The Undoing of Exeter Book Riddle 47: ‘Bookmoth’

I. Doing the Riddle: Creation

Exeter Book Riddle 47 (hereafter, Riddle 47, or "Bookmoth" riddle) remains one of the literary stars of the manuscript's riddle collection – often anthologized and regularly discussed, despite the curious fact that in conventional terms, it has never been regarded as that impressive a riddle:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Moððe word fræt.} & \quad \text{Me þat þuhte} \\
\text{wætlicu wyrd,} & \quad \text{þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,} \\
\text{þæt se wyrm forswealg} & \quad \text{wera gied sumes,} \\
\text{þeof in þystro, þrymfæstne cwide} & \quad \text{þæs strangan staþol.} \\
\text{ond þæs strangan staþol.} & \quad \text{Stælgiest ne wæs} \\
\text{wihte þy gleawra,} & \quad \text{þe he þam wordum swealg.} \\
\end{align*}
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A moth ate words. I thought that a marvelous occurrence, when I learned of this wonder – that the worm devoured the sayings of one man, - this thief in the dark – the glorious speech, and its strong foundation. The thievish-guest was not a whit wiser – he who devoured those words!

1 This essay was originally composed to be part of a festschrift in honor of Allen Frantzen. But in light of public statements made by Frantzen regarding women, feminism and the academy (see Rio Fernandes, "Prominent Medieval Scholar's Blog on 'Feminist Fog' Sparks an Uproar," in The Chronicle of Higher Education, February 5, 2016 <http://chronicle.com/article/Prominent-Medieval-Scholar-s/235014>), I can no longer offer this essay in that context. Because an academic publication is a durable record, this essay remains in this volume to provide an explicit citation of Frantzen's views and the controversy that surrounds them, so that their witness and an objection to them is registered within it. As my dissertation director, Frantzen most vitally taught me not to back down in the face of a position you feel strongly is wrong, but rather to actively counter it with your own. Accordingly, though it would have been easier to simply retract the essay from this volume, or silently remove my original, honorific footnote, this essay remains, to note my debt to Frantzen for what he has contributed to the field of Anglo-Saxon studies and my own professional development, and equally to object to the positions he has taken that I cannot agree with, and which have blemished the field of Anglo-Saxon studies. \(\text{Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg.}\)

2 This essay follows the conventional numbering of the Exeter Book riddles as found in George Phillip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed. The Exeter Book (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 180-210 and 229-43. Craig Williamson, The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977) provides an alternative numeration of the riddles. The texts of all Exeter Book riddles cited in this essay are taken from Krapp and Dobbie, except as noted.

3 Except where noted, all translations of Old English and Latin are my own.
Most critics accept, to varying degrees, that the solution of the riddle is some version of a bookworm – a page-eating insect we today would recognize as a larval form of the death watch beetle (*Xestobium rufovillosum*), or of the common furniture beetle (*Anobium punctatum*), or maybe as the so-called booklouse (*Trogium pulsatorium*).\(^4\)

The first line of the poem makes it clear that its subject is a bug that eats words, and for modern scholars it does not take a huge leap of imagination to infer that the words eaten and swallowed represent physical damage to a manuscript. While actual moths as we usually think of them today, fully mature and fluttering about, are not that interested in books (though they can have a fondness for clothing and even cloth book bindings),\(^6\) the Old English *modðe* applies equally to the winged insect or its larval, *wyrm*-like form.\(^6\) The standard solution to the Old English riddle has further and unambiguous support in the fact that the text is a reworking of a late-Classical Latin riddle by Symphosius, one often accompanied by the title which provides its solution: *Tinea* ("moth/worm"):

> Littera me pavit nec quid sit littera novi:
> In libris vixi nec sum studiosior inde;
> Exedi Musas nec adhuc tamen ipsa profeci.\(^7\)

Letters have nourished me, but I know not what letters are. I have lived in books, but am no more studious thereby. I have devoured the Muses, and yet so far have not myself made progress.

The Exeter Book version substantially expands and modifies its Latin source, descriptively and figuratively augmenting a core figure of something that is nourished by letters and books, but remains ignorant of their meaning. Symphosius’s riddle employs the common rhetorical structure of first-person prosopopoeia, allowing the insect to describe its own condition as a creature unable to benefit from letters, books and the Muses. The Old English version recasts this figure as a third-person report that first announces its subject (*modðe*), before specifying the moth’s form (*wyrm*), and then describing this creature as a thief (*peaf, stælgiest*) who remains ignorant (*in lystro, ne wæs wihte hy gleawra*) despite its consumption of words. The Old English riddle also obscures and abstracts the material object that the insect feeds upon. In the Latin, the *litterae* (letters) metonymically introduce *libris* (books); in the Old English the words eaten do not explicitly describe books, but rather the song or speech of a certain man (*wera gied sumes*), appositionally described in the next two lines as glorious and a strong foundation (*þrymfæstne cwide ond þæs strangan staþol*). The phrase *strangan staþol* artfully suggests a range of meanings, from the material book that contains these sayings to the cultural import of gnomic expression. Finally, the Old English text adds an additional narrative layer of the first-person observer who simultaneously describes the riddle’s subject, and his own course of learning and reflection on it (*ic . . . gefrægn, me


\(^5\) Richardson, “Bookworms.”


puhtē), situating the wyrm's activity within an aura of wonderment (wrætlicu wyrd, wundor).

The widely espoused belief that the poem announces, or even gives away, its answer at the start historically has made for some critical uneasiness. Frederick Tupper noted long ago that "the answer is betrayed at the outset," and Krapp and Dobbie echo Christian Grein's earlier assertion that the riddle's so-called solution ("die Buchermotte") is "obvious"; Williamson pronounces the riddle's opening to be "shocking," while both Ann Harleman Stewart and Andy Orchard note that the riddle "gives the solution away," an assertion repeated (with qualifications) by Dieter Bitterli.8 To explain this apparent lack of an interpretative challenge, Fred Robinson and Bruce Mitchell consider the poem in a formalist mode as less a riddle and more an artful exercise in rhetorical paradox; Geoffrey Russom develops the notion of paradox as the idea that the insect is eating spoken, not written words, while Stewart interprets the riddle as a "stylistic parody" of the "Old English heroic mode."9 Most recently, Patrick Murphy reinforces the traditional interpretation of the poem even as he calls to move beyond it, equivocating that "it seems less important to name Riddle 47's obvious answer than to appreciate its playful sense of wonder at the marvelous qualities of the written word."10

Is this just a bad riddle? Archer Taylor's definition of riddles as, "descriptions of objects in terms intended to suggest something entirely different" suggests so, or that we need to a different solution.11 I have always wondered if this riddle is better than we give it credit for, and if the ease with which modern readers arrive at an apparent answer deceives them. Good riddles, as typified by other riddles in the Exeter Book and other collections of early medieval Aenigmata, simply do not give their answers away. Regardless of whether they came with solutions or not, the texts of early medieval riddles habitually disguise their answers in figural substitutes whose qualities only obtusely overlap with their ultimate referent.12 The Exeter Book riddles, like their Latin sources and analogues, encourage and even celebrate the discovery of the hidden "key" that solves the riddle. Many of the riddles frame this impulse in the formulaic demand saga hwæt ic hatte ("Say what I am called"), while riddles such as Exeter Book 42 produce more elaborate challenges:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Hwyle ðæs hordgates} \\
\text{cægan cæfte} & \quad \text{þa clamme onleac} \\
\text{þe þa raellan} & \quad \text{wið ryinemenn} \\
\text{hygefæste heold} & \quad \text{heortan bewirgene}
\end{align*}
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12 See Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 27-78 for a thorough overview of this literary device.
orþoncbendum? (11-15)

Who has unlocked the hoard-gate’s chains by the power of a key, which held the riddle mind-fast against secret-solvers, and covered its heart with bands of clever artifice?

The heart of a riddle is locked away, hidden from view, waiting for the caegn that undoes the obscuring bands by interpretatively snapping their deeper meaning into sudden and elucidating focus. This key works by making clear the carefully designed interrelationships of the poem’s various semantic parts. It should not be so easy to find within the text of the riddle itself. Either the riddle is doing it wrong, or we are doing the riddle wrong.

Our caeg to a better understanding of how this riddle works lies in understanding how its adaptation of its source changes not only its content, but its own semantic heorte. The translation (in both senses of the word) of the riddle’s original Latin solution into the body of an Old English poem signals a deeper set of alterations at work. Medieval riddles depend on a carefully constructed relationship between two contrastive but overlapping layers of meaning: a binary structure of proposition and solution. The body of the riddle is wholly concerned with its proposition – a set of described qualities that suggests an object, entity or activity different than a riddle’s actual solution. The proposition normally is designed to both prompt and mislead the riddlee through a slim semantic overlap with the intended solution – in other words, a riddle’s proposition shares enough characteristics or qualities with its solution to make an interpretive connection possible, but not enough to make such a connection probable (i.e. “easy”). Consider the very short text of Exeter Book Riddle 69:

Wundor wearð on wege – water wearð to bane.

A wonder happened on the way – water became bone.

While various solutions have been proposed for this text, most agree on some variation of ice. The description of the ice as a manifestation of bone fashions a typical enigmatic proposition. Bone and ice share a quality of hardness and (perhaps) whiteness, but little else, while the wonder of water turning into bone transforms a natural phenomenon (water freezing) into an unnatural one, creating semantic friction and obscuring the solution even as it provides enough information to suggest it. The locative context of the riddle, on wege, likewise provides a slim but elastic congruency of meaning. Weg can suggest a process or a literal path or road, and once the solution of “ice” is retrofitted to the text, wundor on wege can be understood to fit in any of a number of ways, and there need not be only one: the process of water freezing (icles), ice traveling on its own wege (icebergs), paths of water themselves turning to ice (a frozen river) or water on paths becoming ice (frozen puddles). The point of an Anglo-

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13 Orchard has proposed that perhaps Riddle 47’s obvious opening develops from the fact that the poem’s source had an answer-title, which presumably transformed from a separate text to an integrated part of the riddle’s metaphoric game. Such a transformation would be evidence of a kind of formal experimentation not found in other Old English riddles, at least not so overtly, and might suggest a vernacular intermediary between the original Latin poem and its Exeter Book descendant.

14 Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 35-40.

15 E.g., Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles (“ice” “icles”), 7-8; cf. Williamson, Old English Riddles, 333-4 (“iceberg”), and Krapp and Dobbie, Exeter Book, 369 (“winter” “ice”).
Saxon literary riddle is not finding its solution, but rather understanding the relationship between the riddle’s solution and its descriptive proposition. And the one thing we can be sure of in Riddle 69 is that the solution is not what it announces itself to be, that is, a bone.

Perhaps a reading a Riddle 47 should begin not with moths or worms, but instead with words, especially since the Old English word appears in both the poem’s opening and closing description of the bookworm’s activity (Modde word fæt; he he pam wordum swealg). Despite the longstanding assumption that Riddle 47 gives away its answer, a number of critics have also acknowledged that the riddle appears less interested in worms than it does in words, and specifically how those words can change. Certainly there is something shrewd going on here with the way the poem frames a text about the consumption of Anglo-Saxon words with the Old English word itself. Word tends to mean something different to a contemporary scholar thinking about literature than to the Anglo-Saxons who encounter it. As Russom has noted, usage of word in Old English overwhelmingly applies not to writing, but to speech and “larger units of speech like sentences and oral reports.” While a modern, reader might see the words Modde word fæt and instinctively think “bookworm,” the evidence suggests an Anglo-Saxon would more naturally experience word as an oral/aural, and not a visual phenomenon. That the modde consumes something that naturally exits, not enters, the mouth is indeed a wonder, akin to water becoming bone. And like water and bone, Old English speech and

16 See, for instance, Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 9 (quoted above, XXX); Williamson, Old English Riddles, 285: “The Old English riddler is less concerned with the cuteness of the paradox of an illiterate worm than he is with the mutability of words, as they pass from the traditional wordhord of the scop into the newer and strangely susceptible form of the literate memoria,” an argument further developed by John Scattergood,”Eating the Book: Riddle 47 and Memory,” Text and Gloss: Studies in Insular Learning and Literature Presented to Joseph Donovan Pheifer, ed. Helen Conrad O’Brien, Anne Marie D’Arcy, and John Scattergood (Dublin and Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1999), 119-27; Russom, A Moth Laid Waste to Fame,” 134 comes to a related conclusion, considering the “real answer” of this riddle to be “mutability,” specifically the mutability and ruination of sung words of glory; likewise, Nicolas Jacobs advances the solution of “writing,” claiming that “the point of the riddle is not what form a moth must take in order to devour a book, but what form words must take in order to be devoured by a moth or worm,” (“The Old English ‘Bookmoth’ Riddle Reconsidered,” Notes and Queries 36 (1988): 290-2, 291). John D. Niles takes a slightly different tack, arguing that, “Riddle 47 can scarcely be said to name its own answer,” and posits that the riddle’s answer is a sealm-boc—a book of Psalms” (Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 121-2).

17 Russom, A Moth Laid Waste to Fame,” 131. While in grammatical treatises, word can specify a written unit of language (usually translating verba), in general word would be considered as distinct from writ. E.g. The Phoenix, ii. 424-5: Is pon gelicast, þaes þe us leorneras wordum secg þond writu cybð (“It is most like that, which to us teachers say with words, and writings reveal”), Krapp and Dobbie, Exeter Book, 106; or in Ælfric’s discussion of the how the John the Baptist’s parents respond to his misnaming: Da magas setton þam cilde naman. zacharias: ac seo modor him wîçwæð mid wordum. & se dumba fæder mid gewrite (“Then the authorities established the child’s name as Zacharias, but the mother protested with words, and the mute father with writing”), Peter Clemoes, ed. Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: The First Series. Text, EETS, SS 17, (London: Oxford University Press, 1997); or in Ælfric’s account of St. Swithun: Ne mage we awritan ne mid words asecgan ealle þa wundra þe se halga wer Swiðun þurh God gefremode” (“Nor may we write nor with words say all the wonders which the holy man Swithun worked through God,” W.W. Skeat, ed. Ælfric’s Lives of Saints: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints’ Days Formerly Observed by the English Church, EETS, OS 82 (London: N. Trubner: 1885), 466. My thanks to Roy Liuzza for the latter two references, and to James McNelis, Nicole Discenza, Rebecca Stephenson, Eddie Christie, Roberto Rosselli Del Turco, Carolin Esser-Miles, and Erica Leighton and others for their insights within a comment thread on my Facebook page, over the days of May 30-31, 2012.
writing possess a slight enough semantic overlap to make word an apt element for the riddle’s proposition.

The mutability of words may be the first slippery element of the riddle’s transformational proposition, but not the last. Many Exeter Book riddles are well known for their fascination with the components, processes and tools of manuscript production—solutions to other riddles include books and Bibles, inkhorns, pens, scribal fingers, and written letters themselves, and often reference the natural and animal entities that are a part of the process of textual manufacture. These riddles engage with transformation on a more visceral level of materiality—bookmaking is literally the (animal) flesh made word. Other Exeter Book riddles refashion the text through their own graphic components, presenting propositions that require readers literally to transform existing letters and words on the page through studied manipulation. Riddle 47 similarly suggests that a profound transformation is afoot, where the riddle engages with its own form, word-play and purpose as part of its proposition and solution, as evidenced by the extreme makeover it gives to the Latin source. In Symphosius’s Tinea riddle, the solution is carefully distinguished from the metaphoric proposition. The tinea is never described as such; the riddle’s proposition instead presents its subject as somebody nourished (pavít) by letters (littera), who has lived in books and devoured the Muses (libris vixi, exedi Musas) but is not more studious (nec sum studior) or proficient (profeci) as a result. The proposition of Symphosius’s riddle does not describe a worm, but rather a human reader, a student of letters immersed in books, and one who reads but cannot improve. The trick of the riddle turns on the thin zone of qualities the larval insect and the un-studious human reader share: they both consume books without gaining knowledge. In this sense the Tinea riddle, like its Old English successor, is a text centered on an imagined figure of unstudious nature who, through the mechanism of the riddle, in turn promotes a studious understanding of textual figuration. The solution of the Latin riddle, the dumb bug, only serves to pull all of this meaning into focus—it is the punctuation here, not the sentence.

The ingenuity of the Exeter Book adaptation, however, is that it does not revise, but rather reverses the relationship of the riddle’s original binary structure. The embedding of what is likely the source riddle’s former title in the first line of the poem turns the boc-moddë from the riddle’s figural solution to its literal proposition—a fundamental change emphasized by the further addition of wyrm in line 3a, and the creature’s subsequent negative (and humanized) characterizations as a þeaf in þystro and a stælgiest. The Old English riddle, in other words, does not announce its solution when it describes the insect and its destructive actions at the beginning, but rather its enigmatic vehicle—the governing metaphor of its proposition. The burrowing insect aptly inhabits the text of the riddle and supplants its source’s activities of reading, study and learning as the central metaphor of the riddle.

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18 E.g. Exeter riddles 24, 28, 51, 57, 60, 88, 93, 95.
19 E.g. in orthographic riddles, such as 42, "cock and hen," where runes must be identified, named as letters and then assembled into hana and haen; or more simply, such as Riddle 23, "bow," where the letters "agob" must be assembled and reversed to form boga ("bow"); or in runic riddles such as Riddle 19 ("ship"), where four groups of runes must be transaltered and read backwards as words, and then the final letter of each word taken and combined to spell snac, a light sailing vessel. For Riddle 42, see Williamson, Old English Riddles, 276; for Riddle 23, see Williamson, Old English Riddles, 204; for Riddle 19, see Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 65. See also Bitterli, Say What I Am Called, 83-134, for a general discussion of literate manipulation within the Exeter Book riddles.

And learning, or more precisely the extra-ordinary struggle to learn, is what Anglo-Saxon riddles are all about. The ultimate point of a riddle is not to solve it, but to understand it. As intellectual exercises that teach important distinctions between literal and figural meanings of textual interpretation, the riddle genre had a long tradition of use in medieval monastic classrooms. The Exeter Book contains close to a hundred riddles, and along with other included texts the collection been viewed as a repository of educational materials, where, as Seth Lerer puts it, "the poetry of the manuscript enacts rituals of education which would have been performed by student and teacher over its very pages." Pace Stewart who argued that reading the riddle is "a pleasure impossible unless the solution is known from the beginning," both Latin and Old English riddles often circulated independent of their solutions. And we know medieval readers struggled to solve them. Marginal notations often supply the solutions for riddles (both Latin and vernacular) that did not accompany the texts, providing additional evidence of active engagement. One eleventh-century collection of Symphosius's riddles comes with answers, but each one is encrypted with a cipher, no doubt so that the text might be worked over without the luxury of an immediate solution – the equivalent of an answer key in the back of a textbook. The Exeter Book itself contains several items of later marginalia which point to efforts to solve or comment on its runes; at one moment either despairing or joking, the runes are scratched in drypoint next to a runic riddle; R.I. Page suggested they stand for Beo Unrepe (which could mean "be less cruel," or possibly "it's not right").

Riddle 47 also adds a specific rhetorical device that highlights the way Anglo-Saxon riddles prompt intellectual inquiry and effort: the third person observer who has gefrægn ("questioned, or learned through inquiry") about the proposition described. Immediately following the bug's ingestion of words, Riddle 47 introduces a second figure, who not only narrates the insect's unthinking consumption, but also his own process of thought and inquiry into this matter: me þat þuhte/ wræltic wyrd/, þa ic þat wundor gefrægn ("I myself thought this a marvelous circumstance, when I investigated that wonder"). Orchard has shown that earlier Latin riddle groups (including most of Symphosius’ riddles, and all of Aldhelm’s Enigimas and Tatwine and Euseubius’s combined collection) largely dealt in a first-person mode of prosopopoeia, where subjects of the riddle spoke in direct address. But beginning with Alcuin’s Anglo-Latin riddles in ninth century, the Anglo-Saxon riddlic structure began to programmatically shift to the third person frame of an "imagined observer." This reworking of the older riddle tradition created an additional layer of meaning around the enigmatic text that took an exteriorized purpose of promoting knowledge and perception and embedded it directly into the text as an integral thematic component. The literary effect of such a device can be powerful; one need only to think of the imaginary, sinful dreamer of The Dream of the Rood who frames the prosopopoeic account of the Rood, who then is called by the cross to perform apostolic missionary

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25 Williamson Old English Riddles, 51-62 and especially plate XVII; for Page’s reading, see Williamson, 59.

26 Orchard, "Enigma Variations," 293.
work at the end of its account. In Alcuin's ninth-century riddles, the imaginary observer becomes paired with an ideal imaginary respondent who knows how to solve the riddle; forty-eight of Alcuin's fifty-three riddles contain the now familiar formula "Let him say who can." As the Anglo-Saxon variant of the riddle develops, then, it begins to emphasize more and more the importance of both inquiry and the application of knowledge — paired qualities already vital to the successful reading of riddles.

The use of gefrīgna in this way is distinctive and possibly unique to a handful of Exeter Book riddles. Along with three other riddles (45, 48 and 67) the "Bookmoth" riddle's use of the verb takes the notion of active observation within an enigmatic text into the realm of dynamic learning. The learner, idealized, now resides inside the poem, a literary stand-in for the readers who find themselves confronted with the same puzzling proposition. Juxtaposed against the ignorant wyrm, this "imagined learner" studies the fate (wyrd) of the riddle's texts— not just the riddle, or the book, but also the wera gied sumes ("song of a certain man") recorded within the book. This wera, Niles notes, is yet another imagined figure who functions as a kind of "mini-riddle" as he himself remains unidentified. Wera gied sumes replaces the devoured Muses (exidi Musas) of the Latin source; the effect is to give the destroyed words a more immediate, tangible, and human origin. Inside the restructured proposition of the Old English poem, this wera can then be understood as a teacher figure, while the modde/wyrm acts as the reader who does not learn, and who cannot gain wisdom through study; both are framed by the imagined narrator who contains the poem within is or her own interpretative act of gefrīgna.

The very origin of the Old English word for riddle, rædels, tells us that riddles were viewed as discourses closely related to the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. The use of rædels as "riddle" in the modern sense is a secondary or even tertiary definition of the word. The primary meanings of rædels are not concerned with puzzles, but with debate and council, and the faculties of the imagination. The meaning of literary riddles instead arises from, in Seth Lerer's words, the "human capacity to organize experience," and "the scholarly capacity to understand that experience." The form and function of an Anglo-Saxon riddle like "Bookmoth" encodes within it a cultural imperative to record learning in writing, and to use that writing as a strong foundation (strangan stæpol) for the active acquisition, performance and propagation of such wisdom and knowledge. Or, as the opening of another Exeter Book poem, Maxims I, declares:

Frige mec frodum wordum. Ne laet þinne ferð onhærne,
degol þæt þu deopost cunne. Nelle ic þe min dyrne gesecgan,
gif þu me þinne hygecraeft hylest ond þine heortan geþohtas.
Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan (1-4).

Question me with wise words. Do not allow your mind to be hidden, or what you most deeply know to be obscured. I will not tell you my secrets if you conceal your mind's ability from me, and your heart’s thoughts. Wise men should exchange sayings.

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29 Niles, Old English Enigmatic Poems, 122. Niles suggests that the figure may represent the psalmist King David.
31 Lerer, Literacy and Power, 112.
32 Krapp and Dobbie, 156-7.
Riddle 47 shares these concerns with Maxims I, along with some key vocabulary (word, gied, gleaw, poht). In Maxims I, however, an overt didacticism follows and qualifies this opening: God sceal mon ærest hergan, fæder userne, forpon he he us æt frympe geteode lif ond læmne willan (ll. 4-6; "Man shall first praise God, our father, because in the beginning he made for us life and our transitory will"). In such literature, the desire to interrogate and reveal human knowledge we see expounded in Exeter Books poems like the "Bookmoth" riddle must ultimately serve a higher purpose—the deserving praise of God, the creative progenitor of life. Other Anglo-Saxon riddles record similar statements of active thinking paired with reverence for the power of God's creation. Aldhelm's eighty-line "De Creatura" ("On Creation") opens with a comparable homage to divine production: Conditor, eternis fulsit qui saecla columnis . . . Me variam fecit primo dum conderet orbem (ll.1, 4, "The Creator, who founded all existence on eternal pillars . . . made me in various forms in the beginning when he created the world"), and ends with a spirited riff on the genre's standard rhetorical call for identification and intellectual display:

Auscultate mei credentes famina verbi,
Pandere quae poterit gnarus vix ore magister,
Et tamen inificians non retur frivola lector;
Sciscitor inflatos, fungar quo nomine, sophos? (79-83)\textsuperscript{33}

Listen, who believes the words of my utterance; a knowing teacher will barely be able to explain them with his mouth;
and yet a doubtful reader will not judge them frivolous. I ask inflat ed wise men, what name do I bear?

Orchard dismisses Aldhelm's closing challenge as "surely formulaic," citing lexical echoes in other Aldhelm riddles.\textsuperscript{34} But given their prevalence in the Old English riddling tradition, the potential meaning and function of such calls for identity, not to mention their formal influence, should not be so surely overlooked. Similar to Riddle 47's judgment of the unwitting bookworm, Aldhelm's coda to his Creation riddle combines several related intellectual concerns: the necessity of understanding the text at hand, the importance of wisdom, the explicative role of a knowledgeable teacher, and the synthesis of spoken (famina verbi, ora magister) and written (lector) forms of the knowledge sought. As with the "Bookmoth" riddle, the end of "De Creatura" details a struggle to understand the meaning encoded within the enigmatic proposition, but Aldhelm's riddle provides a divine twist at its end; a taunting call to solve this riddle that serves as a final, knowing hint. Aldhelm's words (famina verbi) are also his own writing, a writing of a solution much greater than its speaker/writer. The riddle's answer, Creation, remains a theological mystery that while superficially solved in Aldhelm's riddle, can never truly be understood by a human mind, be it of a learned magister or of a bombastic, foolish excuse for a "wise man."

Aldhelm's "De Creatura" is the hundredth riddle in the Enigmata, his collection of one hundred didactic riddles. Aldhelm encloses the text of the Enigmata within God's


\textsuperscript{34} Orchard, "Enigma Variations," 287.
generative power; his first riddle is on the creation of Earth, while the lengthy "De Creatura" closes collection. Like the Exeter Book collection, Aldhelm's riddles call attention to both divine and man-made forces of production, and with varying degrees of faithfulness and inventiveness, several Exeter Book riddles translate or adapt riddles from the Enigmata. Exeter Riddle 40 ("Creation") is a close, if now incomplete, Old English translation of "De Creatura". Like its Latin source, Riddle 40 opens with a statement praising the strength and scope of the Creator's power. The narrator is creation personified, who through the rest of the poem works through a long series paradoxes consisting of contrasting qualities (e.g. old/young, timid/fierce, fragrant/foul, vast/tiny, fair/filthy, sweet/bitter, rapid/slow, and so forth) that at the same time catalogues a wide variety of natural creations, from plants, flowers and trees to animals, birds and insects. Due to a missing folio, an estimated twenty-five lines of the Latin original are missing from the Old English adaptation, including Aldhelm's final challenge, but there is no reason to suppose that their previous existence.

The surviving portion of Riddle 40 has some notable points of connection with the "Bookmoth" riddle, which follows shortly after, on the verso side of the next folio in the manuscript. Like the "Bookmoth" riddle, Riddle 40 uses the term wraetlice ("wondrous") to describe the activities of nature, as in Creation's first description of its fashioning by God, in line 6: He me wraetlice worhte æt frympe ("In the beginning, he wondrously made me"). Although wraetlice is a common term in the Exeter Riddles, the "Creation" riddle uses the word four times in the space of a single poem (at lines 6, 85, 102 and 104). Wyrm is less common in the Exeter Riddles – it appears in two other riddles: Riddle 40 (Aldhelm's "Creation"), and Riddle 35 ("Mail Coat" -- itself a translation of another Aldhelm riddle). The "Bookmoth" riddle is the only non-Aldhelm, riddle in the Exeter Book to use wyrm, and does so as an addition to its Latin source. Riddle 40 ("Creation") uses wyrm multiple times throughout the final sections of translation of Aldhelm's catalogue of nature; forms of the word appear at line 70 (me is snægl swiftra, snelra regnywyrm - "the snail is swifter than me, the earth worm quicker"), lines 76-77 (leohtre ic eom micle þonne þes lytla wyrm / þe her onflonde gæþ fotum dryge - "I am much lighter then this little worm that walks on water with dry feet") and, most elaborately, in lines 92-97, where the Old English markedly revises Aldhelm's Latin original text, which contains neither men of skillful wisdom nor the need for such men to dig worms out of their own bodies with knives:

Mara ic eom ond strenga þonne se mícla hwæl,
se þe garsecges grund bihealdedæ
sweart ansyne --ic eom swibre þonne he;
swylyce ic eom on lægene minum læsse
þonne se hondwyrm, se þe hæleþa bearn,
secgas searoþoncle, seaxe delfaþ.

36 On the missing folio leaf, see Williamson, Old English Riddles, 274-5. Given the clear evidence of the missing folio and the closeness with which the Old English adapts its Latin source, there is no reason to suppose that Riddle 40 did not originally include the remainder of "De Creatura." See Bitterli, Say What I Am Called, 126.
37 "Lorica", see Williamson, Old English Riddles, 243-4.
38 Aldhelm's Latin reads: et minor exiguo sulcat qui corpore verme (l.66, "and less than the tiny worm that furrows with its body"). This action also may not be the standard Anglo-Saxon treatment for this kind of malady; for a discussion of hondwyrm and Old English cures for such infestations, see Williamson, Old English Riddles, 274, who notes that the Old English Leechdoms prescribe a salve, not cutting, as a cure.
I am more powerful and stronger than the mighty whale
who looks upon the ocean’s floor,
dark as it appears -- I am greater than he,
just as I am in my own might less
than the hand-worm, that the sons of men,
men of skillful wisdom, dig out with a knife.

The Exeter Book "Bookmoth" and "Creation" riddles together chart an uneasy dynamic
between the created, natural world and the human place within it. Both texts begin by
considering the wraettlice qualities of the natural world, and then later use the figure of
the wyrm paradoxically to relate human wisdom to damage and injury. The "Bookmoth"
riddle emphasizes the fragility of human wisdom through the lowly wyrm's ability to
erase it. The Old English "Creation" riddle presents human bodies infested with little
hondwyrm, treated through an ambivalent form of searoponcle, a "wise thought" that
requires men to heal themselves by inflicting wounds.

The text at the end Aldhelm’s "De Creatura" suggests that the missing end of its Old
English version may have contained additional material thematically related to the
"Bookmoth" riddle. While the first eighty lines of Exeter Riddle 40 faithfully follow the
form of the first forty-three lines of "De Creatura," it then skips over a brief section of its
source (ll. 44-58), before continuing on, translating lines 59-67 of the Latin. The Old
English version then returns to the skipped section of the Latin, translating lines 44-50
before the text breaks off in the Exeter Book due to the missing folio. 39 In spite of such
structural revisions, Riddle 40 follows its source closely enough that it is reasonable to
assume that the Exeter Book's lost folio contained the remainder of a complete Old
English translation of "De Creatura," presumably with the Latin source's second half of
the shifted middle section (ll. 51-58), followed by Aldhelm's concluding passage (ll. 68-83).

In "De Creatura," the middle section missing from the Old English version continues
Aldhelm's series of natural paradoxes that constitute the majority of the poem. 40 The Old
English abruptly stops in the middle of one such contrastive set:

Mara ic eom ond fættra þonne amæsted swin,
bearg bellende, [pe] on bocwuda,
won wrotnende wynnum lifde
þ. he . . (105-108)

I am greater, and fatter, than the engorged swine,
or the bellowing boar, who in the beech forest
dark and rooting, happily lives,
he who . . .

What finishes this set, we find Aldhelm's version, is a competing statement about
consumption, hunger, and feasting:

Sed me dira fames macie torquebit egenam,
Pallida dum iugiter dapibus spoliabor optimis. (51-52) 41

39 See Williamson, Old English Riddles, 266-7, and Wyatt, Old English Riddles, 98-100, for
texts of Aldhelm’s Latin riddle with corresponding line numbers from the Old English
translation.
40 In the following treatment of "De Creatura," I am grateful to Bridget Balint and Damian
Fleming for their advice on some of the finer points of Aldhelm’s Anglo-Latin.
41 Some versions of the poem substitute satiabor ("will be satiated") for spoliabor. See, as
example, Wyatt, Old English Riddles, 99.
But dire hunger tortures me with leanness, [makes me] wanting,
I am pallid, even while constantly despoiled by fat feasts.

The section after this begins another descriptive proposition, first establishing the speaker's brightness as clarior orbe – "brighter than the sun") before finishing with:

Carceris et multo tenebris obscurior atris
Atque latebrosis, ambit quas Tartarus, umbris. (55-56)

[I am] much darker than the deadly dimness of prison,
and the hidden shadows that encircle the underworld.

This section of Aldhelm's riddle establishes two themes that dominate the "Bookmoth" riddle's description of its proposition. The activity of violent feeding (dapibus spoliabor optimis) that nevertheless results in a lack (fames) recalls Riddle 47's stælgiest ne wæs / wihte þy gleawra, þe he ham wordum swealg; while a state of darkness even among the brightest of lights compares to Riddle 47's peof in þystro, where the wyrm remains "in the dark" even among the sayings of enlightened men. As Robinson points out, þystro, which can mean both literally dark and figuratively dim, also commonly glosses the Latin tenebra ("darkness/dimness/ignorance") the same term employed in this section by Aldhelm.

In the final passages of "De Creatura," Aldhelm sets up his concluding challenge to the wisdom of readers a few lines earlier, when Creation provides its own disparaging take on the spoken and written forms of human knowledge:

Sic mea prudentes superat sapientia sofos,
Nec tamen in biblis docuit me littera dives
Aut umquam quivi, quid constet syllaba, nosse. (70-72)

Thus my wisdom surpasses the understanding of philosophers,
yet rich letters in books have not taught me,
nor ever could I understand what a syllable means.

Here again we have a paradox that intersects with a propositional theme in the "Bookmoth" riddle. In Aldhelm’s riddle, the naturally created world is wise, in fact wiser than human philosophers, in spite of remaining ignorant of the learned discourse of books, or even the basic elements of speech. In the "Bookmoth" riddle, the moþþe/wyrm likewise has not been taught by letters in books or the sayings of men, but inverts the transcendent status of the natural world "De Creatura" promotes. Here the incapacity for human expression marks a failure to measure up to human standards. In light of its futile engagement with materials of learning, Riddle 47's wyrm resides below the human, in a darkness of ignorance.

The correspondences outlined above cannot be taken as evidence that either the Latin or Old English version of Aldhelm's "Creation" riddle served as a direct source or analogue for the "Bookmoth" riddle. But taken in aggregate, the shared formal and thematic qualities of these poems point to a dynamic (or, to use Patrick Murphy’s term, a

focus) operating between them. While Aldhelm’s riddle uses God’s creative power as manifest in the natural world to humble human knowledge and agency, the “Bookmoth” riddle reverses the game, and fashions a creature of that natural world as destructive agent that modestly undoes the artifices of human expression. Yet the message of each riddle is the same. The creature that puts humanity in its place can be a lowly insect or a wise man. Like Aldhelm’s snide challenge in the closing lines of “De Creatura,” the “Bookmoth” riddle bridges the gap between such seemingly disparate figures, uniting them as equally powerful and powerless in God’s created world. But while Aldhelm’s riddle exalts nature as a textual check to the presumption of human knowledge, the “Bookmoth” riddle shakily affirms the value of such knowledge and its material forms, anxiously juxtaposing their expression against the destructive tendencies of an unthinking agent of nature.

II. Undoing the Riddle: Destruction

Destruction and creation inevitably help define and limit each other. I cannot create a better (or worse) case regarding the relationship between the Old English version of Aldhelm’s “Creation” riddle and the “Bookmoth” riddle because of the simple fact a page of the Exeter Book has been lost, and presumably destroyed. And as much as the “Bookmoth” riddle may emphasize the value of the learned word, this riddle is also driven by destruction. The ruinous activities within the riddle deserve a closer look, as modern readers have largely hurried over a basic semantic assumption of the poem in their haste to arrive at a pre-determined answer. The idiomatic notion of a “bookworm” was less readily available to Anglo-Saxons than to us; “bookworm” as a figure of speech is a modern coining; as Jacob notes, “neither *bocmoððe nor *bocwyrm is actually recorded in Old English,” and these forms do not appear in Middle English. In fact the word “bookworm” is not attested at all until the beginning of the seventeenth century. But for Anglo-Saxon readers, the pairing of moððe and fræt at the opening of Riddle 47 would have evoked a familiar trope of another kind of literally material destruction. The compound moð-fretan (“moth-eaten”) is used in Ælfric’s Seven Sleepers homily in a mode still familiar today: heora reaf næront nan þingc moðfretene (“nor were their clothes at all moth-eaten”); other vernacular analogues of attest to the moððe’s destruction of clothing and other materials by ingestion. The Lindisfarne Gospels’ Old English gloss to Matthew 6:19 (ubi neque aerugo et neque tinea demolitur et ubi fures effodient et furantur) uses moððe with fretan, and in conjunction with þeof; another word found in Riddle 47: ðer/huer rust 7 моððа gefreaten bið /gespilled bið; ðer ðеAfас ofdelfes / hrypes 7 forstealas (“where rust and moths consume/destroy [this treasure]; where thieves plunder/rob and steal it”). Similarly, the Old English gloss to a passage in the Liber Scintillarum’s chapter “De Tristitia” (sic in vestimentum tinea et vermis devorat lignum), uses moðpe, along with two other Riddle 47 terms: wyrm and forswelgan: Swa swa on reaf moðpe 7 wyrm forswylhð treow (“So as the moth devours clothing and the worm devours trees”).

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43 The simple idea is that an Old English riddle’s proposition . . . may at times relate not only to an unnamed solution but also to what I call its ‘focus,’ an underlying metaphor that lends coherence to the text’s strategy of obfuscation.” Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 18.
44 Jacobs, “Bookmoth’ Riddle Reconsidered,” 291; the terms do not occur in the Middle English Dictionary, and The Oxford English Dictionary first records Ben Jonson using “bookworm” in 1601.

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Moððe word frae begins Riddle 47 by evoking a familiar, colloquial, and generally benign form of damage to clothing, before enigmatically making its object of this injury something much more precious and abstract: the word. The most significant paradox of this riddle is therefore not rhetorical, but cultural. The poem is both text and un-text at once, writing functionally composed to teach that portrays its own material and then intellectual negation. The Latin source for the riddle implies such a tension, but artfully, at a distance, and with a less hostile subtext. The proposition in Symphosius's original "Tinea" works by first employing verbs more typically positive in meaning: pasco - "to graze or nourish," and vivo - "to live." Only exedo ("consume, destroy") in the poem's final line divulges the material mutilation that is the key to solving the riddle. In contrast, Riddle 47 pronounces an appetite for destruction throughout. In the Old English version, all of the verbs used to describe the insect's feeding (fretan, forswealg swealg) are associated with more menacing aspects of consumption. Fretan is a verb that usually applies to animals, not humans (where etan normally is used), and connotes an aggressive, violent and indiscriminate voracity, as well as a secondary meaning related to the act of breaking something apart. Forswealg occurs next in the riddle; the addition of the intensifier for- to swealgan denotes both an action of great scope and totality, where all of something is swallowed completely. Its use suggests that what the wyrm does is well beyond the everyday act of swallowing food, and also borders on the violent—witness perhaps the most famous use of the verb: Grendel . . . leofes monnes lic eall forswealg ("Grendel completely devoured the dear man's body," 2079-80). Fretan and forswealgan, then, operate as expected within a riddling proposition, suggesting hints to an answer that simultaneously mislead. While these verbs share some semantic overlap within the metaphoric structure of an insect nibbling away at a manuscript, they do so by first proposing that the focus of this riddle is a ravenous beast capable of tearing its quarry apart and devouring it whole. Only the riddle's third verb of consumption, the more innocuous swealgan, expresses an action more closely aligned with both a tiny insect's activity and what this figure ultimately describes, a diminished figure of (un)learning. Swelgan, which literally denotes the common act of swallowing, also has well attested figural applications to the learned consumption and ingestion of knowledge. The use of swealg in the final line of the riddle further signals how substantially the Old English version alters Symphosius's original proposition and solution. The Latin source deploys two verbs in a misleading précis of positive growth, as the grazing/nourishment of pasco is followed by life itself (vivat), before reversing...
course with the darker exedo. Riddle 47 inverts this structure, providing first two verbs of consumption (fretan, forswelgan) that violently tear its subject apart and then swallow it whole, before following them with the milder swelgan in the poem’s final line.

As Robinson notes, a central turn in the riddle’s proposition is that the insect swealg (ate) the words, but not swealg (understood) them.\(^{49}\) But the earlier uses of fretan and forswelgan recontextualize this ignorant feeding as destructive performance proportionally greater than its individual act. Both physical and rational at the same time, swelgan proves a pivotal verb, linking and contrasting the fretan and forswelgan to gefrignan and pytcan, the verbs of perception, thought and learned inquiry that describe the riddle’s imaginary observer. The completeness of the destruction implied by forswelgan hints that the riddle frames a deeper set of cultural concerns, an apprehensive outlining of the fragility of this order across a continuum of negative events, from material destruction to a potential and systemic failure of human learning. It does so by first unmaking the book.

When we think about "making" books in medieval England, we naturally gravitate towards later medieval periods where the same term was explicitly employed, e.g., Chaucer and his contemporaries, authors literally named as makeres of books.\(^{50}\) While Old English verb macian was often used to represent the manufacture of something, its derivative meaning, "to write a book" is only sporadically attested until very late in Old English, long after the Exeter Book was made, though such meaning is in evidence earlier in other Germanic languages.\(^{51}\) The eventual derivation of makere from macian suggests, however, the intimate relationship between the material production of a book and the composition of its textual contents that developed in Anglo-Saxon literature. The Exeter Book riddles that deal with inkhorns and animal skin, pens and swart tracks across a page tell us as much, and that for Anglo-Saxon literati, the process and product of the book remained fascinating in equal parts. Even the only surviving Anglo-Saxon description of the Exeter book, the famous detail from Leofric's gift list (mycel englisc boc be gehwilcum þingum on leowdisan geworht), should remind us of this view: this great English book contained all sorts of things "worked in poetry" (leowdisan geworht). Books had to be "wrought" -- it was hard labor to make a book -- and that work had to be deemed worthwhile by the capacious potential of such book to be both mycel and to contain all sorts of things (gehwilcum þingum) within its greatness. Alfhelm's "Creation" riddle and other Exeter Book riddles of literary production likewise remind us that for Anglo-Saxon readers these texts served as stand-ins for the created world itself, whether divinely or humanly manufactured. The same may be said for the manuscript that contains these works – the Exeter Book is a created thing full of created things.

Unlike other Exeter Book riddles that deal with the making of books, the "Bookmoth" riddle inverts the usual formula of the natural world as a material foundation for literary production and learning. We see such a strategy in the way this riddle uses the phrase þæs strægan stæpol ("the strong foundation/support") to value descriptively both the wera gied sumes and the physical structure of the book that records such words.\(^{52}\) Analogously, the early eleventh-century Old English gloss of "De

\(^{49}\) Robinson, "Artful Ambiguities," 357.


\(^{51}\) Sherman M. Kuhn, "Old English macian, its origin and dissemination," Journal of English Linguistics 19 (1986): 49–93. Kuhn (56-57) notes Notker’s use of the Old High German cognate machôn to mean “compose” as early as the late tenth century, i.e. coeval with the Exeter Book, but provides only two Old English attestations, one from Ælfric’s Homilies and one from the twelfth-century Life of St Nicholas.

\(^{52}\) The phrase þæs strægan stæpol remains the only debated grammatical crux of the Riddle 47. Critics have argued on one side that it is genitive (so: the foundation of "a strong one," i.e. the words of the learned speaker, with the phrase in apposition to þrymfaestne cwide) and on
Tristitia" in the Liber Scintillarum employs figures of both moth and worm to signify not only the ruination of the human mind, but also another kind of foundation: the bones of the body:

Ingehyd soðlice scyldiges symle on wite ys; scylidig mod næfre orsorh ys; swa swa on reaf mọþþe wyrm forsylhð treow; eal swa unrotnyss derað hearan; heort bliþe gode strengþe deð were soðlice unrotes byrnað banu.\(^{53}\)

A guilty thought truly, is likewise in the mind; the guilty mind is never secure (untroubled); as the moth devours a garment and the worm a piece of wood; so all sadness harms the heart: a happy heart makes for good strength, while sadness truly burns the bones of men.

In Riddle 47, the moððe/wyrm engages in activity that endangers the very stapol of wera gied sumes.\(^{54}\) In the "De Tristitia" gloss, unrotnyss eats away at the mind (wite) as a moth or worm consumes the material world, and then will consume the weres . . . banu. While the particulars of the theme may differ, the metaphorical structures of both texts contain notable parallels. Both Old English texts use the destructive tendencies of moððe and wyrm as a transformative representation of the danger posed by deficiencies of the mind, and both use the totality of the verb forswelgan to stress the magnitude of the threat. As an additional warning, both texts employ the figure of a physical base (book and body, respectively) that is negatively consumed. In the Liber Scintillarum gloss, the weakness of the mind will also wreck the bones of man; in the "Bookmoth" riddle, the "bones" of the wer are not corporeal but textual and material: the wise utterances of a learned man, the material book that records them, and even the wood, cloth and binding materials that literally hold this book together. This material destruction that the "Bookmoth" riddle uneasily portrays is itself another metaphorical structure – one for the denaturing of intellectual desire that the literary forms of riddles and related enigmatic texts normally promote. If, as Lerer states, in the Exeter Book "the imagery of binding and compiling . . . becomes a way of representing poetic cognition" then Riddle 47 offers a foreboding counterpoint where the twin cultural foundations of cognition and codex

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the other that it is accusative (so: the insect consumes both words and its literal support, i.e. the binding, pages and cover of the manuscript that contains the words). But the ambiguity of the wording accommodates both interpretations, as the riddle’s proposition hinges on the swing from the literal consumption of the material book to an uncomprehending undoing of the foundations of wisdom. See Richard Marsden, The Cambridge Old English Reader, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 316; Mitchell and Robinson A Guide to Old English, 245; Williamson, Old English Riddles, 286; Russom, "A Moth Laid Waste to Fame," 131; Scattergood, "Eating the Book," 126; and James E. Anderson, "Two Spliced Riddles in the Exeter Book," In Gerardium 5 (1983): 57-75, 59. Most critics concur with Robinson, Artful Ambiguities, who follows Kemp Malone’s earlier reading of the "foundation on which the words stand—i.e. the manuscript" (357); see also Bitterli, Say What I Am, who notes without discussion that the insect "eats its way through cover and page" (136). However, Niles, Old English Enigmatic Poems opposes this reading and is "confident that the words that are swallowed up are 'the strong man's firm support'" (121).\(^{53}\) Rhodes, Liber scintillarum, 168. Original Latin glossed: Conscientia autem rei semper in poena est; Reus animus numquam secures est; Sicut in vestimentum linea et vermis devorat lignum; ita tristitia nocet cordi; Cor laetum bonam valuitudinem facit; Viri autem tristis ardescunt ossa. ("The guilt of the thing, however, is always in the punishment; the guilty mind is never secure (untroubled); as the moth devours a garment and the worm a piece of wood; so sadness injures the heart: the happy heart makes for good health; but sadness inflames the bones of men.")\(^{54}\) Cf. Scattergood, "Eating the Book," 127: "the thieving worm represents a serious threat to literary culture."
become destabilized. Bookworms are usually thought of as chewing their way through the individual pages of books, leaving burrowing holes in the content people would wish to read. But as the insects subsisted on vegetal, not animal material, they would only eat pages made out of some kind paper, as was the case with classical books, and late medieval books. Anglo-Saxon bookworms did not greatly damage the animal-derived parchment or vellum pages of medieval manuscripts; wormholes in such books are generally found only at the very beginning or end, close to the covers and binding materials that the worms desired. Anglo-Saxon readers, then, would understand the destructive tendencies of the bookworm differently than a classical or modern reader. Anglo-Saxon bookworms did not, usually, actually devour the words on the page, but instead attacked the structural materials that held the pages together and protected them. Such a distinction further emphasizes the complex and evolved nature of Riddle 47's proposition and solution, where the inability to learn wisdom from books is rhetorically realized as an threatened act of consumptive violence that, more than dumbly eating the words on the page, literally takes apart the strangan stapol, the strong physical foundation, of the book itself.

The uneasiness about such destruction that run through these texts helps better determine what exactly Riddle 47's obvious and literal proposition -- that hungry yet unthinking insect -- is supposed to signify. Robinson notes that the text gradually anthropomorphizes the modde presented at the riddle's opening: this moth becomes a wyrm, and then a þeow and then finally and most poetically, a stælígest, and these lexical choices "increasingly specify a second level of activity (a man seeking wisdom)." But the poem's use of modde and wyrm also suggests a regressive transformation nested inside this human one. The moth is a classic figure of metamorphosis, beginning its life as a worm before maturing to a winged insect, and the use of modde in the riddle's first line can suggest either stage of the insect's development, winged or wormy. But two lines later, wyrm can only denote the larval form of the creature. In other words, the creature also develops in reverse fashion from mature to immature, undoing its own transformation in the process of its own destructive activities. Immature readers may, in fact, be an important key to better understanding this riddle. Leslie Lockett has demonstrated in detail the "intimate connection" of the Anglo-Latin riddling traditions to the culture of elementary classrooms in tenth and eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon monasteries, and "other verse texts of the early stages of literary study" such as grammars and metrical treatises, with which they often circulated. Given such associations, the modde/wyrm of the Riddle 47 suggests something more than just a man seeking wisdom, or a clueless reader. Rather, the immature creature who devours a learned man's sayings with no intellectual gain can also evoke a more specific figure, that of the monastic schoolboy who cannot or will not learn the wisdom set before him. Viewed this way, the mœþe/wyrm of Riddle 47 becomes the opposite of the ideal monastic cild famously promoted in Ælfric's Colloquy (II.244-55):

55 Lerer, Literacy and Power, 98.
57 On the particulars of this distinction, I am indebted to private correspondence with Ben Tilghman and Abigail Quandt.
58 Robinson, "Artful Ambiguities," 359; cf. Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 237, who cursorily reads the poem as mocking its own reader as "clueless" -- a meta-textual insight that warrants more development.
59 Lockett, Anglo-Saxon Psychologies, 261.
60 In her forthcoming study of the Exeter Book Riddles, Mercedes Salvador-Bello similarly considers the image of a moth burrowing through books to refer metaphorically to a slow-witted monk or student unsuccessfully ruminating on learned books. Mercedes Salvador-Bello, Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2015), n.p.
[Teacher:] Eala, cild, hu eow licap þeos spæc? (So, children, how do you like this speech?)

[Teacher:] Ic ahsige eow, forhwæ swa geornlice leorni ge? (I ask you, why are you so eager to learn?)

[Teacher:] Ond hwæt wille ge? (And what do you desire?)

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Ælfric’s young pupils actively seek learning and wisdom (geornlice leorni; wyllaþ wesan wise). They are frustrated that they cannot understand the profound words (þealre deoplice sprecst) of their teacher and seek a common intellectual ground with him (sprec us æfter urum andgyte þæt we magon understandan þa þingc þe þu specst). These schoolchildren also pointedly contrast their desire to learn against creatures of nature that are cast as figures of ignorant consumption: foolish beasts (nytenu), that eat but gain no knowledge from the natural materials they ingest (we nellaþ wesan swa stunte nytenu, þa nan þingc wiþaþ, buton gœrs ond wæter). These nytenu themselves are part of a longstanding Anglo-Saxon tradition of metaphorically relating animal ingestion to learning that stretches back to Bede’s famous account of Cædmon:

Ond he eal þa he in gehernesse geleornian meahte mid hine gemyndgade, ond swa swa clæne neten eodorcende in þæt swepeste leoð gehwerfde.62

And he was able to learn all that he heard, and, keeping it all in mind, just as a clean animal chewing cud, turned it into the sweetest song.

Riddle 47’s bookworm is cut from the same rhetorical cloth as Bede’s unwilling cowherd and Ælfric’s eager schoolboys, but for negative effect, not positive. Bede upgrades Cædmon’s old pastoral profession into a figure of his new religious learning, as he becomes like the beast (neten) chewing his food for (spiritual) nourishment. Centuries later, Ælfric has revised this trope, distancing the process of intellectual learning from animal consumption. Riddle 47 likewise depicts representations of feeding as incompatible with those of learning, but takes the distinction further, making it not simply antithetical, but destructive. The spiritually immature Cædmon and the literally immature pupils of the Colloquy constitute an ideal foundation of monastic education, and therefore of the intellectual and moral future of the community; Riddle 47’s wyrm,
that *heof in hystro* and *stælgiest*, signifies the peril of being something Ælfric's *cild* are not—both immature and incapable of learning.

### Coda: Post-Creatura Resistance and Containment

In its evocation of undesiring learners, Riddle 47 functions as a prime example of a disciplining text and its own imagined (and feared) disruption, where subjects unwilling or incapable of yielding to the discourse are themselves abject and represented as less than human. The riddle, therefore, occupies an imagined place of rupture to literate knowledge, in order to enact a familiar practice of social and institutional control. Such practice permits a degree of "free play" through a careful maintenance of ideological unruliness, where subjects are, in the words of Michel Foucault, "faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized"; social power may not be exercised, without such freedom, as "without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination."  

Foucault viewed such control of "free" subjects as quintessentially modern, deriving from a late medieval/early modern resistance to "the kind of religious and moral power which gave form, during the Middle Ages, to this subjectivity." But notions of a subject's "free play" that must exist to be contained can also apply, albeit less subtly, to much earlier medieval discourse as well. Even as early medieval literature, Riddle 47 still realizes a typical strategy of power through knowledge by acknowledging the existence (and agency) of the recalcitrant subject who resides at the center of an enculturating text. By the engineered game of the riddle, the text also incites the reading subject to desire, not destroy, the knowledge proffered, and reject resistance to it as both inherently harmful to one's community, and the immoral product of a baser, criminal nature (*heof, stælgiest*).

The fate of the recalcitrant subject (and by extension, its threat to Anglo-Saxon society) is encoded in the riddle's figure of the worm. The *wyrm* is a classic Old English formulation of human regression for both spiritual failing and corporeal decomposition. In *Genesis A*, the devil must become a *wyrm* to engineer humanity's fall (e.g. *wearp hine pa on wyrmes lic and wandr him pa ymbutan bone deades beam þurh deofles craeft*; ll. 490-1: "then he changed into a worm's form, and wound himself around the death-giving tree with the devil's craft"). In *Soul and Body II*, just a few texts before the riddles in the Exeter Book, worms are what chew and devour the lifeless body: *ond þe sculon moldwyrmas monige ceowan, seonowum beslitan swearte wihtes gife and grædgel* (ll. 71-2, "and many earthworms, shall chew on you, and slit your sinews; those dark creatures, voracious and greedy"). In Riddle 47, the *wyrm* that *forswealg the word* of both material books and learned sayings attacks a less literal body—the *corpus* of learning in various forms. The rupture posed by the lowly worm feasting upon the learned word is one that at first glance appears to draw a sharp distinction between the status of human and that of animal in the Anglo-Saxon world: the insect cannot achieve what the human simply fails to achieve. But the earlier analysis here of Aldhelm's "Creation" riddle

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63 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208-26; 225, 221 and 221.

64 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 213.


66 See also Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies*, 263, who notes that many Anglo-Saxon classroom riddles demonstrate a pronounced interest in ideas of corporality and incorporeality, as such ideas help fashion the paradoxes that drive the riddles' enigmatic process.
reminds us that medieval views of animal-human relations were often more equivocal and collapsed than a post-Cartesian sensibility expects. Aldhelm’s riddle proclaims that for all their learning, humans fall short of measuring up to the rest of the divinely created natural world – the smallest *creatura* is greater than the richest *littera*. As posthuman and animal studies critics are fond of pointing out, the impulse to differentiate the animal and human as binarisms is particular to the modern condition. For Cary Wolfe, this should be obvious to a medievalist:

As any medievalist or early modern scholar will tell you, the question of the animal assumes, if anything, even more centrality in earlier periods; indeed recent and emerging scholarship suggests a picture in which the idea of the animal that we have inherited from the Enlightenment and thinkers such as Descartes and Kant is better seen as marking off a brief period (if formative one for our prevailing intellectual, political, and juridical institutions) bookended by a pre- and posthumanism that think the human/animal distinction quite otherwise.⁶⁷

The medieval relationship of human to animal developed the pre-modern epistemologies of classical rhetoric and natural history through which, in the words of Bruce Boehrer, "the study of people and the study of animals emerge as parallel expressions of the same taxonomic impulse."⁶⁸ Applying such ideas to the materiality of medieval texts, Bruce Holsinger simply (but also potently) returns to the seemingly obvious and banal fact that medieval manuscripts were made out of animals, averring that "our investments as medievalists in the enduring relation between textuality and embodiment have entailed an insistent forgetting of what I would call the animalness of medieval writing."⁶⁹ To emphasize his point, Holsinger re-views Exeter Book Riddle 24, traditionally solved as "Bible," but whose content describes the process by which animal flesh, feather and horn are reconstituted as essential elements of textual production and manufacture (vellum, quill and inkholder). For Holsinger, the literal animalness of medieval texts compromises Riddle 24’s own obvious solution:

The Bible that is the riddle’s culminating solution, the "glorious" book that promises heaven, originates not from the words of the prophets, or from the inspiration of God, but from the flayed hide of the animal who give its life and endured only as the ink-stained page of the book.⁷⁰

Holsinger’s reading asks us likewise to think still again about the "Bookmoth" riddle, and how a worm’s unthinking destruction encodes a cultural resistance of a different sort – a resistance to a human unthinking and unfounded sense of superiority. As Bitterli observes, the riddle reverses the relationship between books and their animal origins, allowing the book again to become beast.⁷¹ But here, the book is the embodiment—not least of all in terms of the animal corporeality that literally constructs it—of the human mind. The book, a proxy for the attentive reader, the good monastic citizen, encapsulates the learned sayings, the *Prymfastne cwide* and *wera gied sumes*, themselves rendered out of animal parts. And then something extraordinary happens: some dumb bug—not even a bug, actually, but its infant, immature predecessor—just eats that book. In this moment, our

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⁷⁰ Holsinger, "Of Pigs and Parchment," 622.

⁷¹ Bitterli, Say *What I Am Called*, 192.
sense of a "normal" vertical ontology is post-humanly flattened.\textsuperscript{72} Unlike other Exeter Book riddles, this riddle redacts its humanity; the animal here is not used to make the book, but to unmake the self-proclaimed status of the human from within the proclamation.\textsuperscript{73} As with Aldhem's \textit{De Creatura}, the lower form of nature paradoxically, humblingly exposes the fragility of human endeavor through the textual artifice that both professes and constitutes it. Humans: 0, dumb bug: 1.

Within the larger manuscript context of the Exeter Book, however, this victory is short-lived, contained and ultimately controlled. Up until now, this essay has treated the "Bookmoth" riddle as a complete and individuated text, and in doing so aligns itself with every single textbook and collection that anthologizes it, along with every edition of the Exeter Book, and almost every single piece of scholarship which has studied it. But this is not how the "Bookmoth" riddle exists in its manuscript context, where it survives as the first half of a larger text. In the Exeter Book, a new riddle is typically signaled by a line break and a large capital that begins the first word of the new text. After what is traditionally viewed as the end of the "Bookmoth" riddle (\textit{pe he þam wordum swealg}), there is no such division. Instead, the text continues from folio 112v onto 113r without a noticeable break. Only a \textit{punctus} (common as a marker of internal division throughout the riddles) seven words into the first line of 113r, comes between what we call Riddle 47 and the text that follows, commonly edited as Riddle 48 (and typically solved as "Chalice"). This \textit{punctus} is not particularly special; the text of riddles 47 and 48 contains no fewer than eight \textit{puncti}. A sure end to this text is signaled by a \textit{punctus versus} after the final word of riddle 48, and a large initial on the following line marks the beginning of the next riddle. In the manuscript, the uninterrupted text of 47/48 appears as:\textsuperscript{74}

\begin{verbatim}
Moððe word fræt · me þæt· þuhte wrætlicu
wyrd þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn þæt · se wyrm for-
swealg wera gied sumes þeof in þystro þrym feæt · ne
cwide 7 þæs strangan staþol stæl giest · ne was withe
þy gleawra þe he þam wordum swealg · lcg gefrægn for hæle-
þum hring [ær]endea75 · toætne butan tungan tila ·
þeah he hlude stefne ne cirmde strongum wordum
sinc for secgum swigende cwæð gehæle mec hel-
pend gasæ ryne ongiæan redæan golæo gu-
man galdor cwide gleawe beðencan hyra hælo to go-
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{72} This terminology is borrowed from Levi R. Bryant. See his "Flat Ontology/Flat Ethics," 2012, last modified June 1, 2012, http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/06/01/flat-ontologyflat-ethics/.

\textsuperscript{73} Such a reading is not new, nor solely the domain of new theoretical modes such as posthumanism. In his study of bookworms from over a century ago, Frederick Henry likewise levels the hierarchy of bugs and humans, albeit in far more whimsical terms:

\begin{quote}
I have referred to the tendency displayed by all writers on the book-worm to "drop into poetry," and can only explain it by the hypothesis that the highest degree of consciousness of the most gifted worm is at least on a plane with the lowest degree of human sub-consciousness. It seems not improbable that a book-worm gorged with the choicest literature in prose and verse might be able to communicate in a sub-conscious manner with his human antitype.
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{75} The MS here reads \textit{hringende an}, which continues to puzzle editors as semantically, grammatically, and metrically flawed. See Williamson, Old English Riddles, 288, for a range of possible emendations. I follow Krapp and Dobbie's emendation (\textit{hring [ær]endea}) as the least intrusive.
A moth ate words. I thought that a marvelously occurring occurrence, when I studied this wonder – that the worm devoured the sayings of one man, - that thief in the dark – the glorious speech, and its strong foundation. The thievish-guest was not a whit wiser – he who devoured those words. I learned about a ring that delivered a message for men, clearly, but without a tongue; perfectly, though he did not cry out with a loud voice, or with strong words. The treasure spoke silently before men: "Heal me, helper of souls."

May the mystery of the red gold be known by men, this magic incantation; may the wise consider their salvation to God, just as the ring spoke.

Editors either explicitly or tacitly consider the lack of a clear break between these riddles as a scribal error. This is not surprising; as separate riddles, the first and second parts of this text work rather well. The "Bookmoth" section has a clear source in Symphosius's "Tinea" riddle, while the "Chalice" section has a similar structural integrity, as well as an unambiguous analogue in Exeter Riddle 59 (also "Chalice"). But to stop reading the "Bookmoth" riddle at be he þam wordum swealg is to leave the riddle undone in a different way. The surviving, collective form of Riddles 47/48 as presented in the manuscript bids us to also read these texts as one, and internal evidence suggests that this conflation is not necessarily by accident or error. In true riddling fashion, this section of the Exeter Book appears to be both one riddle and two riddles at the same time.

Taken together, the two halves of this hybrid text manifestly complement each other. Lexically, both sections employ the verb Gefrignan, a rare verb for Exeter Book riddles, to describe the learning of the third person narrator. Both parts of the text share forms of word, cwede, gleaw and híncan. As Williams notes, the text of Riddle 47/48 links "a negative exemplar to its positive antipode," and both portions of the text share a pronounced preoccupation with words and expression. After the wyrm consumes words and yet remains unlearned, the second half of the text gives readers a hring. The hring is both a circular object and a resonant sound – a sacred object that speaks its message clearly (torthtne). The hring is the rim of the chalice, metaphorically contrasted to the object of a church bell, another communicational object that rings by means of a

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76 See Muir, Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry, "Riddle 48," footnote F1: "The scribe has failed to notice that a new riddle begins here, and has run this and the preceding text together." See also Krapp and Dobbie, Exeter Book, 347; Scattergood, "Eating the Book," 119; and Williamson, Old English Riddles, 97, who notes that "paleographically [these two riddles] appear to be one riddle," but edits the text as two separate riddles. Notable exceptions in criticism that consider Riddle 47/48 as single text are Williams, "The Wyrm and the Word," n.p.; and Anderson, "Two Spliced Riddles," 56-63.

77 Williamson, Old English Riddles, 102-3 and 313. Riddle 59 likewise presents the descriptive proposition of a hring that is mute, yet speaks. Additionally, the object in Riddle 59 has wounds which speak, possibly connecting not only to the blood of Christ contained within the cup, but to Riddle 48's mysterious readan gold as well.

78 See above, XXX. Gefrignan occurs in Riddles 45 ("Dough") and 67 ("Bible"). In the latter, we again find the trope of a learned figure (leoda ðareow), who here paradoxically speaks without a mouth (næmne mud hafad). See Williamson, Old English Riddles, 334.

79 As noted earlier (XXX), vocabulary also shared with Maxims I.

clapper (i.e. a *tunge* ("tongue"))). But unlike a bell (and unlike people), the chalice communicates without sound, without tongues, and without words (*hlude stefne ne cirmde, strongum wordum; swigende cwæd*). The miracle of the wordless chalice foretells the fate of ignorant thief who rejects and destroys the words of wisdom that should intellectually and morally nourish him. In the larger context of the paired text, such unlearned figures remain incapable of recognizing (ongietan) the mystery, the *galdorcwide* that the wordless chalice puts before them, and therefore incapable of *beþencan hyra hælo* – thinking about their salvation. By the end of the joined riddles, the *wyrm*, the *þeof in þystro* does not simply symbolize someone dumb, but damned.

Both halves of Riddle 47/48 work together to address concerns about physical and intellectual ruin, and modify mechanisms of human communication, mutating the appropriate sensory organs for the production and reception of language to do so. Mouths make words but should not consume them; this is the domain of the eyes and the ears, but this is precisely and uncharacteristically what happens in the first half of this conflated riddle. Real speech cannot transpire in silence, or without a tongue, and yet this is precisely and miraculously what occurs in the second half of the riddle. In aggregate, Riddle 47/48 deals in two ways with our drive to know things: from both below and above the phenomena of material embodiment and rational understanding. First, the text shows from below a rupture to the process of human knowledge, and recasts recalcitrant Anglo-Saxon subjects as a destructive, immoral and lower form of life. The second section manages and contains such cultural anxieties by articulating a salvific mystery that encourages Anglo-Saxon *guman* not to consume dumbly, but to strain to *ongietan* and *beþencan* the words before them, and therefore save themselves. In the words of James Anderson,

> While men, too, must fear the inevitable onslaught of worms, they are nevertheless given the strength of thought and prayer. Their holy words last even after the ring of their written speech has been lost. In those men who entrust themselves to God’s salvation, crying out to him as the book cries to its chanter, the Word lives on.\(^{81}\)

In the enigmatically doubled text of Riddle 47/48, we in turn should recognize the doubling of an Anglo-Saxon intellectual identity; this writing strains to solve its own cultural riddle, a dynamic, recursive tension born of the high status accorded to human artifice, and its lowly place within a divine order. Riddle 47/48 uneasily marks the precarious condition of the textual production of intellectual expression, and then identifies the theological incentive to reaffirm the necessity of such production’s survival.

Finding the solution to an Old English riddle is only the start of understanding it. No one solution covers everything embedded in such literature, the poetic and cultural resonances they contain are simply too rich for that. If there can be a solution to the "Bookmoth" riddle, it derives (like all riddles) by taking the proposition further than its obvious terms, which ironically mislead, obfuscate and prevent a reader from gaining necessary knowledge – even today. The surface level of the enigmatic text of Riddle 47/48 may concern a worm’s material unmaking of a spiritual book – the created (animal) flesh made wordless, and then the spiritual remaking of the human by salvation, saving created flesh by the Word. It may be solved as an ignorant schoolboy who cannot learn from his teacher. But Old English riddles are texts obsessed with both the process and the material production of discernment, of knowledge, and of learning: they always ask that you go further, and excavate deeper under the surface of the words presented. Solutions, both whole and piecemeal, abound in enigmatic literature; gathering them and understanding how they work remains the Old English riddle’s

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heorte – a more open way to "crack" the text. Nowhere do we see this demonstrated more cogently than in Riddle 47's lowly bookworm. Today, the notion of a bookworm has evolved metaphorically into a positive creature – a voracious reader, one who devours books as a good student should. But the more I learn about the modde who word fræt, the more I am convinced that we, as readers of the poem, are the unwitting subject of a cruel and apt post-historical development. We are not the modern bookworms we like to think we are. As we struggle to recover the meaning of this Anglo-Saxon text and others, we also struggle not to be that Anglo-Saxon wyrm, not to be that poor, ignorant schoolboy, and finally, not to be undone by such a simple, six-line poem.

Works Cited


