UCLA
UCLA Previously Published Works

Title
Premodern and Postcritical: Medieval Enigmata and the Hermeneutic Style

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1cm0f4dt

Journal
New Literary History, 50(1)

ISSN
0028-6087

Author
Weaver, Erica

Publication Date
2019

DOI
10.1353/nlh.2019.0003

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Premodern and Postcritical:
Medieval Enigmata and the Hermeneutic Style*

Erica Weaver

*This is the final pre-proof version of the article, which appears in *New Literary History* 50.1 (2019): 43–64.

> JEAN STEIN: Some people say they can't understand your writing, even after they read it two or three times. What approach would you suggest for them?
>
> WILLIAM FAULKNER: Read it four times.
>
> -1956 interview for *The Paris Review*[1]

> I did the jumble two ways and both ways were right.
> I got VERSE and LIVED and RANKED and VEINED
> And ENVIED and DANKER and DEVIL and SEVER.
>
> -Adrienne Raphel, "Glockenspiel"[2]

When Jean Stein asked William Faulkner what he would suggest for "people [who] say they can't understand your writing, even after they read it two or three times," his nonchalant recommendation—that they "read it four times"—offered little practical advice. Reading, he quipped, is the obvious response to a recalcitrant text. But how? Even without any of the modifiers that have lately come under pressure across the humanities, the action is at once glaringly obvious and devilishly elusive—something we know how to do and yet can never get quite right. According to Jeffrey J. Williams and others who have traced the rise and fall of various strands of literary criticism from the

1940s to the present, "'Reading' as we know it"—that is, as a critical practice of unpacking the meaning of texts, whether via close reading or theoretical frameworks—"has a relatively short history."[3] Yet, we find strikingly similar accounts of it in the 940s, too. Although at first glance we might think of demanding passages with shifting viewpoints and moody, uncommunicative authors as strikingly contemporary, medieval writers similarly delighted in practices and forms that invite readers to grapple with obscurity. These invitations to difficult reading occurred both on the level of the line in the layered epithets of Old Norse skaldic verse and the Old English kennings that allude to "whale-roads" rather than oceans, and in larger formal experiments as in the collections of riddles I will focus on here.[4]

Now that we are embroiled in what Rita Felski has termed the "method wars,"[5] these medieval antecedents and the broader literary-theoretical investments they embody provide an important counterpoint. They helpfully illuminate how, in schematizing our own reading practices, we too readily divide our work into a this-or-that paradigm: We read closely or distantly, and our reading is either paranoid or reparative, critical or uncritical, literary or paraliterary.[6] Critics tend to begin dismantling these divisions before their scaffolding is even halfway up; but as we continue to propose new systems, our descriptive categories usually fall into two opposing camps.[7] Felski, for instance, argues that instead of "trying to get

behind" a text to uncover its hidden secrets, critics should "face squarely up to it and consider the meanings and motives it makes manifest."[8] She frames this "postcritical reading" as an antidote for the overly suspicious and symptomatic frameworks that proliferated so widely in the English departments of the 1970s and 80s—much as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have advocated elsewhere for a turn to surfaces over hidden signs.[9] No matter which camp we align ourselves with, all of our reading seems rigidly dialectical without any neat Hegelian synthesis in sight.

In the ever-proliferating conversations about what and how we read, the interpretive practices elicited by medieval enigmata ('mysteries' or 'riddles') and the self-consciously difficult tenth-century aesthetic they inspired explode all binaries. These riddles privilege neither surface nor symptom, closeness nor distance. Rather, the experience of reading them is dynamic and multidirectional, akin to the motions of a Hoberman sphere that continually contracts, expands, and rotates. They are emblematic of a longstanding approach to literature that "did the jumble two ways and both ways were right," as Adrienne Raphel puts it. As a self-consciously playful and multiplicitous hermeneutic movement, tenth-century "hermeneutic Latin" and its seventh- through tenth-century riddling antecedents thus offer a particularly helpful antidote to postcritical work in the wake of Bruno Latour, which has been missing a sense of playful multiplicity.[10]

Indeed, this body of literature helpfully answers Latour's most salient question for the future of critique: "What would critique do if it could be associated with *more*, not with *less*, with *multiplication*, not *subtraction*."[11] As I will discuss below, medieval enigmata do just that, resisting the kinds of binary categorizations of reading that at their most rigid risk flattening texts into cardboard cut-outs. Medieval enigmata and the hermeneutic flexibility they elicit thus simultaneously provide both a much-needed corrective and an often-missing history for the postcritique debate. In foregrounding a sense of radical capaciousness that is often missing from present discussions, they also foreground a longstanding investment in ethical reading practices of the kind that have frequently demanded a critical spotlight.[12] Above all, then, these medieval riddles and riddling modes demonstrate that the anxiety over what it is we do when we read—and the need for our chosen paradigms to reflect an ethical orientation towards our communal lives—aligns modern reading more than ever with the always-multiple hermeneutic modes favored by England's earliest exegetes. "'Reading' as we know it" has a long history indeed.

I do not wish to elide the profound differences between medieval and modern reading practices—not least in the stakes of reading, then and now, and in the kinds of texts that draw our attention. By playfully positing that the premodern is in some ways already postcritical, however, I wish to highlight the capaciousness of early medieval

reading practices, which encouraged the coexistence of varying affective responses and orientations towards their texts. The premodern and the postmodern are related but asymmetric—valuable to think about in relation to one another, but as much for their differences as for their similarities. I consider their juxtaposition to be of intellectual value at both ends of the exchange.

Medieval reading practices have long played a vital role in shaping the history of hermeneutics. Fredric Jameson sought a Marxist equivalent to medieval biblical interpretation, while scholars like Eugene Vance and Stephen G. Nichols have traced connections between medieval exegesis and poststructuralism, and critics like L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, Bruce Holsinger, Erin Felicia Labbie, D. Vance Smith, and Andrew Cole are uncovering the medievalism of theory.[13] Holsinger has persuasively argued for what he terms "theoretic medievalism" as the driving force that undergirds the work of such major French thinkers as George Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida, while Cole has demonstrated the medieval roots of Hegelian dialectic. It has thus been a habit of medieval studies over the last thirty years or so to confront postmodern this and that in order to expose the postmodern's premodern origins. In doing so, medievalists have revealed the ways in which pre- and postmodern literature and literary theory are transformed by being brought into contact.

Medieval enigmata and the hermeneutic style more broadly introduced early English readers to a practice of reading that, I argue, was neither suspicious nor purely formalist but a probing, meditative kind of reading that blends paranoid and reparative, symptomatic and surface approaches. This method attends to both history and form, moving from forms to things and from the apprehension of things to the undertaking of broader social action. It is both premodern and postcritical, and it offers a deep history as well as an avenue forward for the practice of hermeneutics.

Medieval Reading and Riddling

The earliest English *literati* directed their reading upward and outward along widening scales of interpretation that dilated and contracted, twisted, and turned elliptical. When approaching scripture, medieval readers frequently sought to attend to multiple senses in a variably-pronged process of exegetical reading.[14] As Ryan McDermott helpfully summarizes, "Henry of Ghent, for example, considers the various numbers assigned to the senses of scripture by the pseudo-Dionysius (two), Hugh of St. Victor (three), Bede (four), Augustine (five), and theorists working in the rhetorical tradition (as many as there are figures of speech)," but "the important point is that all agree on the multiplicity of senses."[15] As Aldhelm of Malmesbury (d. 709), Anglo-Saxon England's first man of letters and the author of the *Enigmata* I

will discuss below, said of reading, “the fourfold ecclesiastic tradition must be skillfully sought out, distributed according to history, allegory, tropology, and anagogy” (“quadriformis ecclesiasticae traditionis normulis secundum historiam, allegoriam, tropologiam, anagogen digesta solerter indagando”).[16] A single image was thought to manifest several distinct motives and meanings, each with its own bearing on life beyond the page.

In Old English, this demand for reflective thought and interpretive responsiveness is embedded in the verb *rædan* itself. *Rædan* simultaneously meant “to have an idea, suppose”; more specifically, “to make out the meaning of a riddle, dream, &c”; or simply “to read,” whether to oneself or aloud.[17] *Rædan* thus entails both reading and determination; in fact, *rædels,* the preferred English term for enigma, is a close cousin. The verb’s origins in oral explication testify both to its intimate associations with political counsel and, in its earliest instantiations, to “a culture unaccustomed to the written text,” where, as Nicholas Howe helpfully summarizes, “the act of reading would have seemed remarkably like solving a riddle. For it meant translating meaningless but somehow magical squiggles on a leaf of vellum into significant discourse”—much as “grammar,” with its seemingly occult potential to mystify and demystify, gave rise to “glamour” in the eighteenth century.[18] For the Anglo-Saxons, then, *rædan* required an active process of making out meaning, and

hermeneutic responsiveness was self-consciously cultivated.[19] Interpretive flexibility was placed at the center of the classroom experience of learning to read, where it would remain throughout the Middle Ages.

Initially inspired by the North African “party boy” Symphosius, enigmata served as elementary school texts in Anglo-Saxon England, enshrining temporary ambiguity as the hallmark feature of literate life.[20] As Martin Irvine has demonstrated, these classroom collections imparted much more than the fundamentals of Latin grammar and meter.[21] They also introduced their readers to broader hermeneutic frameworks and, I argue, to a practice of reading that would today be deemed radically capacious—neither historicist nor purely formalist, neither too suspicious nor too unquestioning but exploratory and contemplative. Multiple modes of interpretation were cultivated and preferred—all in the service of building a reflective devotional life. For these reasons, riddles were purposefully placed at the center of the curriculum, and Aldhelm’s were particularly popular. A collection of one hundred poems ranging in length from four to ninety-six lines, they originally formed a part of his pioneering metrical treatise—the first written in England. Although Aldhelm initially intended them as an expedient means of teaching meter (among other things), the poems almost immediately began circulating independently from the technical treatise they were meant to illustrate. As a freestanding set, the

Enigmata were soon incorporated into the broader curriculum and continued to circulate widely throughout the early Middle Ages. The collection was directly imitated by Tatwine (Archbishop of Canterbury, 731–734), “Eusebius” (possibly Bede’s abbot), Boniface (the “Apostle of Germany”), and the creators of the Berne and Lorsch riddles.[22] Two of Aldhelm’s riddles were directly translated into Old English as well, and, given the widespread popularity of his collection, it is possible that, as a set, the ninety-five Old English riddles now contained in the Exeter Book were modeled on his hundred enigmata. These ‘mysteries’ continued to shape literature and literary theory well into the later Middle Ages, too, with some of Symphosius’ riddles circulating in the popular romance *Apollonius of Tyre*. Later Latin and Middle English riddles would influence such poems as William Langland’s allegorical masterpiece *Piers Plowman*, constituting what Curtis A. Gruenler has labeled a veritable “poetics of enigma” during the period.[23]

Given the constraints of the genre, riddles naturally both create and demand a heightened investment in reading and interpretation. As Anglo-Saxon schoolroom texts, they were explicitly meant to foster close and careful reading. But they would never have been centered in the curriculum if there had not already been the sense that all reading requires concentration and hermeneutic elasticity. More than two centuries after he wrote them, Aldhelm’s works found particular favor with the influential tenth-century bishops who would revitalize English

monastic life after a period of decline and waves of Viking invasions. Pitted against the supposedly uneducated and non-Latinate secular clergy they sought to replace, these Benedictine monks seized on Aldhelm's carefully wrought style and the kind of reading it fostered. Indeed, inspired by the phenomenological work of the *Enigmata*, they crafted a similar aesthetic of their own in order to elicit heightened concentration and textual engagement, as I will argue in the final sections of this essay.

But first, an account of Aldhelm's riddles is in order. In each of one hundred poems, the Latin meters he sought to model imposed demanding formal constraints, which necessitated arcane, metaphorical descriptions. Marked by obscure word choices and neologisms, these arcane descriptions would come to characterize the highly stylized tenth-century Latin he inspired. Aldhelm proudly deemed his *Enigmata* a "dense forest of Latinity" ("densa Latinitatis silva"), consisting of gnarled syntax, branching clauses, the "hundredfold leaves of meter" ("centuplis metrorum frondibus"), and flowery language.[24] By design, then, his poems were intended to elicit —and reward—close formal analysis. The preface neatly sets up a readerly expectation of meanings and motives embedded in surface-level play. The first and last letters of the thirty-six hexameters form a double acrostic that proclaims, "Aldhelm sang the odes in a thousand verses" ("Aldhelmus cecinit millenis versibus odas"), tucking both a

proclamation of authorship and a rough expectation of subsequent length into a preface that is otherwise silent on these subjects (*E* 97).

Tatwine and Boniface both emulated this acrostic format, further cementing the close ties between enigmata and formal gamesmanship, or what Christiane Veyrard-Cosme has termed “the metapoetic aspects of obscurity” (“éléments métapoétiques sur l’obscuritas”).[25] First, Tatwine extended Aldhelm’s acrostic superstructure into the riddles themselves, concluding his final poem with instructions to read the sequence again, this time taking note of the first letters of the first line of each riddle and then of the last letters of the same lines in order to find two hidden hexameters. In reward for these labors, Tatwine’s readers learn that “Beneath the meters’ thread, the composer weaves together these forty intertwined riddles, twisting in various ways” (“Sub deno quater haec diverse enigmata torquens / Stamine metrorum exstructor conserta retexit”)—an echo of his opening lines.[26] Together, his *Enigmata* thus contain a fragmented comment on their own formal composition, which Tatwine himself instructs his readers to root out. The work of reassembling the embedded hexameters is inseparable from the work of reading the riddles or appreciating their solutions, as an additional hidden subtext is entwined in the formal features of the poems. Boniface likewise carried the acrostic form into the body of his riddles, composing twenty discrete acrostics that reveal the solutions to the mysteries at hand:

ten virtues and ten vices.

Six of the Exeter Book riddles similarly require readers to decode inset runes and cryptograms, which provide the answers to the puzzles, while Exeter Book Riddle 40 necessitates a particularly vigorous linguistic decoupling process.[27] Here, readers must recognize that *Nyd* ('need'), *Æsc* ('ash'), *Ac* ('oak'), and *Hægel* ('hail') double as common nouns and as the names of runic letters. In order to solve the riddle, then, the enterprising reader must copy out the letters, while repeating and rearranging them in order to produce the riddle's twofold solution: *hæn* ('hen') and *hana* ('cock'), the Old English names for the "two wondrous creatures" ("wyhte wrætlice twa"), who were copulating ("plegan / hæmedlaces") at the outset and who have now been disentangled in the act of reading.

Whereas we expect to deduce the answers to riddles only after deep concentration and a bit of luck, Symphosius's influential *Enigmata* and most of the Latin riddles written in their wake, including Aldhelm's, are each titled with their solutions, suggesting that these 'mysteries' offered a flexible method for engaging in textual experience rather than a cat-and-mouse hunt for singular answers. Even when the solutions were not provided as headings, they were obliquely tucked into the initial letters of the lines, as in Boniface's acrostic answer keys, or added into the margins—and sometimes even woven into the meter, as the runes are in the Old English riddles

mentioned above. Unlike the rest of the Exeter Book riddles, many of which still prove elusive,[28] finding the answers to Aldhelm's *Enigmata* is easy enough. The difficulty instead lies in reorienting yourself to the solutions at hand—to knowing the intended result and linking the various elements together so that, in reading, you reconstitute the object or phenomenon being described.

Forty of Aldhelm's title-words require readers to reorient themselves to the nature of language and naming as well, suggesting that the prescribed answers complicate the riddles almost as often as they simplify them. Drawing on seventh-century encyclopedist and Church Father Isidore of Seville's insistence that the name of an object is inseparable from its characteristics, Howe demonstrates that many of Aldhelm's titles position the ensuing riddles as linguistic or etymological meditations. As he argues, "the mystery of the enigma"—what remains to be sought after, when the one-word solution is already known from the outset—"is also the important clue" in how to read the riddles: "the title word or phrase offers in the obvious sense a solution; but in a more esoteric, linguistic sense it may also present a riddle of its own... Such riddles ask 'What does my name mean?' rather more than 'What am I?'"[29] Or, to put it another way, rather than simply posing a riddle about a cat, Aldhelm's sixty-fifth enigma asks its readers to consider why a cat is called "mouse-catcher" ("muriceps") and what it usually goes by instead. As James Hall Pitman helpfully

summarizes, the *Enigmata* thus serve as "an instrument upon which Aldhelm attempts to play, wishing to reveal, not to hide, the wonder and mystery of the universe" and all of the words and things within it, so that "Far from being desirous of concealing the subject of each riddle, he would be defeating his true purpose if he succeeded in hiding it."[30] By serving as goads for conceptual reconfiguration, then, medieval enigmata may well have prompted readers to agree with Latour's now-famous proclamation that "The critic," or the solver of riddles, "is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles."[31]

Wandering through Aldhelm's *Enigmata*

Aldhelm himself introduces the collection by boasting that his *Enigmata* will surpass the communications of Moses and David because the hundred riddles will survey all of creation in order "to reveal the veiled mysteries of things" ("pandere rerum … enigmata … clandestina")—a kind of mise en abyme, in which enigmata reveal *enigmata* (*E* 97). As he explains, he has obtained materials relating the various qualities of things heavenly and earthly, grand and simple. What emerges is cosmographic in scope. Aldhelm has collapsed an entire ontology into one hundred poems that describe objects, animals, and broader aspects of the cosmos, ranging from the Colossus of Rhodes to the Creation. Throughout, the mark of the divine is revealed in the smallest creature or thing, from the silkworm (enigma 12) to the

bubble (enigma 62).

For Aldhelm, even the greatest of human works, the Colossus, exists to showcase God's superior creative ability. Manmade objects are made "in vain" ("frustra"), the statue says, lamenting that he has an "enormous body" ("corpus inorme"), but his massive size is useless "so long as I am cheated of all feelings within my limbs" ("totis membrorum dum frauder sensibus intus") (*E* 130). The implicit parallel heightens divine achievement in animating tiny, delicate hornets (enigma 75), lanky camels (enigma 99), and glittering constellations (enigmata 8, 48, and 53). The series concludes with a paean to all creation. And yet, Aldhelm does not present a scientific explanation of the natural world. His intention is not to dispel mystery but to demonstrate its presence—to teach his readers how to read the "book of nature" along with the books of their libraries.[32]

By meditating on each sequence of allusions, you learn to see each object differently, musing on one concept after another, as competing images cluster together, and the familiar is rendered rich and strange. In enigma 46 ("nettle"), for instance, the same word is reworked three times in the opening line: "I torture torturers, but would torture nobody of my own free will" ("Torqueo torquentes, sed nullum torqueo sponte"), first equating the nettle with its disturbers and then denying the parallel by insisting that the nettle only strikes back once struck (*E* 117).[33] Enigma 49 ("cauldron") begins with a

similarly confounding cluster of opposing traits, as the vessel is simultaneously "curved" ("curva") and "forged of flattened metals" ("patulis fabricata metallis"), ultimately enduring "twinned battles" ("geminas… pugnas"), as it faces off against both "the water's liquid and the ferocious flames" ("latices limphae… flammasque feroces") (*E* 119). Rather than an uninteresting crockpot, the cauldron emerges as a bold combatant, suspended between earth and heaven. In six lines, Aldhelm shifts the viewer's gaze from an "ugly" ("horrida") object unworthy of lingering attention to a glowing and seething adversary with a fascinatingly doubled existence (*E* 119).

The enigma is thus a rhetorical device suited to instruction in basic interpretive practices: You must dwell in contradictions. Attempt to unravel the mystery, and you shift into a higher order of reading—one that attends to textual as well as material life. Readers need not identify the speaker as a cauldron but rather the cauldron as a site of tension between fire and water, earth and heaven. As Jonathan Wilcox notes, in riddle collections, "myriad aspects of the Anglo-Saxon world that are not usually worthy of literary attention"—nettles and cauldrons and peppercorns—"here take centre-stage."[34] Because the traditional solution is already provided before you begin to read the poem, the interpretive work instead consists of making the poem fit its title and of meditating on the object or phenomenon being described and the texture of the description itself.

As poems, they must be broken apart like peppercorns, for, as enigma 40 ("pepper") concludes, "you will consider me to be of absolutely no worth unless my insides are ground for their bright contents" ("me subnixum nulla virtute videbis, / Viscera ni fuerint nitidis quassata medullis") (*E* 115). In the raven riddle, for instance, the final line lexically plays off of the Latin answer, imagining "corbus" ('raven') morphing into "orbus" ('childless'): "Let one letter be taken away: subsequently I will remain without a brood" ("Littera tollatur: post hæc sine prole manebo") (*E* 126). As the solution itself begins to break down, the riddle becomes a meditation on the nature of language and textuality—and on the arbitrariness of the signifier.

As a set, the *Enigmata* are also highly intertextual, frequently demanding a kind of distant reading by setting up pairs of riddles, alluding to an object's characteristic traits in Classical literature, or referring to its etymological associations in Latin and Greek. Just as careful attention to the preface reveals an embedded acrostic assembled from the first letter of each line, so does careful attention to the relationships between enigmata reveal further textual associations, such as the connection between the raven (enigma 63) and the dove (enigma 64), the birds sent out from Noah's ark. Although Aldhelm does not state their connection explicitly, the subtle tense shift between the openings of the two riddles—first as the floods were in the process of destroying the world and then when they had washed

everything away—and the movement from the raven's flaunting of the law to the dove's obedience to it further cement the connection between the two in direct verbal parallels.

Here and elsewhere, the collection invites a readerly ripple effect, as the reader moves from biblical image to biblical image—raven to dove, apple tree to fig tree—and from element to element.[35] These associations are cleverly tucked in, inviting readers to meditate on other possible associations, as feather-pillows (enigma 41) call to mind birds (enigma 42), and the swallow's flight (enigma 47) calls to mind the flight of the heavens (enigma 48). Ordinary objects prefigure planetary movements, just as ravens prefigure doves. Donatus and many subsequent medieval grammarians available in Anglo-Saxon England defined an enigma as "an obscure thought [enlightened] through the unseen similarity of things" ("Aenigma est obscura sententia per occultam similitudinem rerum").[36] Throughout his collection, Aldhelm celebrates these overlooked similarities, not only within individual riddles but also between them—both in the juxtaposition of objects of vastly different environments and scales and in the mirroring of typological practices and elemental transitions.

Like the surface readings of recent years, the style of Aldhelmian enigma ultimately disassembles language, transferring the reader's attention from the words themselves to the broader systems they instantiate. Patricia Dailey has argued that "As language becomes

more and more conspicuous in the determination of how the world is ordered and perceived, so too does it paradoxically distance man from knowing the essence of things in themselves, leaving their mystery intact."[37] The pedagogic advantage is clear. Riddles de-familiarize the everyday, remediating objects and figures for the elementary classroom. In response, readers must reconfigure their expectations, extrapolating a larger picture from small details. The reader must learn to dwell in possibility. In enigma 59 (*Penna,* or Pen), Aldhelm depicts a quill making a straight path through snowy fields. Although writing is linear, however, reading is not. He insists:

> But one rough track is not enough to spread out through the fields,
> for the pathway stretches into a thousand trails,
> and conveys to the height of heaven those who are not wandering.
>
> (Nec satis est unum per campos pandere callem,
> Semita quin potius milleno tramite tendit,
> Quae non errantes ad caeli culmina vexit.) (*E* 124)

The quill's straight path has become tortuous and multiple. The enigma is no longer about a pen but about the gap between writing and reading, the existence of multiple interpretations, and the moral import of reading well. Riddles—and the broader hermeneutic methods they model—thus perform a smoke-and-mirrors funhouse act. Even as Aldhelm notes that *not* wandering will lead to heaven, he writes a series of poems that prompt an intellectual wandering of their own. They reflect back the world differently, forcing readers to

reconceptualize their surroundings as they read the riddle, exchanging one possible vision for another. Rather than a mistake to be avoided, wandering ultimately forms a necessary part of the intellectual process of seeking the truth.

Aristotle divided language into two categories of words: those in their usual, proper meanings and those that are somehow othered, whether by metaphorical intent, rarity, or poetic effect.[38] Riddles collapse this binary. Their language is at once usual and extraordinary. Dailey has concluded that responsiveness both relies on and produces "patterns in thought and language… that mediate affect with cognitive skill," allowing "for an object to be both nameable and potentially mysterious or enigmatic at one and the same time" in order to provoke wonder.[39] Aldhelm certainly used his riddles to this effect. But he also modeled something more serious: namely, that riddles could lead to salvation.[40] Learn to read multiply, follow after the pen, and reading "conveys to the height of heaven" ("ad caeli culmina vexit") those who attend to it.

Sustaining Attention with the Hermeneutic Style

Salvific reading, active interpretation, and textual self-fashioning formed the core components of the ninth- and tenth-century Benedictine "correction" movement, which reshaped literary and devotional life both in England and on the Continent and, fittingly,

cemented Aldhelm’s place at the center of the Anglo-Saxon curriculum. His ‘mysteries’—combined with his signature style and formal gamesmanship in works like his popular treatise on virginity, which was initially written for the famously learned nuns of Barking Abbey—provided the framework for the self-conscious cultivation of a register of written Latin and English that, I argue, was explicitly designed to cultivate hermeneutic responsiveness. This was a high style of writing so that the very form would force a reader to process texts more slowly and carefully—to seek allegorical significance rather than literal meaning and to aspire always to inscription in the “books of life” (“libri vitae”), where Anglo-Saxon monasteries inscribed the names of their dead in imitation of the book that Christ would consult at the Last Judgement.[41] Here, too, the act of reading and the act of salvation became one and the same.

Beginning with the Desert Fathers and Mothers in the fourth century, monks strove to embody the Pauline injunction to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17), “chanting psalms continuously for extended periods of time, achieving feats such as the recitation of all 150 psalms in a single night,” as Susan Boynton has noted in her overview of the Divine Office, which monks labored to perform eight times a day.[42] The *Benedictine Rule* required the Psalter to be chanted over the course of each week, ensuring that the same texts would be encountered every day, week, and year, in repeated cycles.

Throughout, the sleep-deprivation was extreme, with monastic authorities recommending only three or four hours of sleep per night.

In the midst of such chronic exhaustion, the textual repetition of the Office proved paradoxically taxing: while it ensured that the words were always easy to remember, it also made it unnervingly easy to voice them without really thinking about what they meant. The *Benedictine Rule* enjoins, "let us stand to sing the psalms in such a way that our minds and our voices harmonize" ("sic stemus ad psallendum ut mens nostra concordet voci nostrae"), necessitating attentive engagement from all participants.[43] But how could they counteract the feelings of expectation and anticipation that jeopardized the harmony of voice and mind? That is, how could medieval readers, translators, and exegetes help fend off complacency, and prevent monks from mentally exiting the choir?

Aldhelm and his enigmatic style provided one possible solution. Responding to the crises of familiarity and distraction in monastic life, Æthelwold—Bishop of Winchester from 963 to 984 and a key figure in the mid-tenth-century "correction" movement that sought to reinstate the *Benedictine Rule* in England—turned to Aldhelm's formal pyrotechnics. Much as Aldhelm had himself borrowed from Isidore to pose riddles that would inspire broader linguistic meditations, Æthelwold borrowed from Aldhelm to craft a literary lexicon that would unsettle readers' usual expectations—and thereby recapture their

attention. The resulting "hermeneutic style," as it is now known, struck a chord. As Michael Lapidge summarizes, "in England in the later tenth century virtually every Latin author whose works have survived is affected by [the] stylistic tendency" towards Aldhelmian complexity.[44]

As I have argued here, the style is aptly named. And yet the current critical consensus has nothing to do with hermeneutics at all—at least not as an offshoot of literary theory and interpretation. The style was instead named for *hermeneumata*, a set of Greek-Latin glossaries from whence its abstruse vocabulary was thought to derive. Other descriptors have recently been proposed, but these rarefied terms and stylistic quirks reflect much more than a pedantic predilection for arcana. They instead form the central part of a broader literary-theoretical framework in English and Latin.[45]

Together with his *De virginitate* and other works, Aldhelm's heavily ornamented *Enigmata* inspired a broader experiment in exegetical semiotics, and the attendant movement in slow, meditative reading asked readers not just to read, but to "Read what I mean" ("Ræd hwæt ic mæne")—a suggestive ending from the Exeter Book riddles.[46] Just as the defining feature of the enigma is in making an already-known answer seem unfamiliar, the hermeneutic style sought to re-enliven well-known texts. From Aldhelm to Æthelwold, early medieval reading was marked by its insistence on interpretive multiplicity—and on the need to approach even the most familiar texts

and objects as if for the first time. In order to defamiliarize key devotional works like the Psalms, Æthelwold and his compatriots doubly and triply glossed them with rarified words, grecisms, and a continual impulse towards lexical variety. This was a style designed to provoke interpretation—and to prevent reading at the literal level alone. In essence, it was a means of writing that was intended to shift the reader from a too-narrow focus on what a text *says* to what it *means* in the world.

Above all, this hermeneutic style, like the *Enigmata*, corrected for lapses in attention, demanding a persistent, concentrated effort from monks striving to process and meditate on important ecclesiastical documents and devotional texts. Crucially, the mode was also favored for difficult, but essential, schoolbooks such as Byrhtferth of Ramsey's *Enchiridion*. This was thus a style originating in and returning to the classroom, beginning with a riddling impulse, next cultivated for glosses to the Psalms and to Aldhelm, and then spreading outwards into contemporary colloquies, sermons, and poems. By piling on ever-obscurer synonyms, the reformers led their readers into the dark and thence to greater illumination, cultivating a readerly orientation towards interpretation and reflection that would look beyond the page to the larger historical moment—and that would mobilize reading as a bulwark against distraction.

Infused with the same hermeneutic investments of the riddles that taught them how to read, these Anglo-Saxon texts made use of this kind of stylistic defamiliarization in order to reorient readers towards their world and to figure reading as a process of continual rereading and remediation—much as Christopher Cannon has traced a similar "art of rereading" in later medieval texts.[47] Indeed, dedicated glossaries of rare Greek and Latin words proliferated in the tenth century, shaping the course of Latin and English writing and suggesting that Æthelwold's stylistic proclivities were very much in vogue.

Silent, Obscure Words and Glossing Tongues

Although the hermeneutic style was chiefly an English phenomenon, a few early practitioners on the Continent composed similarly ornate works, which were likewise invested in monastic "correction" and subsequently crossed the Channel to spur on the stylistic program of Aldhelm's fans and imitators. One of these authors, Abbo Cernuus ("the Bowed"), provides a helpful paradigm for the mobilization of Aldhelmian style in Benedictine circles. A ninth-century monk and poet of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, Abbo ransacked a glossary of rare words for the third book of his *Bella Parisiacae urbis* ("Wars of the City of Paris") to such an extent that most of the poem's words begin with A, B, and C—a style that, he notes, "equips students with the best

taste" ("cleronomos decentissime ornat").[48] This third book was wildly popular in Æthelwold's circle, and the redoubtable bishop sent a copy—along with a Latin-Greek glossary—to Peterborough in an effort to establish what he no doubt considered a useful library.[49] As Abbo and Æthelwold rightly sensed, the marked language constructed both the unified sense of community that Rebecca Stephenson has described and, as I have been discussing, a broader culture of literary interpretation.[50]

The hermeneutic style eventually became a tag for a certain kind of monastic identity; but I contend that this style originated as a means of cultivating a certain way of relating to texts—that is, of reading slowly and attentively in the face of distraction. Abbo glosses his own poem, much as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Gray, and T. S. Eliot would later do—and, of course, as Æthelwold and his students would in producing bilingual editions of important texts, such as the Psalms, the Old English translation of the *Benedictine Rule*, and the *Regularis concordia*, which Æthelwold composed in order to provide standardized rules for English monks and nuns. The poet of Saint-Germain explained his rationale in a dedicatory note, which specifies that his self-glossation operates as a clarifying intertext for his resistant verse:

> Then it captures the affections of the students resolutely going around the unusual words in its commentaries, but allegory will also joyfully beam for a while for whomever the hunt for it pleases. Because it inheres by itself in the silent, obscure words, with my own hand I threw glossing tongues onto the surface.

> (Tum scolasticis ambientibus glosas suis in commentis obnixe complacet, allegoria vero aliquantisper, cui eius indago libuerit, renitet; tum per semet quoniam mutis inhaeret verbis, propria manu linguas superieci.)[51]

Since his allegory is transmitted in arcane, seemingly incommunicative, language, Abbo has added a clarifying gloss above each line, thus enabling his allegory to please the students who might otherwise be stumped, as well as dedicated enthusiasts of the hunt. Sesquipedalian romps abound, but less adventurous or experienced readers need never stray from the gloss, following Abbo's explicatory "tongues" rather than muddling through his unnervingly silent verses.

Abbo thus mobilizes the same spatial terminology that has recently been proposed by Best and Marcus, while anticipating a necessary critique of it: Texts have both tongues and silences, surfaces and depths. Some readers welcome the opportunity to stay up above, but others will delight in the search down below, and we might imagine the same reader choosing one level in the morning and another at night. Moreover, by tossing "glossing tongues onto the surface" of their texts, Abbo and Æthelwold destabilize the conventional distinction between literal and allegorical meaning. Both are inscribed on the surface of the page, and both play a role in shaping their readers, who can veer between the lines, choosing their own adventures for each reading of Abbo's poem or Æthelwold's glossed Psalms. By providing multiple paths, they self-consciously lay stepping-

stones for many different kinds of readers, much as Anglo-Saxon authors like Aldhelm, Bede, and Alcuin would do in repeating the same material in prose and verse to ward off boredom and cater to audience requests.[52]

For early medieval readers, taking recourse to only one kind of reading, or insisting on a "surface" approach to the exclusion of all others, would have been deeply dismaying. To provide but one additional example, Ælfric of Eynsham, Anglo-Saxon England's most prolific vernacular prose stylist and a self-proclaimed *alumnus Æthelwoldi*, or "student of Æthelwold," worried continually about the ways in which texts have depths that could be obscured by their seemingly accessible surfaces. In his Preface to his translation of *Genesis*, he underscored "how *deep* the book is in spiritual meaning, though it is written with clear words" ("hu deop seo boc ys on gastlicum andgite, þeah þe heo mid leohtlicum wordum awriten sig").[53] For Ælfric, the hunt for a spiritual, or allegorical, meaning was an essential part of reading the text—without it, a "reader" was not really reading at all. Interestingly, whereas Heather Love has recently advocated for an ethical reading practice that is "close but not deep," Ælfric expresses an opposite desire.[54] And yet, the early medieval enigmata that likely taught him how to read resemble the observational, analytic, even post-human descriptions welcomed by practitioners like Love of the "new sociologies of literature."

As Aldhelm and Abbo, Æthelwold and Ælfric nicely illustrate, settling on a fixed interpretation or method was not the true thrill or import of reading, then or now, so much as the continual, pleasurable search for additional meanings and viewpoints—and additional methods for lifting out ethical paradigms and more complete knowledge. Even as they uncoupled *hana* (‘cock’) and *hæn* (‘hen’) or pondered the nature of peppercorns, these early medieval churchmen sought to better understand the revealed word of God in all of its possible manifestations. Aldhelm, Abbo, Æthelwold, and the writers who followed them therefore sought to make words mean more fully *in their own writing*. By creating a text that teaches itself, they thereby rendered silent words more communicative, paradoxically making silence even more expressive than speech. As Isidore, Aldhelm, and their followers understood, you cannot say multiple words at once, but you can write them many different ways in the same space. When reading, a reader can then modulate a tone doubly and triply within the same expression, because the eye can take in more than the ear. A well-trained reader will then seek out even more meanings in the traditionally fourfold process of interpretation.

This desire to make silence speak multiply is what makes riddles work as well.[55] Throughout Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* and in Abbo’s theory of self-glossation, we see the textual remediation not only of obscure language but also of broader ideas about reading and interpretation.

For early medieval readers both in England and on the Continent, reading was not about repression. Nor was it about something that the text could not articulate. Rather, it asked readers to use the elements of the text's surface—its style, its vocabulary, its presentation on the page—in order to propel themselves more effectively towards the text's broader meanings. By getting lost in Aldhelm's "dense forests of Latinity" or the hunt for Abbo's concealed allegory, readerly pleasure and effort combine in the navigation of obscure sentences and difficult syntax, in the pursuit of hidden meanings and historical contexts as well as the careful plotting of a course through intricately wrought lines of verse.

Whereas we often frame suspicious and paranoid pursuits as dour projects, Anglo-Saxon literature demonstrates that symptomatic readings can be just as joyful as surface ones.[56] Indeed, suspicion itself could become a game, with the riddles themselves taunting their would-be solvers: Tell me, windbag scholars ("inflatos … sofos"), what I am (*E* 149). This flippant challenge concludes Aldhelm's hundredth riddle and thus the *Enigmata* as a whole and reveals the playfulness inherent in the reading process.[57] These texts thus demonstrate that a paranoid reading practice may also be reparative and vice-versa—a duality that Heather Love has traced in Eve Sedgwick's own articulation of the two modes. In the hermeneutic style, what might be seen as "hypervigilance" becomes "attentiveness," so that "instead of

powerful reductions," this body of literature invites "acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy, and making whole," echoing Love's framing of the pleasures of reparative reading, while at the same time also creating space for less positive affects.[58]

Just as medieval readers approached nature like a massive tome open to interpretation, they sought books themselves as guiding frameworks for lived experience, deriving the principles for ethical life from their textual encounters. By learning to decode Latin and English riddles, as well as the Greek and Hebrew terms that often accompanied them, early medieval readers transcended elementary literacy to become truly learned, studied in parsing surfaces as well as hidden signs. The proliferation of riddle collections in the early Middle Ages thus cultivated an in-group of learned initiates, capable of solving intricate puzzles and reading across rapidly multiplying linguistic traditions. Similarly, hermeneutic Latin and English served as an identity-marker for monks and nuns of reformed houses, unifying writers at Winchester, Glastonbury, Canterbury, Ramsey, Abingdon, Worcester, and elsewhere, while spurring them to read more attentively. To be a reader, one had to be an interpreter as well—and a careful considerer of "the meanings and motives" a text "makes manifest," as Felski urges us to do today.[59]

Franco Moretti has famously protested that "[t]he trouble with close reading (in all of its incarnations, from the new criticism to

deconstruction) is that… At bottom, it's a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously—whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil."[60] The *Enigmata* and the texts of the hermeneutic style that followed sweep this summation into the ashes. Even at their most theological, rather than "very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously," their reading practices are raucous and ricocheting. In premodern cultures, theological reading entailed play—even judicious wandering and devilish encounters. At the same time, early medieval enigmata and the texts of the hermeneutic style cultivated a practice of attending to literal meaning and reading for multiple figurative interpretations all at once. Amid our "method wars," the theological exercises of medieval monks remind us that, no matter how we describe it—whether distantly, suspiciously, closely, reparatively, modestly, or otherwise—deliberative and joyful reading predates the birth of the professional critic, and the history of reading needs to trace suitably long and variable genealogies. If we have grown dissatisfied with a practice of critique founded purely on disbelief—one that is too close to enabling conspiracy theorists, as Latour worries—perhaps what we need is an influx of critique motivated by belief in the powers of texts to transform the minds and lives of their readers: a practice that is both premodern and always already postcritical.

Notes:

I am grateful to Bruce Holsinger and to the anonymous reader for a number of terrific suggestions. I thank, too, the members of the Anglo-Saxon Studies Colloquium Early Medieval Writing Workshop, who provided invaluable feedback on an early draft, and a host of excellent interlocutors—most notably Amanda Auerbach, Daniel Donoghue, Mary Kate Hurley, Adrienne Raphel, Daniel Remein, and Audrey Walton—for insights on things enigmatic and hermeneutical.

[1] William Faulkner, "The Art of Fiction XII: William Faulkner," interview by Jean Stein, *The Paris Review* 12 (Spring 1956): 28–52; repr. in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1958), 119–41.

[2] Adrienne Raphel, *What Was It For* (Iowa City: Rescue Press, 2017), 94–5.

[3] Jeffrey J. Williams, "The New Modesty in Literary Criticism," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 5, 2015, www.chronicle.com/article/The-New-Modesty-inLiterary/150993.

[4] The word *kenning* comes from Old Norse. On this poetic feature and on the broader use of riddles in Old Norse poetry, see Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Dark Tongues: The Art of Rogues and Riddlers* (New York: Zone Books, 2013), 55–82.

[5] Rita Felski, "Introduction," *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (2014): v–xi, at v.

[6] Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This essay Is about You," in her *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–52; an earlier version appears in her *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37. Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13–38. Merve Emre both introduces and troubles these divisions in her *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[7] See, for instance, Andrew Piper on the oscillation of close and distant reading in computational modeling in "Novel Devotions: Conversional Reading, Computational Modeling, and the Modern Novel," *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015): 63–98; and Heather Love, "Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," *Criticism* 52, no. 2 (2010): 235–41, which argues that Sedgwick's modes of reading are not as opposed as they are usually thought to be—even in their original articulation.

[8] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 107.

[9] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21.

[10] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48.

[11] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 248.

[12] I am thinking of important work by medievalists such as Henri de Lubac, Judson Boyce Allen, and Ryan McDermott on medieval Biblical exegesis and ethical poetics, as well as work by theorists such as J. Hillis Miller on the ethics of reading and interpretation. See, for instance, Henri De Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale: Les Quatres Sens De L'eću00e9riture* (Paris: Aubier, 1959); Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); Ryan McDermott, *Tropologies: Ethics and Invention in England, C. 1350-1600* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016); and J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, De Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*, Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

[13] On Fredric Jameson's search for a Marxist equivalent to the medieval practice of reading for the fourfold senses of scripture, see especially his *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974); and *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981). Eugene Vance, *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages*, Regents Studies in Medieval Culture (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) and "A Coda: Modern Medievalism and the Understanding of Understanding," *New Literary History* 10, no. 2 (1979): 377–83; Stephen G. Nichols, *Romanesque Signs: Early Medieval Narrative and Iconography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) and, co-edited with R. Howard Bloch, *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*, Medieval Cultures, vol. 31 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Bruce W. Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Erin Felicia Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Andrew Cole and D. Vance Smith, ed., *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages: On the Unwritten History of Theory* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
[14] On the traditionally fourfold practice of interpretation, see De Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*; and, for an overview of critiques of De Lubac's unitary theory, see McDermott, *Tropologies*, 22–28, who notes that actual practice was more variable.
[15] McDermott, *Tropologies*, 24.
[16] Aldhelm, *De laudibus virginitatis*, ed. Rudolf Ehwald, *Aldhelmi Opera* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919), 232. All translations are my own. On Aldhelm as a schoolroom author, see Patrizia Lendinara, "The World of Anglo-Saxon Learning," in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 295–312; and, for an illustrative example of this kind of fourfold interpretation applied to early medieval vernacular reading, see Audrey Walton, "'Gehyre se ðe Wille': The Old English Exodus and the Reader as Exegete," *English Studies* 94 (2013): 1–10.
[17] Joseph Bosworth, "Rǽdan," *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller et al., compiled by Sean Christ and Ondřej Tichý, July 20, 2010.
[18] Nicholas Howe, "The Cultural Construction of Reading in Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 58–79, at 62–3. Howe notes that the verb originally entailed giving advice or explicating something obscure and was extended, in Old English and Old Norse, to refer to the general interpretation of writing.
[19] On "responsiveness," see Patricia Dailey, "Riddles, Wonder and Responsiveness in Anglo-Saxon Literature," in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 451–72.
[20] On Symphosius' name as a "joking pseudonym," see Michael Lapidge, "General Introduction," *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge and Michael W. Herren (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 244.
[21] Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory 350–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[22] For an overview of the tradition, see Andy Orchard, "Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Tradition," in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. Andy Orchard and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), i.284–304; Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Mercedes Salvador Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2015); and Chapter 2 of James Paz, *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Material Culture* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2017).
[23] Andrew Galloway identified an influential body of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century enigmatic material in "The Rhetoric of Riddling in Late-Medieval England: The 'Oxford' Riddles, the *Secretum Philosophorum*, and the Riddles in *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum* 70, no. 1 (1995): 68–105. On the late medieval "poetics of enigma," see Curtis A. Gruenler, *Piers Plowman and the Poetics of Enigma: Riddles, Rhetoric, and Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).
[24] Aldhelm, *De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis*, ed. R. Ehwald, *Aldhelmi Opera*, 78 and 77 (hereafter cited as *E*).
[25] Christiane Veyrard-Cosme, "*Lucifica nigris tunc nuntio regna figuris*: Poétique textuelle de l'*obscuritas* dans les recueils d'énigmes latines du Haut moyen Age (VIIe–VIIIe s.)," in *Obscurity in Medieval Texts*, ed. Lucie Doležalová, Jeff Rider, and Alessandro Zironi (Krems: Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit, 2013), 32–48, at 33.
[26] Tatwine, *Aenigmata Tatuini*, in *Tatuini Opera Omnia*, ed. Maria de Marcoe, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 133 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 167.
[27] For commentary, see Exeter Book Riddles 17 ("Ship"), 22 ("Jay"), 34 ("Ship"), 40 ("Cock and Hen"), 62 ("Ship"), and 73 ("Piss") in Craig Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the 'Exeter Book'* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977). The Exeter Book riddles are numbered differently depending on the editor, so I follow Williamson's numbering here. On runes and riddles see also Chapter 3 of Paz, *Nonhuman Voices*. For an in-depth analysis of the interpretive uncoupling required to solve the Cock and Hen riddle, see also Dailey, "Riddles, Wonder and Responsiveness," 454-57.
[28] See, for instance, Patrick J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Book Riddles* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011); and J.D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).
[29] Nicholas Howe, "Aldhelm's *Enigmata* and Isidorian Etymology," *Anglo-Saxon England* 14 (1985): 37–59, at 37.
[30] James Hall Pitman, *The Riddles of Aldhelm* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), iv.
[31] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 246.
[32] For more on the "book of nature" as a commonplace in medieval literature, see Ernst Robert Curtius, who explains that "Here too everything writes: the sun on cosmic space, the ship on the waves, the birds on the tablets of the winds, a shipwrecked man alternately on the blue paper of the sky and the sand of the sea. The rainbow is a stroke of the quill, sleep a written sketch, death the signature of life," in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans.

Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 344.
[33] These lines are frequently read as an adaptation of Symphosius' "onion" riddle (enigma 44), which features similar wordplay with "mordere" [to bite or sting].
[34] Jonathan Wilcox, "'Tell Me What I Am': The Old English Riddles," in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. David F. Johnson and Elaine M. Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46–59, at 58.
[35] See Lapidge, "General Introduction," for further discussion of elemental transitions.
[36] Donatus, *Ars grammatica* 3.5, ed. Louis Holtz, *Donat et la tradition de l'enseignement grammatical* (Paris, CNRS, 1981), 670. For additional background, see Irvine, *Making of Textual Culture* and Vivien Law, *Grammar and Grammarians in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Longman, 1997).
[37] Dailey, "Riddles, Wonder and Responsiveness," 461.
[38] Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. and trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932).
[39] Dailey, "Riddles, Wonder and Responsiveness," 464.
[40] On sacred reading and the attendant need for "reading with the whole self" in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, see Brian Stock, *The Integrated Self: Augustine, the Bible, and Ancient Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), esp. pp. 17–46.
[41] The Winchester New Minster *Liber Vitae* (London, British Library, MS Stowe 944) expresses this wish directly, relating how "through the earthly record in this written form, [the names of the dead] may be written into the pages of the heavenly book" ("per temporalem recordationem scripture istius in celestis libri conscribantur pagina"), ed. W. De Gray Birch, *Liber Vitae: Register and Martyrology of New Minster and Hyde Abbey, Winchester* (London: Hampshire Record Society, 1892), 11–2. For further discussion of this practice, see Jill Hamilton Clements, "Writing and Commemoration in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Death in Medieval Europe: Death Scripted and Death Choreographed*, ed. Joëlle Rollo-Koster (New York: Routledge, 2017), 9–39.
[42] Susan Boynton, "The Bible and the Liturgy," in *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception, & Performance in Western Christianity*, ed. Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10–33, at 13.
[43] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. and trans. Bruce L. Venarde (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 90.
[44] Michael Lapidge,"The Hermeneutic Style in Anglo-Latin Literature," *Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (1975): 67–111, at 73.
[45] A parallel English-language impulse may be found in Æthelwold's "Winchester Vocabulary," which Helmut Gneuss, Mechthild Gretsch, and Walter Hofstetter have identified as a linguistic phenomenon that manifests similar impulses towards grecisms and other recherché tendencies. I have argued elsewhere that this constitutes a veritable "hermeneutic English." See Gneuss, "The Origin of Standard Old English and Æthelwold's School at Winchester," *Anglo-Saxon England* 1 (1972): 63–83; Gretsch, "Winchester Vocabulary and Standard Old English: The Vernacular in Late Anglo-Saxon England," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 83.1 (2001): 41–87; and Hofstetter,

"Winchester and the Standardization of Old English Vocabulary," *Anglo-Saxon England* 17 (1988): 139–61.
[46] Quoted in Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 104.
[47] Christopher Cannon, "The Art of Rereading," *ELH* 80 (2013): 401–25.
[48] Abbo Cernuus, "Scedula singularis Cernui Abbonis dilecto Fratri Gozlino," ed. and trans. Nirmal Dass, *Viking Attacks on Paris: The Bella parisiacae urbis of Abbo of Saint-Germain-des-Prés* (Paris: Peeters, 2007), 22–25, at 24.
[49] For the full booklist in question, see Michael Lapidge, "Surviving Booklists from Anglo-Saxon England," in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 33–90 at 53–6.
[50] On the hermeneutic style as a marker of membership in the Benedictine community, see Rebecca Stephenson, *The Politics of Language: Byrhtferth, Ælfric, and the Multilingual Identity of the Benedictine Reform* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).
[51] Abbo, "Scedula singularis," 24. I thank Tom O'Donnell for his insights about this passage.
[52] For further discussion of this technique, see Erica Weaver, "Hybrid Forms: Translating Boethius in Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon England* 45 (2016): 213–38.
[53] Ælfric of Eynsham, *Prefatio to Genesis*, in *The Old English Heptateuch and Ælfric's Libellus de Veteri Testamento et Novi, Volume One: Introduction and Text*, ed. Richard Marsden, Early English Text Society Original Series 330 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 6.
[54] Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 371–91.
[55] On "signal noise" and the mobilization of silence in the Old English riddles, see especially Jordan Zweck, "Silence in the Exeter Book Riddles," *Exemplaria* 38, no. 4 (2016): 319–36.
[56] On medieval literature's centering of enjoyment as a critical mode, see also Louise Fradenburg, "'So That We May Speak of Them': Enjoying the Middle Ages," *New Literary History* 28, no. 2 (1997): 205–30.
[57] The full final line is, "I ask the windbag scholars to say my name" ("Sciscitor inflatos, fungar quo nomine, sofos") (*E* 149). For the particularly apt "windbag scholars," I am indebted to A. M. Juster, trans., *Saint Aldhelm's Riddles* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), p. 67.
[58] Love, "Truth and Consequences," 238.
[59] Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 107.
[60] Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68, at 57.