad dictates this solution. It is coupled with the riddle 'what's higher than thae trees?' (Child 46B, l. 61) There is a connection between 'grass' and 'trees,' so Mary Barr, the singer of this version of the ballad, connects their answers, 'death' and 'Heaven'. This, more than ever, seems to obscure a secondary, sexual reading of the riddle.

Although the mechanics of riddles types have been considered in depth in previous chapters it is worth pausing to look at the particular character of the comparative riddles in *Riddles wisely expounded* since they reveal much about the implicit world view of ballad riddle texts. Comparative riddles are solved by guessing what could possess the fundamental characteristic of the 'primary referent' – say, the depth of the sea[16] – to an extent greater than the referent (the sea) itself. In many cases, this 'primary referent' is a culturally sanctioned formulation – like, for instance, 'swift as the wind' – which has become so established in the language as to be idiomatic and so deeply familiar as to carry something of the authority of a saying or maxim. However, in requiring that the riddle reader find an answer that replaces this primary referent with a new construction involving new referents – for instance, 'thought is swifter than the wind' – the ballad riddles have the potential to undermine established categories. In effect, the ballad riddles challenge the familiar, authoritative formulations; so 'swift as the wind' becomes 'what is swifter than the wind?' Furthermore, the interrogative form, in itself, is inevitably destabilizing rather than confirming. The earlier, Anglo-Saxon vision of an encompassing creation, guarded and guided by God, is replaced with a restless questioning of the constituents of the world and its limits. The device of *De Creatura* and the Exeter Book is that Heaven, Hell, sun, moon, floods and fields are all part of a single creation and no distinction is drawn between the physical and metaphysical worlds; both are part of creation. But in *Riddles wisely expounded* the riddle reader can only be successful in finding an answer which surpasses the primary referent if each question is considered in new terms. These new terms define the 'ideology' of the text. In *Riddles wisely expounded* the primary referent is often surpassed by giving abstract solutions. So, a question like 'what is longer than the way?' is solved 'love'. In many cases, the 'new terms' privilege the metaphysical world over the physical. The static majesty, abundance, and power of creation as imagined in the Anglo-Saxon creation riddles are replaced by spiritual struggle and the quest for eternal salvation. Set in the context of a wit combat contest, the creation riddle becomes the site of a battle over the nature of reality rather than an assertion of its characteristics.

Riddles wisely expounded marks the point at which Symphosian riddles come full circle. As we have seen, Symphosius drew riddles from popular tradition and alchemized them into a sophisticated literary structure in which all the riddles act in concert. Aldhelm transformed Symphosius' conception of a multifarious but unified, collection into a visionary single riddle comprised of a series of dichotomies. In the Exeter Book the three versions of the creation riddle show increasing interaction with oral culture, so that, in the last of these, Riddle 93, many of the dichotomies of Aldhelm's single riddle are abbreviated into oral-formulaic units and Aldhelm's dichotomies become comparatives; 'higher than', 'wider than', etc., which become a litany of creation's attributes. But, as in

16 Since the sea is sometimes referred to as 'the Deep' it is not surprising that this is the characteristic which has become associated with it.

Symphosius and Aldhelm, the Exeter Book versions remain indicative rather than interrogative in form and mood, whereas, in *Riddles wisely expounded* the comparatives of Riddle 93, become individual, one line questions, each a riddle in its own right, arranged in pairs. Just as in the earlier collections, they are united by common world view and now, significantly, they are also united by narrative.

NARRATIVE RIDDLES AND THE 'META-CONTEST'

The addition of a narrative is perhaps the most obvious break from the previous creation riddles and it radically alters the mechanics of the genre: riddles in narratives function quite differently from non-narrative riddles. In a riddle narrative, the riddle contest is usually fought at the pivotal moment of the narrative, and itself becomes the fulcrum on which the narrative turns. Consequently, as Atkinson notes, riddle contests take place in 'liminal situations', which include 'various threshold events, in particular those concerned with courtship and marriage, meeting and recognition, teaching and instruction, initiation and death'[17] and reflect whatever is at stake in the narrative. The riddle contest is an eruption at a moment of crisis that externalizes whatever tension exists within the narrative, and especially between the two riddlers. Most often, the tension has to do with the fact that one of the protagonists is in disguise. Such contests, then, often end in a 'neck riddle', a 'curious variety of enigma', according to Taylor, in which 'the terms used are not confusing, but the situation itself seems inexplicable'[18] and which often ends riddle contests. The term 'neck riddle' is now more generally used to mean a riddle which is, in fact, a straight-forward question but which cannot be answered because the riddle-guesser lacks a vital piece of information. In most riddle contests, including the contest in *Riddles wisely expounded*, the vital but unknown piece of information is the identity of the riddler. The final riddle is solved and the contest ended when the riddle-guesser both answers the riddle and demonstrates that he or she has accurately guessed their questioner's identity. The 'curious' nature of this kind of riddle can perhaps be explained by considering it in terms of what I describe as the 'meta-contest'.[19] The meta-contest is concerned with the underlying and unspoken tension between the two riddle contestants. This tension, which brings them into conflict in the first place whether they know it or not, usually derives from whatever element of the situation is unknown to either one or both of them. Since in most riddle contests at least one of the contestants is in disguise, the question of identity, most often the

17 Atkinson, *English traditional ballad,* pp 52–3. Toelken makes the same point; Toelken, *Morning dew*, p. 104. **18** A. Taylor, 'Varieties of riddles' in T. Kirby & H. Woolf (eds), *Philologica: the Malone Anniversary Studies* (Baltimore, 1949), p. 6. **19** E. Sebo, 'The lady loves her will: riddling in "The Marriage of Sir Gawain"' in M. Sweetnam & H. Cooney (eds), *Enigma and epiphany: modes of writing, modes of meaning in Renaissance literature* (Dublin, 2012), and E. Sebo '"Sacred and of immense antiquity": Tolkien's use of medieval riddles in *The Hobbit'* in H. Conrad O'Briain & G. Hynes (eds), *Tolkien: the forest and the city* (Dublin, 2014).

questioner's identity,[20] is the unknown element. In this respect, as Frye notes, the riddle genre is 'connected with the very common type of recognition scene which turns on a shift of identity'.[21] In all cases, the undisguised riddler has no reason to suspect that the other is not as they seem. The meta-contest is won if the ignorant riddler (usually the riddle-guesser) is able to guess what it is that he or, more usually she, does not know that she does not know.[22]

So, the meta-contest, which accompanies, mirrors, and is inextricably entwined with the riddle contest, is concerned with perceiving the disguise and recognizing the true identity of the opponent. This last, recognizing the true identity of the opponent, is the key to answering their riddles and exposes the real nature of the conflict. Winning this undeclared contest – often the undisguised protagonist is not even aware of its existence – is vital to succeeding in the riddle contest proper since recognition and naming are 'clearly a part of the riddling'.[23] Recognition is a sign of riddle wit. If the riddler is in disguise, then success in answering the question depends upon penetrating this disguise. Alternatively, if the riddle guesser is disguised, then the sign of the questioner's complete defeat is that he either remains ignorant of his opponent's identity or has to be informed of it. Neck riddles tend to appear at the end of a riddle contest and use terms that are 'not confusing' because they *directly* address the issues of the meta-contest. Since some aspect of this contest is not known to the riddle reader the situation – and the riddle – are, as Taylor says 'inexplicable'.[24] The final riddle of many versions of *Riddles wisely expounded* is a textbook neck riddle in that it solves both the riddle contest and the 'meta-contest' with a single answer.

VERSIONS AND VARIANTS OF *RIDDLES WISELY EXPOUNDED*

Like all popular ballads, our final 'text' exists in numerous, primarily oral, versions which, although differing, have enough in common to warrant the collec-

20 *King John and the Bishop* is anomalous in that it is the riddle reader who is disguised. In Scandinavian riddle literature the riddler is also usually the one in disguise. Oedipus is perhaps an example of a riddle-guesser who is 'in disguise' in the sense that no one knows who he really is. However, as he himself does not know, and as he is the one who must eventually pierce his own 'disguise', the paradigm remains very similar. **21** N. Frye, *Spiritus Mundi: essays on literature, myth and society* (Bloomington, IN, 1976), p. 139. 'The knight and the shepherd's daughter', discussed later in this chapter is an example of exactly this kind of relationship between riddling and recognition. **22** See also, 'The elfin knight', 'Proud Lady Margaret', and 'The marriage of Sir Gawain'. **23** L. Wimbley, *Folklore in the English and Scottish ballads* (New York, 1959), p. 304. **24** Again J.R.R. Tolkien recognized this as an important motif and incorporated it into the riddle scene in *The Hobbit*. The important point of doubt in that scene is the ring. Bilbo does not know its importance and Gollum does not know that he has lost it and Bilbo has got it. However, Bilbo's last riddle, a neck riddle: 'What have I got in my pocket?' strikes at the heart of the real point of contest and brings the situation into the open. See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (London, 1960), p. 90. For my discussion of this episode, see E. Sebo, '"Sacred and of immense antiquity".'

tive title *Riddles wisely expounded* (Child 1). There are three versions of *Riddles wisely expounded* that are of particular interest in tracing changing cosmological conceptions in the creation riddle: the fifteenth-century lyric *Inter diabolus et virgo*, a Regency period version collected from Mrs Storie by William Motherwell known as Child 1C, and a Northumberland version included in Mason's 1878 *Nursery rhymes and country songs* known as Child 1E. These three texts chart the history of one branch of the ballad, the older or primary branch. As is clear from the fifteenth-century manuscript, the primary branch is a wit combat narrative between the devil and a young girl, though some later versions confuse it with a narrative type in which the heroine wins a husband by beating him in a riddle contest. But, as Bronson notes, the 'knight was not originally of the marrying kind, and sounder tradition makes him out a fiend – even Clootie himself – to be checkmated, rather than confirmed in his election by the maid's ability to guess his riddles.'[25] This conflation of the two narrative types is exacerbated by the long-standing association between riddling and marriage.[26] However, in the primary narrative type, the riddle questions betray their origins as comparative elements in Anglo-Saxon creation riddles and so the riddle contest implies a cosmology. The contest is about the nature of the world and who has hegemony over it; the devil's questions imply that he is dominant, and the girl's answers assert that God will be victorious in the end. However, there is also a secondary question at issue. In all versions of *Riddles wisely expounded*, the riddler is a stranger, usually a supernatural figure of some kind. In most, he approaches the young girl's house without invitation. Whatever else it may be, his presence is an invasion of the masculine into a feminine space; several versions of the ballad emphasize that the house is inhabited only by women, usually three girls and their widowed mother. Moreover, in every version, the ballad ends with the shrewd young girl defeating the attempt to abduct or banish her. Here the towns, houses and rooms represent the human domain, while these heroines are banished to 'Other' places; undomesticated nature, especially forests and bodies of water that are commonly gateways to the Otherworld, Elfin or Hell in folk and fairy stories. So as much as being concerned with who will have hegemony over the world, the riddle contest is fought in part, over the rightful place of women within the human/Other dichotomy, in creation.

INTER DIABOLUS ET VIRGO

Because the riddle contest in *Inter diabolus et virgo* takes place against the devil, the cosmology of the text would seem fairly obvious and the contest itself to

25 B. Bronson, *The traditional tunes of the Child ballads* (Princeton, 1959), p. 3. **26** Atkinson, *English traditional ballad,* pp 52–3, Toelken makes the same point; Toelken, *Morning dew,* p. 104. In many cultures riddling is part of marriage or courtship rituals. For example, see Hopkin's discussion of the *dâyage* in Lorainne: D. Hopkin, 'Love riddles, couple formation, and local identity in Eastern France', *Journal of Family History*, 28 (2003), 339–63.

have an inevitably eschatological significance. The devil is imagined like the snake in Eden (Gen 3:4–5),[27] at first tempting:

> Mayd, mote y thi leman be,
> Wyssedom y wolle teche the:
> All the wyssedom off the world,
> Hyf thou wolt be true and forward holde. (ll. 5–8)

It is only after posing his questions that the devil utters his threat: 'But thou now answery me,/ Thu schalt for sothe my leman be.' (ll. 23–4).[28] But unlike Eden, the girl understands her peril from the beginning and she counters:

> Ihesu, for thy myld mygth,
> As thu art kynge and knygt,
> Lene me wisdome to answere here rygth,
> And schylde me fram the fovle wygth! (ll. 25–8)

This detail, however, is a sign that the implicit ideology and cosmology of this text is not so simple. In fact, the insular ballads which grew out of such lyrics, unlike continental and especially Mediterranean ballads, are marked by their ambiguous relationship with Christianity. Housman writes:

> The miracles of the Virgin, the acts and martyrdom of the saints, narrated in innumerable ballads of France, Italy and other countries of the South, were apparently of no importance in the life of English and Scottish ballad communities, even before the Reformation.[29]

In addition to which, from at least the sixteenth century on, there is increasing trend in European ballads in which Mary intercedes on behalf of humanity to defeat the devil. In insular ballads, as in *Riddles wisely expounded* this task falls to an ordinary girl. Darling suggests that this is because the English and Scottish 'were more interested in keeping alive their local and rural secular traditions than those of the church'[30] and, interestingly, in such ballads the devil is typically interchangeable with non-Christian supernatural figures. In 'The elfin knight', for example, the eponymous knight is sometimes the devil while, in other versions, he is simply supernatural or even a mortal man. Equally, in 'The dæmon lover'

27 This is also the persona and role he adopts in Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. In Matthew 4:3 the devil is referred to as 'the tempter'. **28** Bronson comments that narrative confusion in our earliest extant text, *Inter diabolus et virgo*, implies earlier texts, though we have no way of knowing whether these are oral or simply written texts which do not survive. See Bronson, *Traditional tunes,* p. 3. **29** J. Housman, *British popular ballads* (London, 1952), p. 16. For a discussion of this see L. de Bruyn, *Woman and the Devil in sixteenth-century literature* (Tisbury, Wiltshire, 1979). **30** Darling, *American songster,* p. 38.

the figure is sometimes the devil and sometimes a ghost. What is significant about this is that these metamorphoses have the effect of permanently destabilizing moral and ideological dichotomies in the ballad world and are, as Bhaktin notes, part of a wider,

> … carnivalization of the official conceptions of hell and purgatory [which] took place throughout the Middle Ages. The elements of this process were contained even in the official 'visions' of hell. At the conclusion of the medieval period the underworld became a central theme, the crossroads of two cultures; the official and the popular tradition.[31]

In 'carnivalized' representations, an inhuman figure, such as the devil, who clearly belongs in the Other realm, may easily be confused with other supernatural figures. So, despite the overtly religious context, there is always a question about whether the structural dichotomy in *Inter diabolus et virgo* will resolve into either the vertical axis of the Heaven/Hell, high/low dichotomy, as in earlier Christian creation riddles, or the horizontal axis of the mortal/Other dichotomy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the devil begins by attempting to undermine the vertical axis. He asks, 'What ys hyer than ys [the] tre?'/ 'What ys dypper þan ys the see?'' (ll. 9–10). These questions, which reduce creation to the physical, finite measurements, implicitly deny the metaphysical. However, since 'tree' is often used in medieval lyrics and early modern ballads to refer euphemistically to the cross, the questions potentially take on a further, more complex dimension so that the girl is trapped between the blasphemy of denying Christ if she suggests that something is higher or greater than the crucifixion on the one hand and the blasphemy of denying him again if she suggests that there is nothing in creation beyond the physical world. Moreover, the image of the tall tree is often expressive in scripture (especially passages containing riddles) of human pride and the failure to recognize the power of God. For example, the motif of the tree is inherent in the solution to the riddle in Ezekiel 17:1–24:

> And all the trees of the field shall know that I the Lord have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree. (Ezekiel 17:24)

In *Daniel* the tree that 'grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven' (Dan 4:11) is a metaphor for Nebuchadnezzar, the king who attempts to put himself above Heaven and whose his pride leads him to forget that 'the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will' (Dan 4:25). Conversely, comprehending and acknowledging the 'height' of Heaven is a sign of virtue and faith. In Isaiah, God says: 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.' (Is 55:9) In the Book of Job it is asked:

31 M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN, 1984), pp 394–5.

> Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? Deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea. (Job 11:7–9)

Of course, the girl's answer cleverly avoids both blasphemies while satisfying both questions, without ever falling into pride. By answering 'Hewene ys heyer than ys the tre,/ Helle ys dypper þan ys the see' (ll. 30–1) she asserts the metaphysical world over the physical but also everlasting life over the suffering on the cross.

This first set of questions and answers establishes the pattern for the rest of the contest. Throughout *Inter diabolus et virgo*, the devil tries to elicit answers that deny the power of Heaven, often by drawing on imagery which is Biblically loaded. For example, echoing the devil in the wilderness who challenges Jesus to 'command that these stones be made bread' (Mt 4:3) and tempts him to prove that he can escape death (Mt 4:6), the devil in the lyric asks the girl 'what [ys] bether than is þe bred?' (l. 15) and 'What ys schapper than ys þe dede?' (l. 16). These questions emphasize the needs – and failings – of the body. Again, the girl rejects the devil's frame of reference and turns his imagery back on him by transforming it Eucharistically: 'Godys flesse ys betur þan ys the brede,/ Payne ys strenger þan ys þe dede' (ll. 35–6).[32] Moreover, it amplifies her first answer because here again she asserts the idea that, for a Christian death is a means to eternal life but the pains of Hell are everlasting.

In trying to trick the girl, the devil uses myriad strategies. His question, 'What ys scharpper þan þe þorne?' (l. 11) which recalls the description of human frailty in the Book of Micah: 'the best of them is as a brier: the most upright is sharper than a thorn hedge' (Mic 7:4)[33] seems to be an attempt to make a knowledge of scripture a disadvantage. In this instance, if the maid were to supply the Biblical answer that 'the most upright is sharper than a thorn hedge', she would run the risk of regarding humanity as irredeemable, which, given that she is dicing (riddling!) with the devil is a dangerous idea to endorse. As always, the girl wins by rejecting the devil's frame of reference with the answer 'Hongyr' (l. 31). Unlike previous questions, the girl uses a 'physical' answer to defuse a metaphysical trap. On other occasions, the devil attempts to catch the girl out in a lack of scriptural

32 This couplet appears only in this version, though there are some parallels in later texts. Child 1D, for example, uses 'death' to solve 'what is colder than the clay?' (l. 10). The question 'what is sharper than …?' has already appeared in this text, and is clearly a scribal error. The scribe corrects his mistake by changing the adjective to 'stronger' in the answer, 'Payne ys *strenger*' (l. 36, my emphasis). Child C1 preserves the couplet's first question, but answers it, 'the blessing's better nor the bread' (l. 33), which, contextually is presumably the grace said before meals. **33** The notion of the ingratitude and treacherousness of humans is integral to this comparative; a connotation that it has carried ever after—as in Shakespeare's famous adaptation of it in *King Lear*, 'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/ To have a thankless child!' (*King Lear*, Act 1.iv).

knowledge, as when he asks 'What is rader þa ys þe day?' (l. 14)[34] to which she gives the scripturally impeccable answer, 'syn' (l. 34), echoing God's pronouncement in Isaiah that 'your sins be as scarlet … they be red like crimson' (Isaiah 1:18). With these answers, the girl proves that she knows and understands her faith and cannot be faulted either through ignorance of scripture or misapplication of it and in the final question she proves that she has the attributes Proverbs ascribes to a virtuous woman. To the devil's apparently perplexingly anti-climactic final question, 'What [ys] softer ys he flax', the girl answers truthfully and matter-of-factly, 'Selke ys softer þan ys the flex' (l. 42), demonstrating that, like the virtuous woman in Proverbs, she also has knowledge of the qualities of flax (Prov 31:13) and silk (Prov 31:22). In the very next line, she authoritatively banishes the devil, 'Now, thu fene, style thu be;/ Nelle ich speke no more with the!' and claims victory in the contest.

The ballad's narrative is very likely earlier than *Inter diabolus et virgo*, but the ballad's riddles, as we have seen, have pre-Conquest origins. Not only are they descended from the Exeter Book riddles, but they also seem to exhibit parallels with the language and imagery of other Anglo-Saxon texts, suggesting that the riddles' metaphors and associations found a strong and abiding currency in oral and folk tradition, and perhaps even in everyday speech, in Anglo-Saxon England and beyond. For example, the maid of *Inter diabolus et virgo* declares 'Tonder ys lodder than ys þe horne' (l. 32), a conclusion descended from the assertion in *Maxims II* that 'þunar byð þragum hludast' (l. 4) ('thunder is sometimes the loudest'). Elsewhere, *Maxims II* declares that '[w]ind byð on lufte swiftust' (l. 3) ('Wind in the sky is the swiftest…') but, as we have seen, *Inter diabolus et virgo* insists that there is something swifter: 'þowt ys swifter þan ys the wynde' (l. 39). This change reveals a dramatic shift in perspective from a world view dominated by nature to one dominated by a lively awareness of human capacity. The anxiety surrounding the position of humans in the cosmological schema and their relationship to the natural world is replaced by a faith in human wit. Perhaps most significantly of all, however, *Inter diabolus et virgo* also exhibits a shift away from concrete to more abstract, or conceptual, thought.

CHILD 1C

Child 1C, the version of *Riddles wisely expounded* most closely related to *Inter diabolus et virgo*, was recorded in the early 1800s, when ballads were at the height of their popularity. It is the earliest version in Child's collection which has any claim to being a genuinely oral text[35] and is the closest of all Child's texts to *Inter dia-*

34 *Rad* is an archaic adjective which may mean 'swift' or 'eager' (from Old English *hræd* and Old Norse *hraðr*) and also 'frightening' (from the Old Norse *hræddr*). *Rad(e)* may also refer the radiance of celestial bodies. However, in this case, 'rader' is a variant spelling for 'redder'. **35** For a discussion of Motherwell's methodology in collecting this version, see M.E. Brown, *William Motherwell's cultural politics, 1797–1835* (Lexington, 2001).

bolus et virgo. However, in the centuries that separate them, Child 1C gained some interesting additions. Although *Inter diabolus et virgo* had a narrative context (unlike its medieval and ancient antecedents), this narrative is implied entirely through the dialogue of the two protagonists. In Child 1C, the encounter is recounted by a narrative voice and in much greater detail. This version even includes an account of the whereabouts and various activities of the three daughters before the riddle contest. Interestingly, too, in *Inter diabolus et virgo*, the devil appears without disguise in his own person, but in Child 1C the questioner's identity is hidden from both the heroine and the ballad's audience. He is introduced as a 'knicht' (l. 1) who has been 'wooing at monie a place' (l. 3). Like the male protagonists of other ballads such as 'The daemon lover' and 'The elfin knight', he is an ambiguous but not necessarily evil figure; he arrives unheralded out of the wilderness and spies on the widow and her daughters before imposing himself upon them and the narrator's prediction that he 'may beguile a young thing sune' (l. 4) seems to be confirmed when the widow and her daughters welcome him. The youngest daughter is chosen 'to lye with this unco knicht' (l. 17) whereupon he challenges her to a riddle contest. It seems that, despite having been given to the 'knicht', he can only claim the girl if she *loses* the contest, though on this crucial point the ballad is not entirely clear. Naturally, he attempts to disguise the contest by telling her that she can only 'made my ain' (l. 19) only if she *correctly* guesses the riddles. Unfortunately for him, the girl does not correctly guess the riddles, she wins the contest – a feat which involves both answering the questions and recognizing her questioner and the nature of the contest. In doing this, she is freed from him.

The riddles in Child 1C are drawn from those in *Inter diabolus et virgo*. However, there are some significant differences. Several questions have been excluded and some new ones added. Over all, there are fewer questions – there are fourteen in *Inter diabolus et virgo* as opposed to ten in Child 1C – which has the effect of focusing the contest more sharply on the point at issue; namely, the danger that the heroine will be lost to the devil. There are also some new riddles, for example, 'Snow is whiter than the milk' (Child 1C, l. 31), a riddle so popular that it becomes the usual opening question in early twentieth-century American versions. More curiously, it offers an intriguing variation on the 'What is greener than …?' riddle, which it solves, 'The pies are greener nor the grass' (l. 27); an interesting adjustment since, in *Inter diabolus et virgo*, 'wood' is the exemplar of greenness and 'grass' is the thing that surpasses it. But Child 1C and later versions amend the question so that 'grass' is no longer the answer but rather takes the place of 'wood' as the primary referent. The term *pies* in Child 1C probably refers to magpies, or possibly even to the Green Woodpecker, the Latin name for which, *picus viridis*, is the origin of the English word *pies*. In either case, the iridescent sheen of their feathers that flash green in some lights might well be thought greener than grass. Child 1A and 1D give the answer 'poison'; a reference, presumably, to the colour of certain forms of arsenic, a poison which became popular during the 'poison epidemic' fostered by the increasing availability of poi-

sons in early modern Europe.[36] Like some of the comparatives mentioned earlier, this comparative was fossilized in the language in the expression 'poison-green'. In the main, the ballad excludes the more concrete questions in *Inter diabolus et virgo*, like 'What ys yeluer than ys the wex' and most of those which remain are either more obviously directly expressive of the ballad's themes or have been adapted to be. For instance, 'shame', not 'thunder', is now regarded as the thing that is 'louder than nor a horn' (l. 27). As in *Inter diablo et virgo*, the focus of each riddle is whether there is a higher spiritual reality beyond the physical, or whether the world is as the devil represents; one in which the girl is inevitably lost to his power.

The opening couplet of questions, which, like its antecedents, defines the contest in terms of high/low, heavenly/infernal, remains the same as that of *Inter diabolus et virgo*, and is solved in the same way. But Child 1C reinforces the religious implications of the initial couplet with 'what is heavier nor the lead?/ And what is better nor the breid?' (ll. 9–10), which are answered 'sin' and 'the blessing' respectively, making the implicit theology of the girl's answer in *Inter diablo et virgo*, explicit. The pairing of the two answers also has the effect of shifting the reference to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness – which is no more than a passing allusion in *Inter diabolus et virgo*,[37] despite the fact that, since it is a kind of riddle contest itself, it is a natural point of reference.[38] Here the devil challenges Christ, 'If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread' (Mt 4:3).[39] But Jesus rejects the devil's frame of reference by giving bread (and by extension all the goods of this world) a low valuation by comparison with the spiritual treasure of the knowledge of God and His will: 'It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God' (Mt 4:4). This answer frustrates the devil's efforts to tempt Jesus into valuing the impermanent realm of bread and stones over the eternal Kingdom of God and in so doing, to reverse the relative importance of the two realms. Correspondingly, the heroine of Child 1C makes a similar assertion and also expresses

36 Although, in fact, the primary use of poison was in political or aristocratic assassinations (the French dubbed it 'inheritance powder') it was associated with witchcraft and came to be regarded as a particularly feminine instrument of murder since it requires no strength to use. It was especially associated with parricide and even more so with mariticide. In Child 1A, the image of poison is no more than an ominous undertone, but its appearance is perhaps a precursor of the increasingly misogynistic tone of later versions of *Riddles wisely expounded*. See V. Dembitsky & D. Levitsky, 'Arsenolipids', *Progress in Lipid Research,* 43 (2004), 403–48; R. Oremland & J. Stolz, 'Arsenic, microbes and contaminated aquifers', *Trends in Microbiology,* 13 (2005), 45–9. In a related, but more ominous, vein 'Captain Wedderburn's courtship' adds 'death' to the long list of solutions. **37** Bronson sees a long-standing association between the ballad and the Biblical episode and he attributes early narrative confusion in the ballad to 'homiletic rehandling, out of memories of Christ's Temptation'. Bronson, *Traditional tunes*, p. 3. **38** For a more detailed discussion of Jesus and riddling see T. Thatcher, *The riddles of Jesus in John* (Atlanta, 2000). **39** In *Genesis* the physical world was brought into being by the 'word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God': 'And God said, Let there be light and there was light' (Gen 1:3).

her faith in, and reliance on, God and the power of his blessing. Interestingly, we seem to see the influence of this Biblical episode, too, in the final and most significant riddle in Child 1C: 'what is waur nor a woman was?' (l. 30) to which the heroine neatly answers 'Clootie's waur nor a woman was' (l. 38). Here, as in the Bible, the tempter, is named in the answering of the last question: Jesus answers the devil's final test with the words, 'Get thee hence, Satan' (Mt 4:10) and this naming ends the trial. By correctly identifying the questioner, the hero(ine) correctly identifies the nature of the contest they have been engaged in. However, there seems to be a further, underlying idea; that names and naming have an intrinsic power and at least in the early modern ballads, we see 'the belief that naming has an enfeebling or destructive effect on men engaged in fight.'[40] Naturally enough, this power also works in reverse, especially if the bearer of the name is powerful in his own right. There is a distinct reluctance in the ballads to use the proper names of powerful figures, even when they are a force for good, thus Christ is referred to as him 'that died on tree' (Child 39A, l. 88, Child 72C, l. 122) and the devil is sometimes simply called 'the Enemy' (Child 194B, l. 12) or 'Man's Enemy' (Child 194A, l. 20). Kvideland notes that in Scandinavian tradition 'it was considered dangerous to call the devil by his proper name,'[41] and the remnant persists in the Anglosphere in the expression 'talk of the Devil and you'll see his horns.'[42] However, as the winner of the riddle contest, the girl in Child 1C is able to banish the devil through the power of his name and by solving the riddle 'Clootie's waur nor a woman was' (l. 38), the young girl not only rightly guesses the riddle, but also uncovers the true identity of her questioner: in so doing she forces him to flee:

> As sune as she the fiend did name,
> He flew awa in a blazing flame. (ll. 39–40)

The final question of Child 1C, which displays some of the characteristics of a 'neck riddle', is perhaps the most complex of all and the girl answers it but rejecting the notion that Eve was to blame for the Fall, an assertion which gives this riddle contest a wider, metaphoric significance. Early modern English folk interpretations of the Fall construct Eve's act in taking the apple as, at least in part, caused by her failure to recognize her tempter. Thus, for example, in *The fall of man* from the York Cycle of the Miracle[43] Plays Eve immediately answers the devil's call by asking 'who is there?'[44] The devil, who has disguised himself 'in a worm's likeness' answers 'I, a friend'.[45] The Eve of the York Cycle accepts this

40 Wimbley, *Folklore,* p. 86. **41** R. Kvideland, & H. Sehmsdorf, *Scandinavian folk belief and legend* (Minneapolis, 1988), p. 89. **42** Wimbley, *Folklore*, p. 87. **43** Though these plays were suppressed during the Tudor period, they re-emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For a further discussion, see J. Elliott, *Playing god: medieval mysteries on the modern stage* (Toronto, 1989). **44** A. Cawley (ed.), *Everyman and medieval miracle plays* (London, 1977), p. 20. **45** Ibid.

answer and takes the apple. So, the heroine of Child 1C is successful in her verbal duel with the devil because she does what the folk Eve does not: she recognizes her interlocutor and names him. In Eden the devil is successful, but in Child 1C he has met his match. The young girl has not only answered the riddle, but also guessed the identity of her questioner, given him his real name, and returned his implicit insult – the question implies that the guilt assigned to Eve reflects on women in general and the maid in particular – with an insult of her own. More importantly, and quite at odds with early modern theological interpretations[46] of the story, the ballad heroine's answer asserts that Adam was betrayed by the devil rather than Eve and so the devil, not Eve, is to blame for the Fall. In nominating Eve/woman as a superlative evil, the question aligns all women with Eve and places them squarely within the realm of the supernatural as enemies, like the devil himself, of God and *man*kind. The girl, of course, refuses to allow herself to be identified in such a way and her answer emphasizes the distance between the devil and herself. She asserts the essential humanity of women and the way she does it is particularly significant in the context of Child 1C, which is so concerned with establishing and measuring the relative extent and importance of the physical and spiritual domains.

The radicalism of Child 1C is not matched in later versions. Oral twentieth-century versions of *Riddles wisely expounded* interpret the question as unambiguously and solely referring to womankind without allusion to Eve. So rather than the deed of a single woman tarnishing womankind by association, women become an exemplar of evilness in their own right, even comparable to the devil. Such versions conclude that a 'She devil's worse than woman kind',[47] 'the Devil's meaner than womankind',[48] and 'a foul fiend is crueller/ Than a wicked woman's will'.[49] This is also true of twentieth-century versions of the related ballad, 'Captain Wedderburn's courtship', which adds that 'The devil's worse than woman's wish',[50] 'the devil is worse than woman's vice',[51] and 'the devil's worse than woman's tongue'.[52] Indeed, with the possible exception of Florence Mixer's version which stresses that it is only 'a wicked' woman's will which is to be compared to the devil, the answers are informed by an underlying misogyny. Not all history is progress.

CHILD 1E

In general, later written versions of the ballad are more conservative in outlook than their ancestors. In them, the privileging of the abstract over the physical –

46 I am indebted to John Flood who generously shared his extensive research on this topic. **47** Recorded by A. Peel, sung by Mrs Rill Martin, Giles Country, VA, 1922. **48** A. & E. Lomax, LC Archive of American Folk Song, Album I, rec. 4AI. Sung by Mrs Texas Gladden, Salem, VA, 1941. **49** Sung by Florence Mixer, Stonington, ME, 1936, reprinted in Bronson, *Traditional tunes,* p. 38. **50** Greig MSS, I, 165. sung by J. Spence, 1906. **51** Greig MSS, II, 149. Sung by J. Mowat, New Pitsligo, Aberdeenshire, 1907. **52** 'A gentle young lady', recorded by Samuel P. Bayard, sung by Albert E. Richter, South Connellsvill, PA, 1946.

an integral part of all riddling – becomes a vehicle for Victorian moralizing. The most pronounced version of this is the late ninteenth-century Child 1E, initially published in Miss Mason's *Nursery rhymes and country songs*. The book's title in itself reveals that the ballad had been relegated to the far lower status. In this version there is no *anagnorisis* because the 'stranger' (Child 1E, l. 6) overtly declares the nature of the contest three times and on the second he also declares his own identity as an integral aspect of the challenge:

> Now answer me these questions six
> Or you shall surely be Old Nick's. (ll. 14–15)

The subtle but important shift in the contest itself is reflected in the absence of the traditional opening couplet, 'what is higher than …?', 'what is lower than …?' Each tidy couplet of questions requires to be answered by a pair of 'moral' abstractions which become almost allegorical figures. These abstractions refer to human passions which are stark, and largely ignoble. At stake in the conflict are worldly versus moral categories rather than the large eschatological and religious issues of the ultimate nature of the universe and God's power over it.

The first couplet 'what is greener than the grass?/ What is smoother than crystal glass?' (ll. 18–19) is answered 'Envy' and 'Flattery'; two opposite but equally unproductive responses to the talents of others. The second couplet of questions, 'what is louder than a horn?/ What is sharper than a thorn?' (ll. 20–1), answered 'rumour' (l. 30) and 'hunger' (l. 31) respectively, owe the most to older riddle ballads and are the least moralistic. The third couplet is unusual in that it is dichotomous in both its imagery and solutions: 'what is brighter than the light?' (l. 22); 'Truth', and 'What is darker than the night?' (l. 33); 'Falsehood'. In the context, these answers may be understood as simply alluding to the absence or presence of deception, or as a reference to the true faith as opposed to the devil's falsehood, but the terms also have a currency as abstract philosophical categories; a fact perhaps reflected in the more elemental imagery. The next couplet takes us to intimate human responses: 'what is keener than an axe?' (l. 24); 'Revenge', and 'What is softer than melting wax?' (l. 25); 'Love'. This last answer is in contrast to earlier versions of the ballad (especially those from the secondary narrative branch, as we will see) that regard, not melting softness, but the more substantial characteristics of constancy, loyalty, endurance and transcendent loveliness as exemplifying the nature of love. The ninth and final question is the most intriguing. It is the only riddle in Child 1E that is not part of a couplet and it does not deal in 'moral' categories. Indeed, it seems to betray its origins as a creation riddle. One might have expected that the question 'What is rounder than a ring?' (l. 26) would require an answer that elaborates the love motif of the previous riddle. But instead, the ring is to be understood as symbolic of wholeness, order, and perfection. And what could be more whole, more ordered, and more perfect than that? The answer, is as it must be in a creation riddle, 'the World'.

RIDDLES WISELY EXPOUNDED IN MODERN ORAL TRADITION

The symmetrical arrangement of the questions in Child 1E is made possible by neatening alterations which suggest a literate editing of the oral text. Child 1E, then, is a version of *Riddles wisely expounded* which has been taken to its logical extreme in a particular direction and has been consciously adapted to express a didactic moral perspective – it is not surprising that this version held almost no interest for the oral tradition. Oral versions of *Riddles wisely expounded* collected in the twentieth century have most in common with earlier oral versions like Child 1C, though they tend to be shorter and in some respects simplified. The version collected by Alan Lomax in 1941 from the singing of Mrs Texas Gladden which he refers to as 'The devil's nine questions' is a typical example – though curiously, like the almost identical version (collected by Alfreda M. Peel in 1922 (also under the title 'The devil's nine questions') it only includes eight questions. The 1941 version of 'The devil's nine questions' opens with the devil's threat that if the riddles are not answered, 'you're one of mine'.[53] The riddles are in four couplets, and have answers we have encountered before: 'Snow is whiter than the milk', 'Down is softer than the silk', 'Heaven's higher than a tree', 'Hell is deeper than the sea', 'Thunder's louder than a horn'.[54] With the exception of 'Death' as the answer to 'what is sharper than a thorn',[55] the riddles have remained remarkably unchanged in their order and content from *Inter diabolus et virgo*; even the slightly archaic use of the definite article is preserved in the first and second riddles. However, the final couplet, the most altered, demonstrates that much of the original Biblical intertext has receded. The sentimentalism of 'A babe's more innocent than a lamb' and the colloquialism of 'the devil is meaner than womankind'[56] suggest that singers did not have the scriptures uppermost in their thoughts; perhaps a sign that riddling was no longer thought a fit vehicle for allusion to Holy Writ. The contest between the devil and the girl no longer re-enacts the temptation in the Garden of Eden. Rather it is the expression of the common association of the wife with the devil in early twentieth century American folk culture, as attested in Lomax's observation that in many rural American communities 'if a man divorces his first wife, and marries again unhappily, they say that he has "swapped a witch for the devil".'[57]

The extent to which the ballad had fossilized by the time of Lomax' version suggests that it was no longer culturally resonant. Bronson notes that the tune bears no relationship to the tune associated with the earlier English versions, which leads him to surmise that 'the ballad was transported [to America] on paper, rather than in the head'.[58] This alone suggests that the popularity of the *Riddles wisely expounded* ballad type was fading and that the secondary branch, in

53 A. & E. Lomax, LC Archive of American Folk Song, Album I, rec. 4AI. Sung by Mrs Texas Gladden, Salem, VA, 1941. **54** Ibid. **55** Ibid. **56** Ibid. **57** A. Lomax, *The folk songs of North America in the English language* (London, 1960), p. 174. **58** Bronson, *Traditional tunes*, p. 3.

which the riddle contest serves as a combined wooing and testing of a potential bride, was overtaking it in popularity. As the cultural status of riddles diminished, the context of romantic love must have seemed more appropriate for a riddle contest than one about the temptations of the devil.

CONCLUSION: CHILD 1A AND THE SECOND BRANCH OF *RIDDLES WISELY EXPOUNDED*

It is not difficult to see why the secondary narrative branch eventually became more popular than the primary one; it is a charming story with a happy ending. However, it was a development that effectively ended the creation riddle. Child 1A relates a rather domestic, even domesticated, version of the tale in which the beautiful youngest daughter of the house, wins the noble knight by dint of her success in the riddle contest. The riddler is 'a knight of noble worth', a man 'of courage stout and brave,/ A wife he did desire to have.' (ll. 5–8). Unlike most riddlers in the ballads, his identity is not at issue. Moreover, his intentions are clear and uncharacteristically honourable, the heroine is a dutiful and 'lovely bride' (l. 44) and overall the ballad affirms the existence of true love. The outcome is achieved after the knight requests that the youngest daughter answer 'questions three' (l. 21) – although he actually asks her three *pairs* of questions. The origin of the riddles in the primary branch of *Riddles wisely expounded* tradition is very evident. However, though each element in the pair clearly bears a relationship to the other, they are not straightforward opposites. The first pair, '"O what is longer than the way,/ Or what is deeper than the sea?"' (ll. 27–8) is clearly a corruption of the opening pair of questions of *Inter diabolus et virgo*, which is about the 'high' 'deep' opposition. In Child 1A, the questions are adapted to suit the topic of romantic love, and are found in most versions of this branch of the ballad. The first question (the fifth in *Inter diabolus et virgo*) allows the contest to begin with a question solved by 'love': an appropriate riddle for the testing of a future wife. The second pair, '"Or what is louder than the horn,/ Or what is sharper than a thorn?"' (ll. 29–30), occupy the same place in the sequence and have the same solutions as in *Inter diabolus et virgo*. The contest ends with the same question as Child 1C and 1E, 'what is worse then [sic] a woman was?' (l. 32) and it works well in this context too. The heroine here also rejects the equation of Eve with women in general, '"the Devil is worse than woman was"' (l. 38) but in this case, the question is recontexualized by the narrative and proves equally apt to frame a ballad about the relationship between men and women. All the questions of 1A are about the nature of love and marriage, which the girl answers so as to demonstrate that she will 'constant prove' (l. 47) and make the knight 'exceeding glad' (l. 40), and the knight marries the girl on the basis of what she has revealed about herself – rather than about her questioner – in answering the riddles.

The rise in the popularity of this secondary narrative branch of *Riddles wisely expounded* coincides with the decrease in popular interest in riddles and riddling.

Indeed, it mainly survives into modern times in individual motifs which other Ballads have absorbed. For example, Gilbert's 1823 version of *Riddles wisely expounded* was collected under the title 'The Three Sisters'; a sign that the ballad was already being associated with other narrative types, in this case specifically the ballad 'Twa Sisters' (Child 10). The last vestiges of *Riddles wisely expounded* may be seen in Tom Waits' recent recording of 'Two sisters' included on his 2006 album *Orphans: brawlers, bawlers & bastards*. His version, which is descended from the same tradition as the version collected by Max Hunter from the singing of Mrs Pearl Brewer, Pocahontas, Arkansas on 12 November 1958, preserves several details from Child1A. Like Mrs Brewer's version, the song's beginning, which describes the domestic arrangements of the protagonists, owes much to Child1A. Also drawn from Mrs Brewer's version (and absent from early versions of the 'Twa sisters') is the detail that the suitor is a stranger rather than a local boy, and the fact that sisters live with their (apparently) widowed mother. The influence of *Riddles wisely expounded* also seems also to have dictated that there are more than *two* sisters. But the fact that the riddles and the riddle contest, the oldest aspect of Child 1A, have not survived in ballads of the 'Twa sisters' type is significant.

The decline in the popularity of riddling had the effect of polarizing riddle ballads so that they become either a narrative without riddles or a riddle sequence with only the barest implied narrative. These non-narrative riddles found their way into new songs. The riddles of 'Captain Wedderburn's courtship' (Child 46) and 'Proud Lady Margaret' (Child 47) supply the inspiration for the riddles in 'The cherry song', while the riddle-tasks in 'Lady Isabel and the elfin knight' (Child 4) supply the basis for the riddle-tasks in 'Scarborough Fair'. The riddle in 'The marriage of Sir Gawain' (Child 31) – infamously popularized by Freud – 'what do women want?'[59] has been the title of a film directed by Nancy Meyers in 2000,[60] an Australian political party,[61] and a Malaysian reality television series.[62] Though the riddles of Child 4, 31, 46, and 47 are, like all riddles, in some peripheral way concerned with the nature of the things, it seems that the creation riddles of Child 1A which more particularly seek to understand the nature of things, were no longer resonant.

59 E. Jones, *The life and work of Sigmund Freud* (Ann Arbor, 1961), p. 377. **60** *What women want*, dir. N. Meyers, Paramount Pictures, 2000. **61** *Current Register of Political Parties*, The Australian Electoral Commission, 2009,<http://www.aec.gov.au/Parties_and_Representatives/party_registration/Registered_parties/>. **62** *What women want*, 8TV, Bandar Utama, 14/12/2006–1/3/2007.

Conclusion

Das Rätsel gibt es nicht.[1]

Riddles do not exist'

I began this book with a quotation from Plutarch in *The E at Delphi* in which he insists that it is 'only natural that the greater part of what concerns the god should be concealed in riddles'.[2] This is the implicit understanding of the role of riddles in all the texts I have considered and it is an understanding of the genre shared by early churchmen like Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Bede, and Aldhelm.[3] Yet, despite its prominence in the thought of influential figures of Christian tradition, it is the aspect of riddling most incongruous to modern sensibilities. Popularly, 'riddle' are usually understood to refer to a joke or trivial puzzle, while for many modern scholars, especially those who take their cue from post-Freudian theoretical perspectives, riddles are seen as primarily an expression of sexuality. (According to Lees and Overing, such a view is 'a critical commonplace.')[4] Abrahams describes the riddling as a kind of 'epistemological foreplay',[5] while Tiffany argues that the form itself is 'a verbal striptease'.[6] However, perhaps most telling in terms of the demise of the cultural status of riddles and riddling is Wittgenstein's assessment that '[t]he Riddle does not exist'. He theorizes that:

> Zu einer Antwort, die man nicht aussprechen kann, kann man auch die Frage nicht aussprechen. Das Rätsel gibt es nicht. Wenn sich eine Frage überhaupt stellen läßt, so kann sie auch beantwortet werden.
>
> For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. The riddle does not exist. If a question can be asked, it can also be answered.[7]

1 L. Wittgenstien, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922), 6.5. **2** *Plutarch's Moralia,* trans. Babbitt, p. 203. **3** Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15. 9. 15; Isidore, *Etymologiae* 1. 37. 22. 26; *De schematibus et tropis*, C. Kendall (ed. and trans.) (Saarbrücken, 1991), p. 194. **4** C. Lees & G. Overing, *Double agents: women and clerical culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia, 2001), p. 54. **5** R. Abrahams, 'The literary study of the riddle', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 14 (1972), 177–97, at p. 178. **6** D. Tiffany, 'Lyric substance: on riddles, materialism, and poetic obscurity,' *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 72–98, at p. 79. **7** Wittgenstien, *Tractatus,* prop. 6.5. 'If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered.') This is a tautological definition, and, in defining a riddle as something which cannot exist,

His rejection is part of a wider rejection of the metaphysical and miraculous, a view which found its most pronounced expression in the attempts of logical positivist philosophers to de-mystify the world. It demonstrates a fundamental shift in the understanding of what a riddle is; Wittgenstein assumes a riddle is a question which cannot be answered and as such is a bar to understanding, not a means to it. Riddles, here, are seen as entirely negative. Their very existence is seen as the product of failures of logical reasoning.

This move away from riddles and riddling also occurs in the Christian tradition. Although the word *riddle* is almost entirely absent from most modern translations of the Bible, it is found frequently in ancient versions and seems to have a range of complex, sometimes ambiguous, but always important meanings. In the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, and even the Vulgate, a riddle (OH *chiydah*, OGr. *αἴνιγμα* and Lat. *enigma* respectively) is the vehicle of various kinds of divine revelation. In Numbers, Psalms, Proverbs and Daniel, the ability to speak riddles and to understand them is the sign of a wise man or prophet. In Numbers 12:8, God acknowledges that he reveals himself to humanity in riddles (with the exception of Moses, to whom he speaks 'mouth to mouth'). In 1 Corinthians, 13:12,[8] God's obscurity to human perception is likened to a riddle seen through the distorting medium of a bronze mirror.[9] It is only in death that we can see God directly. However, it seems that a riddle could be something more like a parable, too. In Ezekiel 17:2, God warns the House of Israel against pride and impiety by means of an allegorical 'riddle'. This conception of a 'riddle' clearly did not quite make sense to the translators of the Septuagint who diverge from the old Hebrew and render it *διήγημα*, 'a tale'. Yet, the notion of a riddle as a parable or warning must have had some currency in the Greek tradition because the Septuagint translates the Hebrew *shammah* in Deuteronomy (28:37) with *αἴνιγμα*. The Hebrew means 'a horror', so here, very much like the use in Ezekiel, a riddle is an example through which others may learn. This is a good illustration of how riddles started to disappear from Bible translations, as the more serious aspects of riddling, especially ideas of revelation or insight started to disappear from the semantic range of direct translations for the word 'riddle'. Usually the idea of riddling is preserved in ancient and early medieval translations, although much depends, naturally, on the particular version of the Bible from which the translation was made. Anglo-Saxon Bible translations, for example, usually translate Latin *enigma* as *rædsel,* 'riddle'. However, in line with the decline in status of the riddle after the Norman invasion, successive later medieval and early modern English translations gradually erased references to it. In the case of the King James Version, the word *riddle* is rendered in periphrastic and

Wittgenstein is misusing the word. However, the very fact of his defining the word in such a way and of his impatience with any more serious consideration of the ideas connected with riddling is part of his de-mystification of the world. **8** The Greek New Testament, not the Septuagint, naturally. **9** Ancient mirrors were made of polished bronze and so do not produce a clear reflection.

euphemistic phrases such as 'dark sayings', 'dark sentences', 'dark proverbs', and most famously, 'through a glass darkly', a phrase now proverbial in English. This practice is a useful litmus for changing cultural attitudes since Bible translators are usually conservative.

The Septuagint, the Vulgate and the King James Version all translate the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew so a comparison of their choices of vocabulary is instructive. In the original Hebrew, *chiydah*, 'riddle', occurs in ten passages. In the Septuagint there are nine passages and, interestingly, in the Vulgate there are eleven passages that use the word **αἴνιγμα** or *enigma*. By contrast, the word 'riddle' appears in only two passages in the King James Version. In the 1611 Preface, the translators give an explanation of their translation practice, which makes clear how this would happen: 'wee have not tyed our selves to an uniformitie of phrasing, or to an identitie of words' because 'there bee some wordes that bee not of the same sense every where'.[10] This is an admirable methodology in many ways, but one that easily permits cultural assumptions to colour the translation. The King James translation all but excises the word 'riddle' from the Bible and it is not surprising since, in many ways, their aim is to make the text as comprehensible as possible and to clarify enigmatic or ambiguous passages, so that it 'may bee understood even of the very vulgar'. In fact, the phrases 'dark sayings' or 'dark sentences' that they substitute for 'riddle' are echoed in their account of what they wish to eliminate from their translation: 'we have shunned the obscuritie of the Papists … whereof their late Translation is full, and that of purpose to darken the sence.' Here it is not simply that a riddle is not an appropriately serious genre for religious instruction but, more significantly, that riddles are, by their nature, opposed to the expression of truth because they are necessarily ambiguous. It is a radical change in the understanding of how humans understand the world.

Rejected by the concrete, rationalist, Logical Positivist inspired ethos of the modern world, by the Christian tradition, and even, by the twentieth century at least, by the popular tradition, are riddles obsolete? Perhaps; and yet, as the progression traced in here demonstrates, riddles are remarkably enduring. In tracing the particular arc of the creation riddle and of the riddle subgenre inspired by Symphosius, I set aside other riddle arcs and histories of equal interest. Perhaps the most engrossing of these would begin with the relationship between riddling and poetry in early England. Since some of the earliest poetic texts composed in England are riddle collections, from its beginning, poetry in England has been influenced by riddling it would be intriguing to follow this relationship through to modern times. Even the obvious examples are interesting. For instance, the three riddles associated with the three caskets in Shakespeare's *The merchant of Venice*,[11]

10 Original Preface 1611, Epistle and Dedicatorie, King James Translation. **11** *The Merchant of Venice* 2.vii; 2.ix; 3.ii. The first riddle is, 'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire' but upon opening the golden casket the 'solution' is revealed to be a skull with a manuscript in its eye socket which reads 'All that glitters is not gold'. The second riddle is, 'who

the crucial 'incest' riddle in *Pericles*,[12] or the famous riddlic prediction that 'none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth' – grimly solved when Macbeth realizes that MacDuff was 'from his mother's womb/ Untimely ripp'd' (5.8. 15–16).[13] Poets from Wyatt – for example the suitably puzzling 'On A Gift from a Lady' and the rather Symphosian 'On a gun' – to Plath's equally Symphosian 'Metaphors' write riddles. However, perhaps a poem like T.S. Eliot's 'Usk' – to pick an example more or less at random – is a more significant instance of the enigmatic in modern poetry. Like the creation riddle, this poem looks to the great expanse of creation, 'Where the grey light meets the green air', in order to find God:

> Do not suddenly break the branch, or
> Hope to find
> The white hart over the white well.
> Glance aside, not for lance, do not spell
> Old enchantments. Let them sleep.
> 'Gently dip, but not too deep',
> Lift your eyes
> Where the roads dip and where the roads rise
> Seek only there
> Where the grey light meets the green air
> The Hermit's chapel, the pilgrim's prayer.

This poem is not a riddle but, on the other hand, it is deliberately unclear. It is not clear what exactly is happening, nor what its significance is. What is the point? Why not make it clear? If the point is to convey an experience or an idea, why not make it clear? Yet, this kind of obscurity is a feature of modern English poetry. Like the ancient conception of riddles, there is a sense here that the time a reader must spend puzzling over its meaning is part of the experience, part of the vision, even the understanding, it has to offer. In the English tradition, all, or almost all, poems are a kind of *enigma*. Poetry is the form of literature that has the greatest array of language resources at its disposal: a poem may develop its

chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves' but upon opening the silver casket, the solution is discovered to be a picture of 'a blinking idiot' offering a note which reads 'Some there be that shadows kiss;/ Such have but a shadow's bliss'. The third riddle is, 'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath'. Inside the lead casket, Bassanio finds a portrait of Portia, and another scroll which says 'You that choose not by the view,/ Chance as fair and choose as true'. **12** *Pericles* 1.i. 647–1. 'I am no viper, yet I feed/ On mother's flesh which did me breed./ I sought a husband, in which labour/ I found that kindness in a father:/ He's father, son, and husband mild;/ I mother, wife, and yet his child./ How they/ may be, and yet in two,/ As you will live, resolve it you.' The sources for this riddle can be traced through *Apollonius, King of Tyre* to Symphosius. **13** *Macbeth* 4.i.78–80. This 'riddle' is also found in a ballad related to *Riddles wisely expounded*; another direct connection! In *Lord of the rings* Tolkien plays on the clue, 'no man of woman born' to predict that the king of the Nazgul will never be killed by a man. In the event, he meets his end at the hands of a woman.

theme not only through imagery; that is by analogy, simile and metaphor (the technique perhaps most closely associated with poetry), but also through dramatic or novelistic devices such as monologue, narrative and dialogue. It may use the same kind of aural devices that music does through onomatopoeia, rhythm, rhyme, assonance or dissonance, and it is freed, at least partially, from the constraints of syntax. Yet, with all these means of expression available to it, what we value most in a poem is not clarity. We prefer a poem to make us consider the world in a new light and to turn us 'to those inner things which are to be grasped'.[14]

14 Isidore of Seville, quoted in V. Law, *Wisdom, authority and grammar in the seventh century* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 24.

APPENDIX A

Translation and commentary of the *Symphosii Scholastici Aenigmata*

This translation of the *Symphosii*[1] *Scholastici Aenigmata* is made from Bergamin's thorough and meticulous 2005 edition of the text.[2] In line with recent philological thinking, I follow her preference for a more conservative approach than that of Shackleton Bailey in his 1982 edition. But in a few difficult cases I have accepted Shackleton Bailey's conjecture or simply marked the text as corrupt and not attempted a translation (see below). Bergamin's textual conservatism epitomizes the ideology of a small group of Italian Symphosius scholars, including Spallone, Murru, Vitale and particularly Guarducci,[3] who have produced some of the most insightful and influential work on Symphosius in recent times. Their approach does not deny the losses, corruptions and interpolations inevitable in the process of textual transmission; on the contrary, much of their work is devoted to the rigorous assessment of manuscript evidence. But they recognize that with only the evidence of the text to go on, and without other contemporary extant riddle collections for comparison, extensive scholarly textual emendation runs a high risk of writing preconceptions into the text.

PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AND RIDDLE TRANSLATION

As with any translation, translating *Symphosii* raises the question of what constitutes an accurate 'equivalent'. As Nord and Sparrow write:

> The concept of equivalence has been questioned ever since it was first established. From Nida's formulation of 'dynamic equivalence' (Nida 1964) it is a long and tortuous path via Koller's specification of denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic and formal equivalence (1979: 187ff., cf. also Koller 1995) to Neubert's 'text-bound equivalence'

1 Like many Italian scholars, Bergamin prefers 'Symposius' to 'Symphosius'. However, I have used the latter spelling throughout as it is the more usual among English-speaking scholars. **2** For a fuller discussion of Bergamin's use of the manuscript tradition. **3** See Spallone, 'Tradizioni Insulari', 185–228; Murru, 'Aenigmata Symphosii ou Aenigmata Symposii?', 155–8; Vitale 'Gli Enigma', 201–17, Guarducci, 'La Chicciola Cristiana', 447–56.

> (1984: 68 and 1986: 87ff.), which the translator constantly has to strive after and which may compensate for non-equivalent translations on lower ranks (e.g. at the level of words and phrases).[4]

Of course, some of these approaches are not suitable for a scholarly translation, such as the one I offer here, whose purpose – to support a close literary and cultural academic study of Symphosius' riddles – necessarily dictates close, literal translation. Such a translation is, to use Newmark's phrase, 'a means not an end', an aid to understanding, not a literary work in its own right.[5] So, for example, a translation in which equivalence is achieved through cultural 'transplantation'[6] is not appropriate for an academic audience seeking to understand the culture of the source text.[7] As the projected audience for my translation is an academic readership, my approach has been to translate as literally as possible and, in order to ensure that the reader has the requisite information and understanding of cultural nuance, my practise has been to provide detailed notes on any point which might be obscure.

Translating riddles presents its own particular problems, which is not surprising given that modern western culture does not value riddles as a literary or high culture form. Such work as exists on riddle translation has been done by scholars studying riddles (Bantu or Shona riddles, for example) which, because of their linguistic structures or cultural specificity, 'cannot be translated into English'.[8] However, because of the close linguistic relationship between English and Latin, and the cultural continuities between the Late Roman Empire and the modern Western world, this work is not pertinent to translating Symphosius' riddles. But while this closeness does give us *entrée* into Symphosius' work, it also complicates the task of translation because it encourages us to overlook, or segue, the significant cultural differences. Symphosius' popularity in early England means that his work has been formative on the English literary tradition and yet,

4 C. Nord & P. Sparrow, *Text analysis in translation: theory, methodology, and didactic application of a model for translation-oriented text analysis* (Amsterdam, 2005). **5** P. Newmark, *About translation* (Bristol, 1991), pp 1–15. **6** *A dictionary of translation technology* defines the term as 'referring to the replacement of details of the source culture in the original text by relevant target culture elements.' S. Chan, *A dictionary of translation technology* (Hong Kong, 2006), p. 52. **7** L. Venuti, *The translation studies reader* (New York, 2000), p. 68. **8** E. Gwaravanda & D. Masaka, 'Shona reasoning skills in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Pan-African Studies* 2 (2008), 1–15, at pp 3–4. For a fuller discussion of Bantu riddling, see P. Beuchat, 'Riddles in Bantu' in A. Dundes (ed.), *The study of folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969), pp 182–205. In fact, there are many other fundamental differences, not least that riddle contests are adjudicated differently. In Shona riddling, the contest is lost when one contender can not think of any more riddles to ask. Gwaravanda and Masaka claim that because of this the winner is always 'the one who is more knowledgeable', but for a scholar used to European riddling traditions, the more knowledgeable riddler would prove him/ herself by being able to answer more questions. This represents a fundamental ideological difference in the approach to riddles and in the kind of mental facilities which are valued.

as this thesis demonstrates, both Roman culture in general and Symphosius' work in particular are profoundly foreign, especially in their attitudes to riddling. This 'similarity in difference', makes the problems of translation less obvious, but not less important to address.

The current notion that a 'translator should make explicit in the translation what is implicit in the source text'[9] presents a particular difficulty for riddle translators because, under such a rubric, the aims of a translation are directly opposed to those of a riddle. If a translation should attempt to make meaning explicit, by contrast a riddle always attempts to obscure it. If a translation should provide its audience with an accurate understanding of the source text, by contrast a riddle always misdirects them to focus on a single, and inevitably incorrect, reading of its clues – often by means of exactly the kinds of cultural miscommunication that a translator seeks to clarify. If a translation should seek to illuminate (or elide) cultural ambiguities, a riddle often works through them. In short, the workings of riddles cut against much of current translation theory.

The aims of riddle translation must be appropriate to the nature of the genre. The riddle is interactive, eliciting particular mental processes from its audience, so that a translation must retain this function while reproducing the imagery and overt meaning. The riddle works through a central paradox, usually established (and enacted) by means of linguistic quirks and puns, so that a translation must preserve and convey this paradox rather than explain or clarify its ambiguities. With all of this in mind, I have tried to render an English version that translates the text as riddles, not as poetry. As I note above, I have scrupulously avoided finding cultural equivalents, since it is in understanding the original components of the central paradox, and the ideas and imagery associated with it, that we may achieve an insight into a particular riddle and the riddling culture that produced it.

Since the central riddle paradox is of paramount importance, it is crucial to represent it accurately. For example, there is a temptation to translate a line such as 'Virtutes magnas de viribus affero parvis' (4.1), so as to reflect the play on *virtus;* I initially considered something like 'I bestow great virtues by virtue of so little'. However, this rendering displaces the wordplay and, more importantly, does not faithfully reflect Symphosius' construction of the paradox. My solution, 'I bring great merits with little strength', more accurately expresses the contrast between the smallness of the key and the greatness of its power to guard or expose the contents of the house – although it does not retain the neatness of Symphosius' turn of phrase. On a very few occasions, when I have felt that it did not obscure or distort Symphosius' meaning, I have allowed a slight displacement of the wordplay. Thus in *Mula*, I have translated 'confusi generis, generi non apta propago' (37. 2) as 'of mingled blood, a breed not fit to breed'. The word play would have been more exactly preserved in a rendering such as, 'of mingled blood, a blood not fit to breed' or 'of mingled lineage, a lineage not fit to breed', but neither is true to Symphosius' sense or to the requirements of acceptable

9 Chan, *Dictionary,* p. 52.

English. Since there is no English word which reflects Symphosius' use of *generis* and *generi*, the only other option is to exclude the wordplay altogether – as Ohl has in the rendering, 'of mingled race, a breed unfit for progeny'. All things considered, I have felt that the slight displacement of the wordplay is an acceptable compromise.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF SYMPHOSIUS

Both made almost a century ago, the two currently used translations of Symphosius' riddles into English[10] are by Peck (1912)[11] and Ohl (1928). In addition, Wilbur recently translated a handful of Symphosius' riddles: *Clavis, Ericius, Funambulus, Tigris, Rosa, Viola, Tus, Pistillus, Anulus cum Gemma, Papver, Rana, Mus, Formica, Musca* and *Pediculus*.[12] None of these translations uses Bergamin's edition of the Latin text and for this reason alone, there is a need for a new translation. The translations by Ohl and Peck represent opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of translation methodology. Ohl's translation, the only scholarly translation of Symphosius into English, is often literal to the point of retaining Symphosius' syntax, which is, at times, simply too convoluted to transfer successfully to an uninflected language. While this syntactic flexibility is an integral part of Symphosius' riddling technique, the riddles become taxing to read, and sometimes even incomprehensible, when transferred directly into English. By contrast, Peck chooses the perilous route of cultural transplantation. Both she and Wilbur have produced verse translations[13] that inevitably take a rather more liberal attitude to their source text, but neither is a serious attempt to produce a scholarly translation.

Let us turn first to these freer renderings. The translations of Peck and Wilbur, though occasionally ingenious, are symptomatic of a dismissive attitude toward Symphosius, which is quite widespread. Both render the riddles in a light-hearted, even comical, tone which perhaps reflects the view that riddles are inevitably light-hearted. They adopt rhythm and rhyme schemes, variously derived from English nursery rhymes and limericks, which are alien to Latin and which do not accurately reflect the sophistication of the *Aenigmata* or the great variety of tone and mood in the utterance of Symphosius' riddle creatures. For example, Symphosius' ant speaks in a manner which matches her patient, hard working nature:

10 Unless otherwise stated, all Ohl's translations are from R. Ohl, *The Enigmas of Symphosius* (Philadelphia, 1928). **11** Unless otherwise stated, all Peck's translations are from E. Peck, *The hundred riddles of Symphosius* (Vermont, 1912). **12** The 'translation' breaks with Symphosius' original order, as the list demonstrates. R. Wilbur, 'Some riddles in Symphosius' in *The Hopkins Review,* 1 (2008), 152–4. **13** Peck 'translates' the quantitative metrics of Latin poetry into the stress-based metre and rhyme more usual in English poetry. Wilbur's translation employs rhyme but not metre.

> Provida sum vitae, duro non pigra labore,
> ipsa ferens umeris securae praemia brumae.
> Nec gero magna simul, sed congero multa vicissim (22.1–3)

I have rendered it:

> I am provident in the conduct of my life, not slothful in hard work,
> Carrying on my shoulders the cost of a safe winter.
> I do not carry much at once, but I amass much bit by bit.

Wilbur gives Symphosius' fussy ant a slack-jawed colloquialism which is entirely alien to her nature:

> I'm provident, and not an idle bum.
> I lug home food before the snowflakes come.
> Not in great loads, of course, but crumb by crumb.[14]

In general, Peck and Wilbur have been reductive in their rendering of the *Aenigmata*. In particular, they have resisted the grave tone which Symphosius sometimes adopts, replacing it with an unacceptable lightness, even in a riddle such as *Mulier quae geminos pariebat* where the woman recalls her near-mortal distress:

> Plus ego sustinui quam corpus debuit unum.
> Tres animas habui, quas omnes intus habebam:
> discessere duae, sed tertia paene peregit. (92.1–3)

I have rendered it:

> I have sustained more than one body should
> I had three souls, all of which I was holding within
> Two left, and the third nearly perished.

Peck's jingly version down plays the anguish of Symphosius' lines:

> More have I carried than from one was due;
> Three lives I had and all I nourished too;
> Now two are gone, the third came hardly through.

In fact, even Ohl's more academic version which renders the final line 'a pair departed, but the third pretty nearly perished too' fails to convey the mother's plight. His jarring use of the phrase 'pretty nearly' is not faithful to Symphosius' original and, to my mind, would be more apt to a P.G. Wodehouse character

14 Wilbur, 'Some riddles', 154.

than a woman who had faced one of the severe trials of ancient life.[15] Such misrepresentations of tone occasionally result in the kind of gross cultural projection that is an ever-present risk for those adopting a methodology of cultural transplantation.[16] Thus Peck renders the ambiguous tombstone inscription, 'Vita tamen superest morti post tempora vitae' (100.3) ('Nevertheless, life survives death after the time of life'), with the moralizing, anachronistic 'Yet for the good there is an after-life instead.'

Turning from Peck, we find that Ohl's translation, which has been standard in English, is equally problematic. On one or two points he appears to misunderstand Symphosius' thought. For example, he translates 'falso … vento' (23.3) ('false wind'), which probably refers to the breezes created by fly-flaps to keep flies off the food at banquets[17] as a 'deceptive breeze' (cf. Peck's 'fickle winds'). Though *falso* may mean 'deceptive' that is not the meaning here. It is not that the wind tricks the fly, but rather that it is not a natural wind. In fact, Wilbur's 'man-made breezes'[18] is the only translation to catch Symphosius' thought.

Ohl's translations are often designed to clarify Symphosius' riddlic ambiguity, as we see in his treatment of *Murra*.[19] Symphosius' uses *nascor* ('I am born'), a verb usually used of sentient creatures, to describe myrrh. This acts to blur the already-precarious distinction between the metamorphosing woman and the tree to great riddlic affect. Ohl's translation, which renders 'ex oculis fluxi sed nunc ex arbore nascor' (48.2) ('I have flowed from eyes, but now I spring from a tree') as 'from human eyes I flowed, but now I start from a tree', does the opposite. He attempts to 'explain' the riddle by translating 'nascor' with the inaccurate and inelegant verb 'start'. Moreover, his translation of 'ex oculis' as 'from human eyes' imports the idea of humanness that Symphosius has deliberately excluded from the original. Perhaps most perplexingly, Ohl renders 'laetus honor frondis' (48.3) ('[t]he happy glory of green boughs') with the nonsensical 'the happy adornment of my leaf'. This misunderstands Symphosius' careful opposition between the great value of myrrh resin and the shame from which, according to the myth, it was created. Having over-explained other points in the riddle, Ohl translation of this phrase is enigmatic. One is constrained to ask, in what sense can the myrrh resin be a decoration for the leaves of the myrrh tree?

Even those scholars most dismissive of Symphosius agree that his turn of phrase is witty and dexterous, so Ohl's labourious, clumsy phrasing is a significant

15 Cf. Medea's famous declaration that she would rather stand in the front line of battle than give birth once. (Eur. *Med.* 250–1) Current estimations put maternal mortality rates in the Roman Empire around 25 per 1,000. The infant mortality rate is thought to be around 300 per 1,000. D. Todman, 'Childbirth in Ancient Rome: from traditional folklore to obstetrics', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 47 (2007), 82–5, at p. 84. **16** Peck, of course, pre-dates the theoretical articulation of this idea, but her text, nevertheless, conforms roughly to its principles. **17** Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii*, 114. **18** Wilbur, 'Some riddles', 154. **19** For a full discussion of *Murra*, see pp 114–15.

distorition of the original. A brief consideration of his rendering of *Pediculus* makes the point. First, the Greek version from which Symphosius works:

> ὅσσ' ἕλομεν λιπόμεσθα, ὅσ' οὐχ ἕλομεν φερόμεσθα (*Cert.* 325)
>
> The ones we caught we left behind, the ones we missed we carry.[20]

Next Symphosius' text – already a 'translation' of the Greek:

> Est nova nostrarum cuctis captura ferarum:
> ut si quid capias, hoc tu tibi ferre recuses,
> et quod non capias, tecum tamen ipse reportes. (30.1–3)

My rendering:

> There is a new kind of hunting of wild beasts for us all
> That if you catch something, you refuse to carry it with you
> And whatever you do not catch, you carry back with you.

This neat line of the Greek is metrically balanced; each half line reflecting the other. Symphosius' version also exhibits these traits: there is an internal rhyme on 'nostrarum' and 'ferarum' which marks the half lines, each of whose endings alliterate. The second and third lines mirror each other, with the second half line in each alliterating on 't' and concluding in a consonantal rhyme on 'recuses' and 'reportes'. This stands in the greatest contrast to Ohl's rather clumsy:

> There is a new kind of catching of our game for all, on condition that if you catch anything you may refuse to carry it off as your own and what you do not catch you may nonetheless bring back with you.

The combination of the profound with the profane is the mark of Symphosius' riddles and yet Ohl's translation seems to shy away from both ends of the spectrum. In *Strigilis aenea*, for example, he translates the riddle rather unclearly, apparently to obfuscate the sexual innuendo. But in so doing, he loses the effect of the riddle which is to suggest an obscene meaning only to disappoint with a solution which is entirely innocent. (The device appears again in a group of riddles from the Exeter Book known as the Obscene Riddles.)[21] Symphosius writes:

> Robea curva capax, alienis humida guttis,
> luminibus falsis auri mentita colorem,
> dedita sudori, modico subcumbo labori. (88.1–3)

20 Anon., *The contest of Homer and Hesiod*, trans. M. West (Harvard, 2007), p. 351. **21** Like all Anglo-Saxon riddles, this group is influenced by Symphosius' riddling.

I have tried to render it so both the entitled solution and the subtext to remain evident:

> Red, curved, large, damp with foreign drops,
> Falsifying the colour of gold with deceitful flashes.
> Devoted to sweat, I succumb to a little toil.

Ohl's translation is not so much a riddle as a puzzle. Even with the entitled solution, it is a little difficult to read this as a description of a strigil:

> Ruddy, curved, capacious, bedewed with strange drop
> By means of metal mendacious set up for gold in improper streams
> Devoted to sweat, I succumb to trifling toil.

The greatest disservice modern scholars have done Symphosius is to take him at his word in the *praefatio* when he claims his works are 'nugas' (*prae.* 7), but to disregard the 'words', as it were, of the *Aenigmata* that show him to be a subtle, strange, comic and serious poet. My translation attempts to reflect the myriad moods of Symphosius' array of personalities and objects: the cheeky description of the strigil, the brazen fly, the mother's distress, the humble mouse, the raucous frog, the vicious wolf, the broken down soldier, and finally, the ominous tombstone that marks the end of the riddle collection – of its author and of us all.

So far, I have considered the typical problems that confront the translator of ancient material, and especially of riddles, into modern English. But sometimes, these are compounded by uncertainty about what the text actually means. This is the case with *Miles Podagricus*. In particular, there is much scholarly disagreement over the meaning of the 'quinque pedes'. In the following, I will review this debate and propose my own solution. Here is Symphosius' text:

> Bellipotens olim, saevis metuendus in armis;
> quinque pedes habui, quod numquam nemo negavit.
> Nunc mihi vix duo sunt; inopem me copia fecit. (93.1–3)

I have translated it:

> Once valiant in war, to be feared among savage weapons,
> I had five feet, which none ever denied.
> Now I have barely two; plenty has made me poor.

The most popular of various solutions, the one preferred by Bergamin, is that the 'five feet' refers to the height requirement for soldiers in the Roman army.[22] However, this suggestion is problematic because the minimum height for soldiers

22 Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* 194.

in the Roman army was always greater than five feet. According to Vegetius, it was 'VI pedum uel certe V et X unciarum' (Veg. *Mil.* 1.5) ('six feet or at least five feet and ten inches'). Even after the reduction of the height requirements in 367 CE, a 'delectus' ('chosen man')[23] was required to be five foot seven inches tall (*CTh.* 7.13.3). Some editors, including Glorie, amend the riddle substituting 'six feet' for the 'five feet', but since the height requirement seems never to have been quite so tall, and was certainly less in Symphosius' time, this is also problematic. Shackleton-Bailey's suggested emendation, that 'bis' ('twice') be added to the line, is even more drastic: 'quinque pedes habui bis, numquam nemo negavit'[24] ('I have twice five feet, which no one has ever denied'). Shackleton Bailey takes the 'twice five feet' to refer to the ten foot measure, the *decempeda*. The obvious objection to this (apart from the intrusion into the received text and the metrical disruption of the line)[25] is that the *decempeda* ruler is used in all kinds of surveying. It is not inherently military or associated with weaponry and therefore does not support the old soldier's claim to have been fearsome in battle.

I would like to propose the new solution that the 'five feet' refers to the soldier's own two feet in addition to the three feet of frontage assigned to each soldier in close formation. These three feet, mentioned in both Latin and Greek late antique sources – Vegetius' 'ternos pedes' (Veg. *Mil.* 3.14) and Polybios' 'τρισὶ ποσὶ' (Polyb. 18.28) – were roughly the same width as a shield and represented both the area each soldier was required to defend and the space within which he must fight. In other words, it was the space that defined a soldier's duty and with which he, presumably, felt identified. My reading would fit with Symphosius' other 'human riddles' in which the riddle subject is described as having, in addition to his own limbs, those of the objects associated with him (see note 81). It would also explain why the old soldier no longer has the five feet of which he boasts in the second line, a point not addressed by Bergamin's solution since even when he was shrunken with age the soldier must still have a height of at least five feet. If I am correct, there is true pathos in the soldier's lament 'Nunc mihi vix duo sunt; inopem me copia fecit' (93.3) ('Now I have barely two; plenty has made me poor').

The paradox 'inopem me copia fecit' is borrowed from Ovid's story of Althea whose son, the warrior Meleager, kills her brothers (*Met.* 3.466). Althea is thereby caught between two irreconcilable obligations: to protect her son and to avenge her brothers.[26] Ovid's paradoxical juxtaposition of *inops* and *copia* expresses the

23 A 'delectus' met the requirements for admission to the Roman army. **24** D.R. Shackleton-Bailey, *Towards a text of 'Anthologia Latina'* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 41. **25** Bergamin claims 'quinque pedes habui, quod numquam nemo negavit' è la lezione prosodicamente corretta' ('quinque pedes habui, quod numquam nemo negavit' is the metrically correct reading'). Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* 194. **26** As Tissol writes, 'after so many waverings from one unacceptable course of action to the other, her resolve is rather like a toss of the coin: a resolve, but not a resolution of the dilemma. It finds its perfect expression in paradox'. G. Tissol, *The face of nature: wit, narrative, and cosmic origins in Ovid's* Metamorphoses

tragic inextricability of Althea's situation since '*inops* and *copia,* from **co-opia*, are etymologically connected'.[27] In this way, the plight of Symphosius' soldier, who is defined by a role he is no longer able to fulfil, by the three feet which he no longer has, echoes that of Althea who is also defined by that which she no longer has and is equally (albeit for different reasons) unable to do her duty.

I have translated 'inopem' 'poor' since this may refer to reduced resources both financial and physical, and also to the soldier's reduced spirits. Peck's rending 'Now scarce I've two, for wealth does not abide', fails to convey either the paradox or the pathos of the line. By choosing to 'explain' the riddle in terms of material goods or wealth, conveys only one aspect of Symphosius' meaning, and the least interesting at that.

Symphosii Scholastici Aenigmata

Praefatio
[Haec quoque Symphosius de carmine lusit inepto;
sic tu, Sexte,[28] doces; sic te deliro magistro.]

Annua Saturni dum tempora festa redirent
perpetuo semper nobis sollemnia ludo,
post epulas laetas, post dulcia pocula mensae,
deliras inter vetulas puerosque[29] loquaces,
cum streperet late madidae facundia linguae,
tum verbosa cohors studio sermonis inepti
nescio quas passim magno de nomine nugas
est meditata diu; sed frivola multa locuta est.
Nec mediocre fuit magni certaminis instar,
ponere diverse vel solvere quaeque vicissim.
Ast ego, ne solus foede tacuisse viderer,
qui nihil adtuleram mecum quod dicere possem,
hos versus feci subito †discrimine vocis†.[30]
Insanos inter sanum non esse necesse est.
Da veniam, lector, quod non sapit ebria Musa.[31]

(Princeton, 1997), p. 14. The paradox to which Tissol refers is 'et consanguineas ut sanguine leniat umbras/ inpietate pia est' (Met. 8.476–477) ('And in order to assuage her blood-kin spirits with blood, she is dutiful in her violation of duty'), and has much in common with the paradox used by Symphosius. **27** G. Tissol, *The face of nature*, p. 13. In fact Symphosius may be punning on *copia* in other ways. A *copis* is a short sword and the plural of *copia*, *copiae*, may refer to troops. **28** It is not known to whom this refers. **29** A feature of the Saturnalia is that slaves were given license. **30** Many reconstructions of this line have been suggested; indeed, almost every edition reads it differently. None, however, is entirely satisfactory. See Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* p. 4. **31** Cf. Ausonius' declaration in the dedication of the *Griphus*

[These too did Symphosius playfully write in foolish verse,
Just as you teach, Sextus; so similarly I rave under your teaching.]

When the time of the feasts of Saturn was making its annual return –
always a ritual of endless fun for us –
after joyous banquets, after the sweet drinking cups at the table,
between revelling old women and prattling slaves,
when the eloquence of drunken tongues resounded far,
then the garrulous crowd in eagerness for foolish speech
long pondered over I know not what frivolities under grand names
but frivolous were the many things said.
It was no ordinary matter, but resembled a mighty contest;
each one in turn to put various questions or to solve them.
But I, not to seem the only one to be disgracefully silent,
who had brought nothing with me which I was able to say,
I improvised these verses […]
It is necessary not to be sober among the insane.
Be indulgent, reader, because the drunken Muse shows no sense.

1. Graphium
De summo planus sed non ego planus in imo.
Versor utrimque manu diverso et munere fungor:
altera pars revocat quidquid pars altera fecit.

Stylus
Flat on top, but not flat at the bottom.
I am turned both ways in the hand and am engaged in opposite functions:
One part undoes what the other has done.

2. Harundo
Dulcis amica dei,[32] ripae vicina profundae,
suave canens Musis, nigro perfusa colore,
nuntia sum linguae, digitis signata magistris.[33]

Ternarii Numeri to Symmachus 'Iniurium est de poeta male sobrio lectorem abstemium iudicare' ('It is outrageous that a strictly abstemious reader should sit in judgment on a poet a little drunk'). trans. H. Waddell, *The wandering scholars* (London, 1954), p. 37. **32** This refers to the story that when the nymph Syrinx was transformed into a reed to escape Pan's amorous advances, the god cut the reeds and made from them the first *syrinx* or pan-pipes (Ov. *Met.* 1.689ff). Bergamin suggests that the reference is to the story that when Karpos drowned, Kalamos, son of the river god Maiandros, transformed into a reed out of grief (Nonnus *Dion.* 11. 369–481). (Although Nonnus claims that it is an old story, no prior attestation survives except in Servius' commentary on Virgil's *Eclogues* (5. 48), which indicates that the story was known in late antiquity, but probably not before.) Bergamin prefers this solution because 'kalamos' is the name given to a reed pen, and *harundo* was sometimes a poetic word for it.

Reed
The dear sweetheart of a god, neighbour to steep banks,
Singing sweetly for the Muses, drenched with black,
I am the messenger of the tongue, pressed by expert fingers.

3. Anulus cum gemma
Corporis extremi non magnum pondus adhaesi,
ingenitum dicas, ita pondere nemo gravatur.
Vna tamen facies plures habitura figuras.[34]

Ring with Gem
No great weight at the body's end, I clung,
Implanted, you might say, and so no one is oppressed by my weight.
Though having one face, I shall have many figures.

4. Clavis
Virtutes magnas de viribus affero parvis:
pando domos clausas, iterum sed claudo patentes.
Servo domum domino, sed rursus servor ab ipso.

Key
I perform great deeds with little strength:
I open shut houses, but also shut open ones.
I guard the house for the house-holder but I am guarded by him.

5. Catena
Nexa ligor ferro, multos habitura ligatos.
Vincior ipsa prius, sed vincio vincta vicissim.
Et solui multos, nec sum tamen ipsa soluta.

Chain
Bound, tied with iron, I will hold many bound.
Already bound myself, yet bound I bind in turn.
And I have freed many, but I have not been freed myself.

(Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* p. 81). However, Kalamos is the son of a god, not the sweetheart; certainly he is not the female 'amica', which is why the riddle must refer to Syrinx. **33** The riddle refers to the reed in its natural state but also in its use as both a pen and a musical instrument. In this last line the two possibilities are held in tension; both the pen and the pipes may be the 'messenger of the tongue' worked by fingers, since ancient reed pipes had finger-holes. See A. Barker, *Greek musical writings* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 16. **34** This riddle depends on the Roman practice of engraving scenes into gemstones used in jewellery. The pun on *facies* suggests a creature with one face but many bodies, whereas the gem has a single face engraved with many figures. Moreover, both *facies* and *figura* may mean 'shape', so it is possible to read the sentence as a straight contradiction: 'Though having one shape, I shall have many shapes'.

6. Tegula
Terra mihi corpus, vires mihi praestitit ignis.
De terra nascor, sedes est semper in alto;
et me perfundit qui me cito deserit umor.

Roof-Tile
My body is earth, fire gave me strength.
I am born from the earth, my home is always on high;
And water drenches me but quickly deserts me.

7. Fumus
Nunc mihi sunt lacrimae, sed non est causa doloris.
Est iter ad caelum, sed me gravis impedit aer;
et qui me genuit, sine me non nascitur ipse.

Smoke
Now tears are mine, but there is no reason for grief.
My path is to the sky, but the heavy air hinders me;
And what gave me birth itself is not born without me.

8. Nebula
Nox ego sum facie, sed non sum nigra colore,
inque die media tenebras tamen affero mecum.
Nec mihi dant stellae lucem nec Cynthia lumen.

Cloud
I am night-faced, but I am not black in complexion,
Nevertheless, at midday I bring the dark with me.
The stars do not give light, nor Cynthia illumination, to me.

9. Pluvia
Ex alto venio, longa delapsa ruina.
De caelo cecidi, medias transmissa per auras:
sed sinus excepit qui me simul ipse remittit.

Rain
I come from on high, dropping in a long fall.
I fell from the sky, sent through the middle air;
But the earth received me which itself sends me back.

10. Glacies
Vnda fui quondam, quod me cito credo futuram.
Nunc rigidi caeli duris conexa catenis
et calcata pati possum nec unda teneri.

Ice
Once I was, and I believe soon shall be again, water.
Now held by the harsh chains of a frozen heaven
And I can suffer being trodden on but not to be held as water.

11. Nix
Pulvis aquae tenuis, modico cum pondere lapsus.
Sole madens, aestate fluens, in frigore siccus,
flumina facturus totas prius occupo terras.

Snow
A fine dust of water, I fell with little weight.
Dripping in the sun, flowing in summer, dry in the cold,
I will make rivers, but first I occupy whole lands.

12. Flumen et Piscis
Est domus in terris, clara quae voce resultat:
ipsa domus resonat, tacitus sed non sonat hospes.
Ambo tamen currunt, hospes simul et domus una.

River and Fish
There is a house in the earth and it resounds with clear voice.
The house itself resounds, but the silent guest does make a noise.
Both move at the same time, guest and house together.

13. Navis
Longa feror velox, formosae filia silvae,
innumeris pariter comitum stipata catervis.
Curro vias multas, vestigia nulla relinquens.

Ship
Long, fleet daughter of the beautiful wood, I am carried,
Crowded together with numberless bands of companions.
I travel many ways, leaving no tracks.

14. Pullus in ovo
Mira tibi referam nostrae promordia vitae:
nondum natus eram nec eram iam matris in alvo.
Iam posito partu natum me nemo videbat.

Chicken in Egg
I will tell you the strange origins of my life:
I was not born, nor was I in my mother's womb.
My birth had already taken place, no one saw me being born.

15. Vipera
Non possum nasci si non occidero matrem;[35]
occidi matrem, sed me manet exitus idem:
id mea mors patitur quod iam mea fecit origo.

Viper
I cannot be born, unless I kill my mother;
I killed my mother, but the same end waits for me:
My death allows what my birth has already done.

16. Tinea
Littera me pavit, nec quid sit littera novi;
in libris vixi nec sum studiosior inde.
Exedi Musas nec adhuc tamen ipsa profeci.

Bookworm
Literature has nourished me, though I do not know what a letter is.
I have lived in books, though I am not more studious for it.
I have consumed the Muses, yet I have still not made progress.

17. Aranea
Pallas me docuit texendi nosse laborem:[36]
nec pepli radios poscunt nec licia telae.
Nulla mihi manus est, pedibus tamen omnia fingo.

Spider
Pallas taught me to know the pains of weaving:
My robes do not demand a shuttle, nor the warp its heddle.
I have no hands, I form everything with my feet.

18. Coclea
Porto domum mecum, semper migrare parata,
mutatoque solo non sum miserabilis exul,
sed mihi concilium de caelo nascitur ipso.

Snail
I carry my house with me, always ready to move.
And when I have moved land, I am not a wretched exile
My wisdom is born from heaven itself.[37]

35 A common belief in the Ancient World, attested, among others, by Pliny (*HN*.10. 82) and Herodotus (3. 109.1). **36** This refers to the story of the competition between Pallas and Arachne over who was the more skilful at weaving (Ov. *Met*. 6, 5–145). According to Ovid, Pallas, enraged by Arachne's ability, tore her tapestry and struck her. Arachne tried to hang herself rather than bear such an insult but Pallas saved her by transforming her into a spider and the noose into her cobweb. **37** Both Peck and Ohl render 'concilium' as 'wisdom'; a

19. Rana
Raucisonans ego sum media vocalis in unda,
sed vox laude sonat †quasi quae† laudet et ipsa;
cumque canam semper, nullus mea carmina laudat.

Frog
I sing with a raucous voice in the middle of the water,
My voice sounds with praise, […] it itself praises.
And though I am always singing, no one praises my song.

20. Testudo
Tarda, gradu lento, specioso praedita dorso,
†docta quidem studio†, sed saevo prodita fato;
viva nihil dixi, quae sic modo mortua canto.[38]

Tortoise
Deliberate, with slow step, gifted with a splendid back,
[…], but betrayed by cruel fate,
Living I said nothing, as soon as I die I sing in this way.

21. Talpa
Caeca mihi facies, atris obscura tenebris;
nox est ipse dies nec sol mihi cernitur ullus.
Malo tegi terra: sic me quoque nemo videbit.

Mole
My face is blind, dark with gloomy shadows;
Day itself is night nor do I see any sun.
I prefer to be covered by earth; so no one will see me either.

22. Formica
Provida sum vitae, duro non pigra labore,
ipsa ferens umeris securae praemia brumae.
Nec gero magna simul, sed congero multa vicissim

Ant
I am provident in my life, not slothful in hard work,
Carrying on my shoulders the cost of a safe winter.
I do not carry much at once, but I amass much bit by bit.

reasonable enough translation, though it makes the line rather perplexing. I am intrigued by Guarducci's view that 'concilium' might be rendered 'society' and refer to a late antique use of the snail as symbolic of a Christian. However, I regard this opinion as rather too speculative to incorporate in my translation. Guarducci, 'La Chiciola Cristiana', 447–56. **38** The tortoise's 'cruel fate' is that Hermes made the first lyre out of his shell (*HH.* 4, 41). It is through the lyre's music that the tortoise sings after death.

23. Musca
Inproba sum, fateor: quid enim gula turpe veretur?
Frigora vitabam, quae nunc aestate revertor.
Sed cito submoveor falso conterrita vento.[39]

Fly
I am wicked, I confess; for what disgusting thing does my maw fear?
I shunned winter, I who return now in summer;
But I am quickly driven away, terrified by a false wind.

24. Curculio
Non bonus agricolis, non frugibus utilis hospes,
non magnus forma, non recto nomine dictus,[40]
non gratus Cereri non parvam sumo saginam.

Weevil
Not good to the farmers, not a useful guest to the crops,
Not great in size, not called by my rightful name,
Not dear to Ceres, nor do I consume a small amount of food.

25. Mus
Parva mihi domus est, sed ianua semper aperta;
exiguo sumptu furtiua vivo sagina.
Quod mihi nomen inest, Romae quoque consul habebat.[41]

Mouse
My house is humble but the door is open.
I live at small expense on stolen food.
The name which belongs to me, a consul at Rome also had.

26. Grus
Littera sum caeli penna perscripta volanti,[42]

39 As noted above the 'false wind' refers to the fanning of fly-flaps used at banquets. See C. Jackson, *Peacock* (London, 2006). Interestingly, Martial includes an epigram on a fly-flap in his *Apophoreta* (14. 67). **40** Presumably this is a reference to the alternative pronunciation of *curculio* as *gurgulio*. However, this has been a point of some debate. Wernsdorf suggests that such a long name as *curculio* is incongruous for so small an animal. (C. Wernsdorf, *Poetae Latini Minores*, II (Altenburg, 1782), 413). Shackleton-Bailey dismisses the problem entirely by suggesting the line should be read 'non *certo* nomine dictus' not 'non *recto* nomine dictus'. **41** In fact, there were three consuls called Mus. Publius Decius Mus (consul in 340 BCE), his son, also Publius Decius Mus (consul in 312 BCE, 308 BCE, 297 BCE, and 295 BCE), and his grandson, another Publius Decius Mus (consul in 279 BCE). They comically contrast with Symphosius' humble mouse since all three are known for their martial bravery. The three consuls are thought to have died heroically at the battles of Vesuvius (340 BCE), Sentinum (295 BCE), and Asculum (279 BCE) respectively. **42** This refers to the way cranes fly in a 'v' for-

bella cruenta gerens volucri discrimine Martis;
nec vereor pugnas, dum non sit longior hostis.[43]

Crane
I am a letter of the sky, written with a flying feather,
Waging bloody war with the swift changing peril of Mars;
Nor do I fear fighting, so long as the enemy is not too large.

27. Cornix
Vivo novem vitas,[44] si me non retia fallunt,
atraque sum semper nullo compulsa dolore,
et non irascens ultro convicia dico.

Crow
I live nine lives, if snares do not entrap me;
And I am always in black, though not compelled by grief;
And though not angry, I scream wanton abuse.

28. Vespertilio
Nox[45] mihi dat nomen primo de tempore noctis.
pluma mihi non est cum sit mihi penna volantis;
et sedeo in tenebris nec me committo diebus.

Bat
Night gives me name from the first period of the night.
I do not have feathers, though I have the wings of a bird,
And I remain in darkness, for I do not entrust myself to the day.

29. Ericius
Plena domus spinis, parvi sed corporis hospes,
incolumi dorso telis confixus acutis;
sustinet armatas sedes habitator inermis.

mation. Martial also uses the image of the flying letter in his epigram on cranes in the *Xenia* (Mart. *Epig.* 13.75) **43** There was a long-standing belief in the enmity between cranes and Pygmies. Pliny writes of the Pygmies that 'quos a gruibus infestari Homerus quoque prodidit' (Plin. (E) *HN.* 7.26) ('this tribe Homer has also recorded as being beset by cranes'). Again, in Book 10, Pliny writes 'Indutias habet genus Pygmaea abscessu gruum, ut diximus, cum iis dimicantium' (Plin. (E) *HN.* 10.30) ('By the departure of the cranes, which, as we have already stated, were in the habit of waging war with them, the nation of the Pygmies now enjoys a respite'). The Homeric passage Pliny mentions is *Iliad* (3.1–7). **44** In the Ancient World, crows were thought to live nine human life spans. The most famous source for the idea is Hesiod (fr. 304.1). Pliny mentions Hesiod's belief, though he dismisses it (*HN.* 7.153). Other authors, such as Aristophanes (*Birds*, 609) and Horace (*Odes* 3.17, 12–13) attribute to the crow different numbers of life spans. **45** Bergamin reads 'vox', but I have adopted 'nox' since it is preferred by most editors, including Shackleton-Bailey. Both grammatically and contextually makes more sense.

Hedgehog
The house is full of spikes, though the guest is of small body,
Pierced with sharp spikes on its unharmed back,
The unarmed inhabitant keeps an armed home.

30. Pediculus
Est nova nostrarum cunctis captura ferarum:
ut si quid capias, hoc tu tibi ferre recuses,
et quod non capias, tecum tamen ipse reportes.[46]

Louse
There is a new kind of hunting of wild beasts for us all
So that if you catch something, you refuse to carry it with you
And whatever you do not catch, you carry back with you.

31. Phoenix
Vita mihi mors est, morior si coepero nasci;
sed prius est fatum leti, quam lucis origo.
Sic solus Manes ipsos mihi dico parentes.

Phoenix
Life is death to me; I die if I begin to be born;
But the doom of death is before the beginning of life.
Thus I alone say that the Manes themselves are my parents.

32. Taurus
Moechus eram regis, sed lignea membra sequebar,[47]
et Cilicum mons sum, sed mons sum nomine solo,[48]
et vehor in caelis et in ipsis ambulo terris.

46 A reworking of a traditional riddle found in *The contest of Homer and Hesiod*, p. 325. It was clearly a popular riddle – versions of it and allusions to it are common; for example, Pliny appears to be playing on this conceit when he says that he takes notebooks when he goes fishing so that even if he catches nothing he will bring something home (*Ep.* 1. 6. 1. and 9. 36. 6). **47** Pasiphae, wife of King Minos, offended Venus and in vengeance the goddess cursed her to lust after a bull. Pasiphae convinced Daedalus to build a wooden cow to conceal her and thereby trick the bull into copulating with her. The ploy worked, and Pasiphae conceived the Minotaur (Ov. *Met.* 9. 735.). **48** Here I have adopted Ohl's text. Bergamin's reading, 'sed non sum nomine solo' ('but not only one name'), seems to defeat the very point of the riddle: that each of these things, the mountain range, the constellation, the mythological Taurus and a bull, is 'Taurus' *in name only*. Bergamin defends her reading by saying that the mountain 'infatti è il monte dai molti nomi' (Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* 126) ('is, in fact, a mountain of many names') and further, that her explanation is valid even without Shackleton-Bailey's suggested textual emendation: '[n]on è necessaria la congettura di Shackleton-Bailey, *non uno sum nomine solo*, per giustificare questa esegesi' (Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* 126) ('Shackleton-Bailey's conjecture, "non uno sum nomine solo", is not necessary to justify this explanation'.)

Bull
I was the cuckolder of a king, but followed wooden limbs.
I am a Cilician mountain, but a mountain in name only.
I ride in the heavens and walk on the earth itself.

33. Lupus
Dentibus insanis ego sum qui vinco bidentes,
sanguineas praedas quaerens victusque cruentos.
Multaque cum rapiam vocem quoque tollere possum.[49]

Wolf
With frenzied teeth I overpower two teeth
Seeking blooded prey and gory nourishment.
And when I pillage, I am even able to steal the voice.

34. Vulpes
Exiguum corpus sed cor mihi corpore maius;
sum versuta dolis, arguto callida sensu;
et fera sum sapiens, sapiens fera si qua vocatur.

Fox
A small body, but my mind is greater my body.
I am well versed in tricks, clever in my clear perception.
And I am a knowing animal, if any wild thing may be called knowing.

35. Capra
Alma Iovis nutrix,[50] longo vestita capillo,
culmina difficili peragrans super ardua gressu,
custodi pecoris tremula respondeo voce.

Goat
Nourishing nurse of Jove, dressed in long threads,
Wandering over the steep heights with difficult steps,
I answer the keeper of the flock with trembling voice.

36. Porcus
Setigerae matris fecunda natus in alvo,
desuper ex alto virides expecto saginas,
nomine numen habens si littera prima periret.[51]

49 This refers to the ancient belief which Pliny outlines as follows: 'creditur luporum visus esse noxius vocemque homini, quem priores contemplentur, adimere ad praesens.' (Plin. (E) *HN*. 8.34) ('it is believed that there is a noxious influence in the eye of a wolf; it is supposed that it will instantly take away the voice of a man, if it is the first to see him.') J. Bostock (ed. and trans.), *The natural history of Pliny* (London, 1855), pp 282–3. **50** Jupiter is said to have been raised by the goat, Amalthea (Hyg. *Poet. Astr.* 2. 13). **51** ie. *orcus*, a god of the under-

Pig
I was born from the fertile womb of a bristly mother.
I wait for fresh food from high above.
I have divinity in my name, if the first letter disappears.

37. Mula
Dissimilis patri, matri diversa figura,
confusi generis, generi non apta propago;
ex aliis nascor, nec quisquam nascitur ex me.

Mule
Unlike my father, a different shape to my mother.
Of mingled blood, a breed not fit to breed;
I am born of others and none are born of me.

38. Tigris
A fluvio dicor, fluvius vel dicitur ex me.
Iunctaque sum vento, quae sum velocior ipso;
et mihi dat ventus natos nec quaero maritum.[52]

Tiger
I am called after a river, or a river is called after me.
I am yoked to the wind, but am faster than it;
The wind gives me children and I do not seek a husband.

39. Centaurus[53]
Quattuor insignis pedibus manibusque duabus,
dissimilis mihi sum, quia sum non unus et unus;
et vehor et gradior, quia me duo corpora portant.

Centaur
Distinguished by four feet and two hands,
I am unlike myself because I am not one and yet I am one.
I both ride and walk, because my two bodies carry me.

world. **52** In the Ancient World it was believed that certain animals conceived by the wind. Aristotle was among those who subscribed to the idea. However, interestingly, the only extant references to this belief in relation to tigers belongs to late antiquity (See Opp. *Cyn.* 1. 320, 3. 350 ff.). References are strikingly absent from earlier sources, like Aristotle, where we might reasonably expect to find it. This precious, if inconclusive, clue supports the now accepted dating of Symphosius as roughly fifth century. **53** There are several different accounts of the origin of the centaurs. Chiron, perhaps the most famous centaur and the teacher of culture heroes such as Achilleus and Theseus, is the son of Saturn (disguised as a horse) and the nymph Philyra (*Bibl.* 1.2.4). However, his lineage is exceptional. Most centaurs are descended from Ixion and Nephele (an *eidolon* of Hera devised by Zeus), or, in alternative tradition, from Centaurus and the Magnesian mares. It is not clear whether Symphosius has a specific tradi-

40. Papaver
Grande mihi caput est, intus sunt membra minuta.
Pes unus solus, sed pes longissimus unus.
Et me somnus amat, proprio nec dormio somno.

Poppy
My head is large, within it are small pieces.
One foot only but that a one very long foot.
And sleep loves me, though I do not sleep my own sleep.

41. Malva
Anseris esse pedes similes mihi, nolo negare;
nec duo sunt tantum, sed plures ordine cernis;
et tamen hos ipsos omnes ego porto supinos.

Mallow
I do not wish to deny that my feet are like those of a gander,
Though are there not only two; instead you see many in a row
And yet I carry them all upside down.

42. Beta
Tota vocor Graece, sed non sum tota Latine;[54]
†ante tamen mediam cauponis scripta tabernam†
In terra nascor, lymphia lavor, unguor olivo.

Beetroot
Whole I am called in Greece, but I am not whole in Latin.
[…]
I am born in the earth, washed with water, anointed with olive oil.

43. Cucurbita
Pendeo dum nascor; rursus dum pendo cresco;
pendens commoveor ventis et nutrior undis.
Pendula si non sim, non sum iam iamque futura.

Gourd
I hang while I am born; again, while I hang, I grow;
Hanging, I sway in the wind and am nourished by moisture;
If I am not hanging, I shall very soon I shall cease to exist.

tion in mind when composing this riddle. **54** This puns on the Latin *beta* (the second letter of the Greek alphabet) and beetroot. Moreover, according to Renhan, Symphosius' use of *tota* should make us think of τω τά. He reads the line 'My name is whole (with TA) in Greek, but not whole (with TA) in Latin'. R. Rehnan, 'Symphosius 41.1: A literal interpretation', *The Classical Quarterly*, ns, 31 (1981), 471.

44. Cepa
Mordeo mordentes, ultro non mordeo quemquam.
Sed sunt mordentem multi mordere parati:
nemo timet morsum, dentes quia non habet ullos.

Onion
I bite the biters, though I do not willingly bite anyone.
There are many prepared to bite me, though I bite:
No one fears my bite, for it has no teeth.

45. Rosa
Purpura sum terrae, pulchro perfusa rubore,
saeptaque, ne violer, telis defendor acutis.
O felix, longo si possim vivere fato!

Rose
I am the purple of the earth, imbued with beautiful blush.
Encircled, so as not to be violated, I am defended by sharp spears;
O blessed, if I were able to live for a long time!

46. Viola
Magna quidem non sum, sed inest mihi maxima virtus;
spiritus est magnus, quamvis sim corpore parvo.
Nec mihi germen habet noxam nec culpa ruborem.

Violet
Certainly I am not big, but I have the greatest virtue in me;
My essence is great, though my body is humble.
Nor does my sprig bring injury nor does any guilt bring a blush.

47. Tus
Dulcis odor nemoris, flamma fumoque fatigor;
et placet hoc superis, medios quod mittor in ignes.
Nec mihi poena datur, sed habetur gratia danti.[55]

Frankincense
Smell of the sweet forest, I am wearied by flame and smoke
And it is pleasing to the gods that I am cast in the middle of the fire,
Nor is this a punishment for me, but the giver receives favour.

55 In his letter to Trajan probably written between 111 and 113 CE, Pliny the Younger cites the ritual use of incense as a means of identifying Christians because, he writes, it is not possible to force true Christians to perform these acts (Plin. (Y) *Ep.* 10.96). Ante-Nicene texts are uniform in their condemnation of the practice, and although frankincense came into honorific use among Christians in the fourth century, the idea that it is pleasing to the *superi* and that it ensures divine favour is pagan. Thus, in response to Glorie's assertion that 'nihil in aenigmatibus christianum eum fuisse indicat'. Glorie, *Variae Collectiones Aenigmatum*, p. 149 ('[n]othing in the riddles indicates him [Symphosius] to be a Christian'), we might add that *Tus* indicates that he was not.

48. Murra[56]
De lacrimis et pro lacrimis mea coepit origo;
ex oculis fluxi sed nunc ex arbore nascor,[57]
laetus honor frondis, tristis sed imago doloris.

Myrrh
My birth began from tears and for tears.
I have flowed from eyes, but now I spring from a tree;
The happy glory of green boughs, but the sad image of sorrow.

49. Ebur
Dens ego sum magnus populis cognatus Eois.
Nunc ego per partes in corpora multa recessi;
nec remanent vires, sed formae gratia mansit.

Ivory
I am a great tusk, kin of the people of the East
And now I have left in pieces passed to many bodies;
No power remains, but the grace of my beauty endures.

50. Fenum
Herba fui quondam, viridi de gramine terrae;
sed chalybis duro mollis praecisa metallo
mole premor propria, tecto conclusa sub alto.

Hay
Once I was a plant from the earth's greenery,
But cut down while soft by the steel's hard blade,
I am crushed by my own weight, packed beneath a lofty roof.

51. Mola
Ambo sumus lapides, una sumus, ambo iacemus.
Quam piger est unus, tam[58] non est et piger alter:
hic manet immotus, non desinit ille moveri.

Millstone
We are both stones, we are one, but we both lie together;
Just as one is lazy, so the other is not.
This one stays immobile, that one does not stop moving.

56 The more usual Latin word for *myrrh* is *myrrha*. Symphosius' *murra* is a rare form, closer to the Greek μύρρα. **57** This refers to the myth of Myrrha who fell in love with her father, Cinyras, and by him conceived Adonis. In her flight from her father when he finds she has deceived him, she is transformed into a myrrh tree (Ov. *Met*. 10, 298–502). **58** Here I have accepted Shackleton-Bailey's reading of *tam* over Bergamin's *tantum*. It seems to make more sense contextually and 'quam…tam' is a more usual construction.

52. Farina
Inter saxa fui quae me contrita premebant;
vix tamen effugi totis collisa medullis.
Et nunc forma mihi minor est, sed copia maior.

Flour
I was between stones which pressed together and crushed me;
Nevertheless, with difficultly I escaped, all my inner parts crushed
And now my form is smaller, but its quantity greater.

53. Vitis
Nolo toro iungi, quamvis placet esse maritam.[59]
Nolo virum thalamo: per me mea nata propago est.
Nolo sepulcra pati: scio me submergere terrae.

Vine
I do not wish to be joined in a bed, although I am glad to be married.
I do not wish a man in my chamber; through me are my offspring born.
I do not wish to suffer the grave; I know how to plunge under the earth.

54. Hamus
Exiguum munus flexu mucronis adunci
fallaces escas medio circumfero fluctu.
Blandior ut noceam; morti praemitto saginam.

Hook
A meagre gift on the curve of a hooked point,
I offer my deceptive bait in the middle of the stream;
I entice in order to harm; I preface death with food.

55. Acula
Longa sed exilis, tenui producta metallo,
mollia duco levi comitantia vincula ferro;
et faciem laesis et nexum reddo solutis.

Needle
Long but thin, drawn from fine metal,
With slender iron I lead soft attendant bonds;
And I restore form to the torn, and connection to what is undone.

59 Roman farmers used trees (especially elms) as stakes for growing vines. See Cato. *Agr. Orig* 32, Plin. (E) *HN.* 16.1. Accordingly, the vine and the elm became a common image of marriage in Roman poetry. (eg. Catull. *Carm.* 62, Ov. *Met.* 14.661–8.) However, the vine as an image of the wife predates these Augustinian Age poets. It may even be found in the Old Testament. (Ps 128:3).

56. Caliga
Maior eram longe quondam, dum vita manebat;
at nunc exanimis, lacerata, ligata, revulsa,
dedita sum terrae, tumulo sed condita non sum.

Boot
Once I was far bigger, when life remained,
But now lifeless, cut, tied, stripped
I am consigned to the earth, but not buried in the tomb.

57. Clavus caligaris
In caput ingredior, quia de pede pendeo solo.
Vertice tango solum, capitis vestigia signo;
sed multi comites casum patiuntur eundem.

Hob-Nail
I walk on my head, because I hang from a foot alone;
I touch the ground with my head, I mark with head-prints,
But many comrades suffer the same fate.

58. Capillus
Findere me nulli possunt, praecidere multi.
Sed sum versicolor, albus quandoque futurus;
malo manere niger: minus ultima fata verebor.

Hair
No one is able to split me, many are able to cut me;
I am colour-shifting, at some time I will be white:
I prefer to stay black, the less I shall fear my final fate.

59. Pila
Non sum cincta comis et non sum compta capillis:
intus enim crines mihi sunt quos non videt ullus;
meque manus mittunt manibusque remittor in auras.

Ball
I am not framed with locks nor am I adorned with hair,
For I have hair within that no one sees;
And hands send me and by hands I am sent back through the air.

60. Serra
Dentibus innumeris sum toto corpore plena.
Frondicomam subolem morsu depascor acuto;
mando tamen frustra, quia respuo praemia dentis.

Saw
I am full with innumerable teeth over my whole body.
I graze on leafy shoots with sharp teeth;
Never the less I chew in vain, because I spit out the reward of my tooth.

61. Ancora
Mucro mihi geminus ferro coniungitur uno;
cum vento luctor, cum gurgite pugno profundo.
Scrutor aquas medias, ipsas quoque mordeo terras.

Anchor
My twin spikes are joined by a single iron;
I wrestle with the wind, I fight with the deep water;
I search the middle of the waters, I bite the earth itself.

62. Pons
Stat nemus in lymphis, stat in alto gurgite silva,
et manet in mediis undis inmobile robur.
Terra tamen mittit quod terrae munera praestat.

Bridge
A forest stands in the water; a wood stands in the deep raging flood,
And the immovable oak remains in the middle of the water,
Yet the earth sends what fulfils the duty of the earth.

63. Spongia
Ipsa gravis non sum, sed aquae mihi pondus inhaeret;
viscera tota tument patulis diffusa cavernis:
intus lympha latet, sed non se sponte profundit.

Sponge
I am not heavy in myself, but a weight of water clings to me;
All my innards swell, spreading out in gaping caverns;
Water lies hidden within, but does not pour out of its own accord.

64. Tridens
Tres mihi sunt dentes, unus quos continet ordo;
unus praeterea dens est solus in imo;
meque tenet numen, ventus timet, aequora curant.

Trident
I have three teeth, held by one row;
In addition there is one tooth, alone at the bottom.
A divinity holds me, the wind fears me, the seas attend me.

65. Sagitta
Saepta gravi ferro, levibus circumdata pinnis,
aera per medium volucri contendo meatu.
Missaque discedens nullo mittente revertor.

Arrow
Girt with heavy iron, surrounded with light feathers,
I fly through the middle of the air, in swift flight,
And when sent, I return in departing, though no one sends me back.

66. Flagellum
De pecudis dorso pecudes ego terreo cunctas,
obsequio cogens moderati lege doloris.
Nec volo contemni, sed contra nolo nocere.

Whip
I, who come from the animal's back, terrify all animals,
forcing obedience by a regime of moderate suffering;
I do not wish to be despized, and neither do I wish to hurt.

67. Lanterna
Cornibus apta cavis, tereti perlucida gyro,
lumen habens intus, divini sideris instar,
noctibus in mediis faciem non perdo dierum.

Lantern
Fitted with hollow horn transparent in a smooth circle,
Having light within, like a divine star.
In the middle of the night, I do not lose the appearance of day.

68. Specular
Perspicior penitus nec luminis arceo visus,
transmittens oculos intra mea membra meantes;
nec me transit hiems, sed sol tamen emicat in me.

Window-Pane
I am looked deep into and I do not prevent light being seen,
Sending wandering eyes inside my limbs
Nor does the cold pass through me yet the sun shines within me.

69. Speculum
Nulla mihi certa est, nulla est peregrina figura.
Fulgor inest intus radianti luce coruscus,
qui nihil ostendit nisi si quid viderit ante.

Mirror
For me no shape is fixed, no shape is foreign.
Radiance is within me, shining with flashing light,
Which shows nothing except if it has seen something before.

70. Clepsydra
Lex bona dicendi, lex sum quoque dura tacendi,
ius avidae linguae, finis sine fine loquendi,
ipsa fluens, dum verba fluunt, ut lingua quiescat.[60]

Water Clock
A good control of speech, I am likewise a harsh control of silence.
Law to a greedy tongue, the end of endless talking.
Flowing myself, while words flow, so the tongue may come to rest.

71. Puteus
Mersa procul terris in cespite lympha profundo
non nisi perfossis possum procedere rimis,
et trahor ad superos alieno ducta labore.

Well
Water sunk far in the ground in the deep earth,
I cannot proceed unless a crevice has been dug,
And I am dragged to those above, drawn by foreign labour.

72. Tubus
Truncum terra tegit, latitant in stipite lymphae.[61]
Alveus est modicus, qui ripas non habet ullas.
In ligno vehitur medio quod ligna vehebat.

Pipe
Earth covers a tree-trunk, waters hide in a log;
It is a moderate channel which does not have any banks;
In the middle of wood is carried what used to carry wood.

73. Follis
Non ego continuo morior, dum spiritus exit:
nam redit adsidue, quamvis et saepe recedit;
et mihi nunc magna est animae, nunc nulla facultas.

60 Borrowing from the ancient Athenian practice, water clocks were used in Roman law courts from the Republican period on to limit the length of speeches. **61** In addition to lead pipes, wooden water pipes were also used in the Roman Empire, especially in Britain and Northern Europe. See R. Ulrich, *Roman woodworking* (New Haven, 2007), p. 88. Pliny discusses the merits of different kinds of wood for this purpose in *Historia Naturalis* (16.224).

Bellows
I do not die immediately while my breath leaves
For it continuously returns, although it often withdraws;
Now my ability to breathe is great, and now I have none.

74. Lapis
Deucalion ego sum, crudeli sospes ab unda,
affinis terrae sed longe durior illa.[62]
Littera decedat: volucris tum nomen habebo.[63]

Stone
I am Deucalion, safe from the cruel flood,
Akin to the earth but much harder than it.
Let a letter leave: I shall have the name of a flying thing.

75. Calx
Evasi flammas, ignis tormenta profugi.
Ipsa medella meo pugnat contraria fato:
†ardeo de† lymphis, gelidis incendor ab undis.

Lime
I have evaded the flames, I have escaped the torments of fire,
The very remedy fights against my fate.
[…] water; I am kindled by the icy waves.

76. Silex
Semper inest intus, sed raro cernitur, ignis;
intus enim latitat, sed solos prodit ad ictus.
Nec lignis ut vivat eget, nec ut occidat undis.

Flint
Fire is always within it, but rarely seen;
Indeed it hides itself within, it appears for blows alone;
It needs neither wood to live, nor water to die.

62 Deucalion and Pyrrah were the sole survivors of Jupiter's world-obliterating flood. When the waters subside, they appeal to Themis who tells them 'Discedite templo/ et velate caput cinctasque resolvite vestes/ ossaque post tergum magnae iactate parentis.' (Ov. *Met.* 1.381–3) ('Leave the temple, and with veiled heads and loosened robes throw behind you as you go the bones of your great mother.') They obey, rightly interpreting the bones of the mother to be stones. Those thrown by Deucalion become men and those by Pyrrah, women. Ovid comments that this is the reason for the resilience of humans (*Met.* 1.414–5) and it was believed that the Greek word λαός, 'person' derives from λᾶας 'a stone', as a reflection of our origins. (*Bibl.* 1.7.2) **63** i.e, *apis*, 'bee'.

77. Rotae
Quattuor aequales currunt ex arte sorores;
sic quasi certantes, cum sit labor omnibus unus,
et properant pariter nec se contingere possunt.

Wheels
Four identical sisters run by means of science
As though vying, although a single task is for all,
And they hurry together though they are not able to touch each other.

78. Scalae
Nos sumus ad caelum quae scandimus alta petentes,
concordi fabrica quas unus continet ordo,
ut simul haerentes pronos comitamur[64] ad auras.

Ladder Rungs[65]
We are those who climb towards heaven, seeking the heights,
With a harmonious construction, one row contains us
So that we accompany to the breezes those who lean forward and cling to us.

79. Scopa
Mundi magna parens, laqueo conexa tenaci,
iuncta solo plano, manibus compressa duabus
ducor ubique sequens et me quoque cuncta sequuntur.

Broom
Great mother of cleanliness, bound by a firm noose,
Attached to the flat ground and held by two hands
Following, I am led everywhere and everything together follows me.

80. Tintinnabulum
Aere rigens curvo patulum componor in orbem;
mobilis est intus linguae crepitantis imago.
Non resono positus, †motus quoque† saepe resulto!

Bell
Rigid with curved bronze, I am put together to form a spreading globe;
The image of an agile, clattering tongue is within;
Placed down I do not resonate, […] I often resound.

64 Here I have adopted Shackleton-Bailey's reading over Bergamin's rather perplexing 'per nos comitentur'. **65** 'Ladder', *scalae*, is plural in Latin, rather like the English *stairs*, and for the same reason: the ladder is made up of a series of rungs, just as stairs are made up of a series of steps. Thus, the *Scalae* speak about themselves in the plural and the riddle turns on them being, in a sense, at once singular and plural. Ohl resolves the issue by translating *scalae* as 'stairs' but this renders the last line of the riddle rather mystifying. 'Ladder Rungs' seems to me to most accurately convey Symphosius' meaning.

81. Lagena
Mater erat Tellus, genitor fuit ipse Prometheus;[66]
auriculaeque[67] regunt redimitae ventre cavato.
Dum cecidi, subito mater mea me laniavit.

Wine Jar
My mother was Tellus, my progenitor has been Prometheus himself;
And my ears guide me, encircled by my hollow belly,
When I fell, my mother suddenly tore me to pieces.

82. Conditum[68]
Tres olim fuimus qui nomine iungimur uno;
ex tribus est unus, et tres miscentur in uno;
quisque bonus per se; melior qui continet omnes.

Spiced Wine
Once we were three who are joined by one name.
Out of three comes one, and three are mixed in one;
Each good in itself: better the one who has all.

83. Vinum in acetum conversum
Sublatum nihil est, nihil est extrinsecus auctum:
nec tamen inveni quidquid prius ipse reliqui.
quod fuerat non est; coepit quod non erat esse.[69]

Wine Changed to Vinegar
Nothing is taken away, nothing is added from outside
Yet I have not found what I left earlier.
It is not what it has been; it begins to be what it was not.

66 This is heavily reminiscent in both its conceit and its entitled solution of Thomas Wyatt's 'Description of a gun': 'Vulcan begat me, Minerva me taught/ Nature my mother, craft nourish'd me year by year;/ Three bodies are my food, my strength is in nought;/ Anger, wrath, waste, and noise are my children dear,/ Guess, friend, what I am and how I am wrought,/ Monster of sea, or of land, or of elsewhere;/ Know me, and use me, and I may thee defend,/ And if I be thine enemy, I may thy life end.' *The poetical works of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, ed. G. Fillan (Dublin, 1858), p. 155. **67** Symphosius' use of the later *auricula* rather than *auris* is one of the few ways in which he departs from classical Latin. The diminutive, *auricula*, only became standard in late antiquity. **68** The late antiquity cookery book *De Re Coquinaria* (dating from the fourth or fifth century CE) opens with a recipe for *conditum paradoxum*. This recipe, which calls for honey, pepper, mastich, laurel, saffron and roasted date stones is very similar to one given by Pliny (*HN* 14.108): in fact Book 14 of *Historia Natralis* is devoted to discussion of various kinds of spiced or mixed wines. The *conditum* referred to by Symphosius is much simpler, probably consisting of wine, pepper and honey: cf. Aug. *De Tri.* 9, 7, that refers to a drink consisting of wine, water and honey. **69** I have followed Shackleton-Bailey in reversing lines 2 and 3 because the adversative 'tamen' does not otherwise make sense.

84. Malum

Nomen ovis[70] Graece, contentio magna dearum,[71]
fraus iuvenis pulchri,[72] multarum cura sororum.[73]
Hoc volo, ne breviter mihi syllaba prima legatur.[74]

Apple

The name for sheep in Greece, the great strife among the goddesses,
The trick of a handsome youth, the care of many sisters.
I do not want my first syllable to be read short.

85. Perna

Nobile duco genus magni de gente Catonis.
Vna mihi soror est, plures licet esse putentur.
De fumo facies, sapientia de mare nata est.

Ham

I come from a noble lineage, from the gens of Cato.[75]
I have one sister, though more may be thought to exist;
My complexion is born from smoke, my taste from the sea.

86. Malleus

Non ego de toto mihi corpore vindico vires,
sed capitis pugna nulli certare recuso:
grande mihi caput est, totum quoque pondus in illo.

Hammer

I do not claim strength from my whole body,
But in a battle of heads, there is no one with whom I refuse to fight:
My head is large, my whole weight is in it.

70 This clue is somewhat devious since the most obvious Greek word for 'sheep' is ὄις, cognate of *ouis*, when in fact Symphosius is referring to another word for sheep, μῆλον. However, the bilingual pun was well known, it was remarked upon by both Varro (*Rust.* 2.1.6) and Servius (*Auct.* Aen. 4.484). **71** At the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Eris (Strife), who had not been invited, threw into the throng a golden apple inscribed 'καλλίστῃ', 'for the fairest'. Hera, Athena and Aphrodite all claimed it, causing the 'contentio' to which Symphosius refers. **72** The identity of the handsome youth is disputed. Baehrens suggests that it is Acontius who tricks Cydippe into marriage with an apple inscribed with a promise to marry him. When Cydippe picks up the apple and reads the writing out loud, she inadvertently plights her troth to him (Ov. *Her.* 20). Ohl and Shackleton-Bailey prefer to indentify the youth as Hippomenes who wins a race by distracting his opponent, Atalanta, with golden apples (Ov. *Met.* 10.569–707). Bergamin favours Paris. Certainly, it is difficult not to think of Paris since he is defined by his beauty and he figures in the story alluded to in the previous line, in that he judges the beauty of the three goddesses. However, if the reference is to Paris, 'fraus' is rather obscure. **73** i.e., the Hesperides, nymphs who tend the orchard that hold the immortality-giving golden apples. **74** If the first syllable were read as short then *m lum* 'apple' would become *malum* 'evil'. Well might the *malum* worry: in each of the myths mentioned the apple is the cause of some discord, treachery, or sorrow. **75** This is a punning reference to Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis (95–46 BCE).

87. Pistillus
Contero cuncta simul virtutis robore magno.
Vna mihi cervix, capitum sed forma duorum:
pro pedibus caput est, nam cetera corporis absunt.

Pestle
I crush all together with the great vigour of my strength;
I have one neck, but my form is double-headed:
Instead of feet, there is a head, but the rest my body is missing.

88. Strigilis aenea
Robea curva capax, alienis humida guttis,
luminibus falsis auri mentita colorem,
dedita sudori, modico subcumbo labori.

Bronze Strigil
Red, curved, large, damp with foreign drops,
Falsifying the colour of gold with deceitful flashes.
Devoted to sweat, I succumb to a little toil.

89. Balneum
Per totas aedes innoxius introit ignis;
est calor in medio magnus quem nemo veretur.
Non est nuda domus, sed nudus convenit hospes.

Bath-house
A harmless fire goes through the whole building.
There is a great heat in the middle, which no one fears.
The house is not bare, but a bare guest is at home there.

90. Tessera
Dedita sum semper voto,[76] non certa futuri;
iactor in ancipites varia vertigine casus.
Non ego maesta malis, non rebus laeta secundis.

Dice
I am always associated with a vow, uncertain of the future,
I am thrown with different spinning in the face of uncertain chances:
I do not mourn in bad luck, nor rejoice in good.

91. Pecunia
Terra fui primo, latebris abscondita terrae;
nunc aliud pretium flammae nomenque dederunt,
nec iam terra vocor, licet ex me terra paretur.

76 It was Roman practice to say prayers over the dice upon which were written promises of votive offerings in exchange for luck.

Money
At first I was earth, hidden in the secret places of the earth;
Now the flames have given me another value and name.
I am no longer called earth, but earth is obtained with me.

92. Mulier quae geminos pariebat
Plus ego sustinui quam corpus debuit unum.
Tres animas habui, quas omnes intus habebam:
discessere duae, sed tertia paene peregit.[77]

Woman in Labour with Twins
I have sustained more than one body should
I had three souls, all of which I was holding within
Two left, and the third nearly perished.

93. Miles podagricus
Bellipotens olim, saevis metuendus in armis;
quinque pedes habui, quod numquam nemo negavit.[78]
Nunc mihi vix duo sunt; inopem me copia fecit.[79]

Gouty Soldier
Once valiant in war, to be feared among savage weapons,
I had five feet, which none ever denied.
Now I have barely two; plenty has made me poor.

94. Luscus alium vendens[80]
Cernere iam fas est quod vix tibi credere fas est:

77 I have accepted Shackleton-Bailey's reading of *peregit* over Bergamin's *secuta est*. This is in part, because, with the exception of Bergamin, there is a universal consensus around *peregit* and in part, because it seems to make more sense. **78** Symphosius' meaning is obscure here and is the subject of scholarly controversy. Bergamin suggests that the 'five feet' refers to is the minimum height requirement for the Roman army (Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* 194) but, though commonly accepted, is problematic because the height requirement for the Roman army was never five feet. Some editors, including Glorie, amend the text so that it specifies six feet. Shackleton-Bailey's elaborate solution requires considerable emendation of the line in order to support his view that the correct reading is to 'twice five feet' and refers to a *decempeda*. I would like to propose a that the five feet are the soldier's own two feet in addition to the three feet of frontage assigned to each soldier in close formation. (See Veg. *Mil*. 3.14 and Polyb. 18.28). This has the advantage, among others, of explaining why the soldier no longer has the five feet, a point not addressed by Bergamin's solution. For a full discussion, see above 40–3). **79** The phrase 'inopem me copia fecit' is a direct quotation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*Met*. 3.466). It is apt, not only for its immediate context, but also for the wider Saturnalian context of the *Aenigmata* since it puns on the name of Saturn's wife, Ops. The pun is concerned with plenty and privation and so is a fitting pun, not only for a misrule festival, but also for Saturn's annual feast. **80** This is perhaps the strangest riddle *topos* in all the collection. Stranger still, it proved popular – a reworking may be found in the Exeter

unus inest oculus, capitum sed milia multa.
Qui quod habet vendit, quod non habet unde parabit?

One-Eyed Garlic Seller
Now you may see what you may hardly believe:
There is one eye, but many thousands of heads.
He who sells what he has, whence will he buy what he does not?

95. Funambulus
Inter lucifluum caelum terrasque iacentes,
aera per medium docta meat arte viator.
Semita sed brevis est, pedibus non sufficit ipsis.

Tightrope Walker
Between light-flowing heaven and the low lying earth,
A traveller passes through the air by expert skill.
But the path is narrow; it is not sufficient for his feet themselves.

[96. De VIII tollas VII et remanet VI[81]
Nunc mihi iam credas fieri quod posse negatur:
octo tenes manibus, sed me monstrante magistro
sublatis septem reliqui tibi sex remanebunt.

Concerning Eight, Take Seven and Six Remain
Now you can believe me that what is said to be impossible can happen;
You hold eight in your hands, but under my demonstration as a teacher,
when seven are removed you will have six remaining.]

Book (Riddle 86). Bergamin links it to a tradition of riddling in which the limbs of several creatures are added together and described as though they belong to a single creature; she cites the riddle of Óðinn and Sleipnir in the *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* as one such example. More pertinently, we might argue that the Sphinx's riddle (a riddle Symphosius must have known) is another since the description of a human as walking on three legs relies on counting a walking stick as the third. Bergamin speculates that *Luscus alium uendens* might be 'la rielaborazione di un enigma preesistente' (Bergamin, *Aenigmata Symphosii,* 194) ('the reworking of a pre-existing riddle'), though no source can be found for it. **81** This riddle is almost certainly an interpolation and is the only one with a lemma which is not self-explanatory. It is most usually solved by modern scholars as a description of Roman finger notation: 'If a person with his two last fingers lowered for 8 raises the little finger, the one which by itself indicates 7, he now has his hand in the proper position for 6.' J.H. Turner, 'Roman elementary mathematics: the Operations', *The Classical Journal,* 47 (1951), 63–74 and 106–8, at p. 106. This solution was first proposed by Gesner and Kraus in 1720, and although others have been proposed in the meantime, this is in many ways the least problematic. Ohl also argues that the riddle refers to a kind of finger mathematics, though his solution is slightly different in the details: 'hold up one hand, spreading thumb and forefinger so as to form a V; these plus the three remaining digits can be read as VIII. Depress the V and two digits; one is left, which, plus the five on the other hand, makes six.' Ohl, *Enigmas*, p. 131.

97. Umbra
Insidias nullas vereor de fraude latenti;
nam deus attribuit nobis haec munera formae,
quod me nemo movet, nisi qui prius ipse movetur.

Shadow
I fear no tricks from hidden treachery,
For god has given me this gift of form;
No one moves me, except the person who first moves himself.

98. Echo
Virgo modesta nimis legem bene servo pudoris;
ore procax non sum, nec sum temeraria linguae;
ultro nolo loqui, sed do responsa loquenti.[82]

Echo
An extremely shy girl, I observe well the law of decency.
I am not impudent of mouth, nor rash of tongue;
I do not wish to speak on my own initiative, but give answers to a person who speaks.

99. Somnus
Sponte mea veniens, varias ostendo figuras.
Fingo metus vanos nullo discrimine veri,
sed me nemo videt, nisi qui sua lumina clavdit.

Sleep
Coming of my own will, I show various images.
I devise false fears without any distinction of the truth
But no one sees me who does not close his own eyes.

100. Monumentum
Nomen habens hominis post ultima fata relinquor.
Nomen inane manet, sed dulcis vita profugit.
Vita tamen superest morti post tempora vitae.

Tombstone
I remain, preserving the name of a man after death.
The hollow name stays, but sweet life has fled
Nevertheless, life survives death after the time of life.

82 Echo was a nymph who fell in love with Narcissus but when she is rejected by him, fades in grief to become an insubstantial echo. Ovid recounts the story (*Met.* 3.339–510). In his version Echo loses corporeal form because of her unrequited love, but loses the ability to speak of her own volition because of Juno's curse (*Met.* 3.366–7). Juno curses the nymph because she waylaid the goddess with conversation and thus prevented her from catching Jove in one of his many adulterous liaisons.

APPENDIX B

Taxonomies in Symphosius' *Symphosii Scholastici Aenigmata*

Riddles	Lemma		Theme	Subject Group	
100 Monumentum	-um			Writing	Culture artefacts
1 Graphium					
2 Harundo					
3 Anulus cum gemma	-a				
4 Clavis	-is			Enclosure	
5 Catena	-a				
6 Tegula	-la				
7 Fumus					Meteorological phenomena
8 Nebula	-la				
9 Pluvia				Water	
10 Glacies					
11 Nix					
12 Flumen et Piscis	-is		Dependence		
13 Navis					
14 Pullus in ovo		-o			Non-mammalian and/or pest animals
15 Vipera		-a	Destructive		
16 Tinea	-ea		Destructive nourishment		
17 Aranea					
18 Coclea			Self-sufficency		
19 Rana					
20 Testudo		-o			
21 Talpa		-a			
22 Formica	-ca				
23 Musca			Scavenging pests		
24 Curculio	-lio				
25 Mus	-us				
26 Grus			Flying creatures		
27 Cornix	-nix				
28 Vespertilio	-lio				

Riddles	Lemma		Theme	Subject Group	
29 Ericius	-us				
30 Pediculus			Ancient Greek narratives		
31 Phoenix	-nix			Hybrid	Mythic creature
32 Taurus	-es/us				Wild and domesticated animals
33 Lupus			Preditor		
34 Vulpes					
35 Capra			Prey	Divinity	
36 Porcus					
37 Mula				Parentage	
38 Tigris	-ris/ rus				
39 Centaurus					Mythic creature
40 Papaver	-ver/ va				Plants
41 Malva					
42 Beta	-ta				
43 Cucurbita					
44 Cepa	-a				
45 Rosa				Flowers	
46 Viola					
47 Tus				Incense	
48 Murra					
49 Ebur					
50 Fenum			Grain cultivation	Cultivated	
51 Mola					
52 Farina				Nature	
53 Vitis					
54 Hamus				Sharp metal implements	Man-made objects
55 Acula					
56 Caliga	caliga-				
57 Clavus caligaris					
58 Capillus	-pil-		Hair		
59 Pila					
60 Serra	-ra			Subdued nature	
61 Ancora			Water		
62 Pons	-pon-				
63 Spongia					
64 Tridens					
65 Sagitta					
66 Flagellum					
67 Lanterna				Containing the ineffable	
68 Specular	specul-				
69 Speculum					

Riddles	Lemma		Theme	Subject Group	
70 Clepsydra			Juxtaposition of two elements		
71 Puteus	-us				
72 Tubus					
73 Follis	-is				
74 Lapis					Stone
75 Calx	-x				
76 Silex					
77 Rotae	-ae				Everyday technology
78 Scalae		sc-			
79 Scopa					
80 Tintinnabulum					
81 Lagena				Wine	
82 Conditum	-um				Foodstuffs
83 Vinum in Acetum Conversum					
84 Malum		mal-			
85 Perna					
86 Malleus	-lleus/ llus/ lis	mal-		Implements	
87 Pistillus					Leisure and pleasure
88 Strigilis Aenea					
89 Balneum					
90 Tessera					
91 Pecunia					
92 Mulier quae Geminos Pariebat			In extremity		Humans
93 Miles Podagricus	-us				
94 Luscus Alium Vendens					
95 Funambulus	-us				
96 De VIII Tollas VII et Remanet VI					
97 Umbra			Death/ underworld		Simulacra
98 Echo					
99 Somnus					
100 Monumentum	-um			Writing	Culture artefacts
1 Graphium					

APPENDIX C

From the Old Hebrew to King James: translating 'riddle'

The following table is a survey of the use and translation of the word 'riddle' in various versions of the Bible significant to the history of the Symphosian riddle. These fall into two categories, ancient versions (the Septuagint and Jerome's Vulgate) and the English versions (the various, partial Anglo-Saxon Bible translations, Wycliffite Bible, and King James Version). In each passage the word which in each language most unambiguously means 'riddle', the Greek **αἴνιγμα**, the Latin *enigma*, the Old English *rædel* or *rædelse*, Middle English *ridel* or *resoun* and of course the English *riddle* have been marked in bold and underlined. Those synonyms used instead of *riddle* are underlined but unbolded. Although neither Symphosius nor this thesis engage with the Jewish tradition, I have included the Hebrew root words as they are given in *Strong's Concordance* for ease of reference. This is an important point of comparison since, of the fifteen occasions upon which one or other of the Bible texts refer to riddles or riddling, fourteen belong to the Old Testament. The single instance in the New Testament is in 1 Corinthians and refers to a passage in the Old Testament (Num 12:8). Interestingly, there is not a single example in which a term is uniformly translated as *riddle*, which, in itself suggests something of the complexity of the topic. The table does not include the only overt riddle contest in the Bible, Samson's riddle 'Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness' (Judg 14:14). In the KJV, the word 'riddle' is used eight times throughout the passage (making it unsuitable for inclusion within the table).

	Hebrew root words	**Septuagint/ Greek New Testament**	**Vulgate**	**Old English translations**	**Wycliffe's Bible**	**King James Version (16**	**Douay-Rheims (1582)**
Num 12:8	**Chiydah**. n. A riddle, parable, perplexing saying or question.	ν εἴδει καὶ οὐ δι' **αἰνιγμάτων**	ei et palam non per **enigmata** et figuras Dominum videt quare	*OE Heptateuch*: Ic sprece to him muðe to muðe & openlice, næs ðurh **rædelsas** ne ðurh †hiwwinge†	he seeth God opynli, and not bi derke spechis and figuris	With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches	For mouth to mouth I speake to him; and plainely, and not by riddels and figures doth he see the Lord
Num 21:27	Mashal. v. To speak in a proverb.	διὰ τοῦτο ἐροῦσιν οἱ **αἰνιγματισταί**· ἔλθετε εἰς Ἐσεβών, ἵνα οἰκοδομηθῇ καὶ κατασκευασθῇ πόλις Σηών	idcirco dicitur in proverbio venite in Esebon aedificetur et construatur civitas Seon	NA (Num 21:26 —31 missing)	Therfor it is seid in prouerbe	They that speak in proverbs	Therfore it is said in the proverbe
Deut 28:37	Shammah. n. A waste, horror.	καὶ ἔσῃ ἐκεῖ ἐν **αἰνίγματι** καὶ παραβολῇ καὶ διηγήματι ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, εἰς οὓς ἂν ἀπαγάγῃ σε Κύριος ἐκεῖ.	et eris perditus in proverbium ac fabulam omnibus populis ad quos te introduxerit Dominus	*OE Heptateuch*: ge forwurðað ðurh bygspel & . bigcwydas	And thou schalt be lost in to prouerbe, and fable to alle puplis	And thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword	And thou shalt be destroyed for a prouerbe
1 Kings 10:1	**Chiydah**	σα Σαβὰ ἤκουσε τὸ ὄνομα Σαλωμὼν καὶ τὸ ὄνομα Κυρίου καὶ ἦλθε πειράσαι αὐτὸν ἐν **αἰνίγμασι**·	venit temptare eum in **enigmatibus**	*Ælfric's Homilies*: Salomon ða hi lærde and hire sæde ealra ðæra worda andgit. þe heo hine axode	cam in the name of the Lord to tempte hym in derk and douti questiouns	she came to prove him with hard questions	spoke to him all that she had in her heart

	Hebrew root words	**Septuagint/ Greek New Testament**	**Vulgate**	**Old English translations**	**Wycliffe's Bible**	**King James Version (16**	**Douay-Rheims (1582)**
2 Chron 9:1	**Chiydah**	σα Σαβὰ ἤκουσε τὸ ὄνομα Σαλωμὼν καὶ ἦλθε τοῦ πειράσαι Σαλωμὼν ἐν **αἰνίγμασιν** εἰς Ἰερουσαλὴμ ἐν δυνάμει βαρείᾳ σφόδρα	venit ut temptaret eum **enigmatibus** in Hierusalem	NA	cam to tempte hym in derk figuris	she came to prove Solomon with hard questions at Jerusalem	she came to try him with hard questions at Jerusalem
Job 13:17	'achvah**.** v. n. A showing of opinion	ἀκούσατε ἀκούσατε τὰ ῥήματά μου, ἀναγγελῶ γὰρ ὑμῶν ἀκουόντων.	audite sermonem meum et **enigmata**	NA	Therfor here ye my chastisyngis	Hear diligently my speech, and my declaration with your ears	Receive the obscure sayings with your eares
Ps 49:4	**Chiydah**	νῶ εἰς παραβολὴν τὸ οὖς μου, ἀνοίξω ἐν ψαλτηρίῳ τὸ πρόβλημά μου.	inclino ad parabulam aurem meam aperiam in cithara **enigma** meum	*Paris Psalter:* Ic onhylde min earan to þam bispellum	Y schal opene my **resoun** set forth in a sautree	I will open my dark saying upon the harp	I will open my proposition on the psaltery
Ps 78:2	**Chiydah**	ἰξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὸ στόμα μου, φθέγξομαι προβλήματα ἀπ' ἀρχῆς.	aperiam in parabula os meum loquar **enigmata** antiqua	*Paris Psalter*: secggean onginne, þa on worldricum wæron æt frymðe.	Y schal speke perfite **resouns** fro the bigynnyng	I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old	I will open my mouth in parables: I will utter propositions
Prov 1:6	**Chiydah**	οήσει τε παραβολὴν καὶ σκοτεινὸν λόγον ῥήσεις τε σοφῶν καὶ **αἰνίγματα**	verba sapientium et **enigmata** eorum	NA	the wordis of wise men, and the derk figuratif spechis of hem	the words of the wise, and their dark sayings	the words of the wise, and their darke sayings

Ez 17:2	**Chiydah/Chuwd**. v. To propose or propound a riddle.	ὲ ἀνθρώπου, διήγησαι διήγημα καὶ εἰπὸν παραβολὴν πρὸς τὸν οἶκον τοῦ ’Ισραὴλ	fili hominis propone **enigma** et narra parabolam ad domum Israhel	NA	Sone of man, sette forth a derk speche	Son of man, put forth a **riddle**, and speak a parable unto the house of Israel	Sonne of man, propose a darke speach
Dan 8:23	**Chiydah**	καὶ ἐπ’ ἐσχάτων τῆς βασιλείας αὐτῶν, πληρουμένων τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν, ἀναστήσεται βασιλεὺς ἀναιδὴς προσώπῳ διανοουμένος **αἰνίγματα**	NA	NA	a kyng schal rise vnschamefast in face, and vndurstondyng proposisiouns, ether **resouns** set forth	a king of fierce countenance, and understanding dark sentences, shall stand up.	And understanding propositions
Hab 2:6	**Chiydah**	οὐχι ταῦτα πάντα παραβολὴν κατ’ αὐτοῦ λημψονται καὶ **πρόβλημά** εἰς διήγησιν αὐτο	eum parabolam sument et loquellam **enigmatum** eius et dicetur vae ei	NA	take a parable on hym, and the speking of derk sentencis of hym?	Shall not all these take up a parable against him, and a taunting proverb	Take up a parable upon him, and a speache of obscure sayings
Sir 47:17		γῆν ἐπεκάλυψεν ἡ ψυχή σου καὶ ἐνέπλησας ἐν παραβολαῖς **αἰνιγμάτων**	et terram retexit anima tua. et replesti in conparationibus **enigmata**	NA	his soule vnhilide the erthe. And thou, Salomon, fillidist derk figuratif spechis in licnessis	Thy soul covered the whole earth, and thou filledst it with dark parables	And thou didst multiply **riddles** in parables
1Cor 13:12	NA	λέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι’ ἐσόπτρου ἐν **αἰνίγματι**	videmus nunc per speculum in **enigmate**	*Aelfric's Homilies*: Nu we menn geseoð swilce þurh sceawere, and on **rædelse**	we seen now bi a myrour in derknesse	For now we see through a glass, darkly	Vve see novv in a glasse in a darke sort

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