

6 Objects and Hyperobjects

Introduction

The previous chapters have considered human relationships with other humans, individually as well as in groups, as well as with animals and landscapes, the more 'traditional' topics of environmental criticism. This chapter turns toward things, using recent philosophical insights in the areas of thing theory, object-oriented ontology, and hyperobjects to consider how objects interact with living beings, and vice versa, in the *Exeter Book* riddles and in the culture in which they were written. Thinking about the many objects described in the riddles, and the natural materials of which they are made, complicates what we think we mean by the word 'object' and how 'objects' relate to, and are related to, humans. The riddles do not simply *describe* things, animals, and people, but they transmit ideas and ideologies, cultural assumptions as well as potential resistance to such assumptions, about the roles and functions of animals and other living things, as well as non-living parts of the non-human world. The objects described in many of the riddles provide an opportunity to think as if humans are not the center of consideration, but pushed to the edge, with things made central.

In animal studies, the argument has been made that animals deserve moral consideration because, like humans, they suffer. One problem with this ethical orientation is that it maintains the human at the center: animals are seen as worthy of moral consideration and individual agency insofar as they resemble humans. Another is that it fails to provide a rationale for the ethical consideration for beings that do not have nervous systems or feel pain in ways analogous to humans. Can the landscape feel pain? Receding glaciers, flooding and drought, forest fires and rising sea levels suggest that perhaps the earth is suffering, but it seems rather problematic to suggest that it suffers in the same sense as a sentient being. Yet ecofeminism, object-oriented ontology, thing theory and related philosophical endeavors make the claim that inanimate objects also warrant ethical consideration parallel to that of humans, not because of similarity but simply because they exist. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen comments in the introduction to *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, 'the study of animals, plants, stones, tracks, stools, and other objects can lead us to important new insights about the past and present; ...they possess integrity, power, independence and vibrancy.' (2014: 7).

The *Exeter Book* riddles anticipate recent theoretical explorations by giving voice to objects. Like Riddle 26 ('Book') discussed in the previous

chapter, these riddles speak in shifting voices, moving from starting points such as ore deep in the earth or trees under the sky, through the processes of mining or killing them, to descriptions of objects made from them, with no clear or fixed point of rest. The riddles point to multiplicity rather than allowing for singularity or stability. Philosophical examinations of the moral agency of things connect with ecocritical perspectives that call for attention to landscapes and other non-sentient beings, not for the sake of human occupants but simply because they exist. While some of the riddles about objects maintain the centrality of the human, others push humans to the margins, where they occupy a status secondary to that of the objects that describe themselves. Even given that human subjects and objects are quickly restored by language or riddling context to the focus of consideration, the possibility of centering an object anticipates in fascinating ways not only the work of object-oriented philosophers but also the argument of Patricia Hill Collins that the center must always be in motion, allowing for constantly pivoting points of reference.

Thing theory distinguishes 'objects' – items worthy of display in museums – from 'things' – everyday items. Object-oriented ontology (hereafter OOO) places humans on par with all other things, ascribing potentially equal importance to elephants and icebergs, staples and the Queen of England. Timothy Morton invented the term 'hyperobject' to refer to things that are too large to perceive in their entirety, like all the Styrofoam in the entire world, or climate change. The idea of the hyperobject is also useful in thinking about social structures such as racism and sexism, and intersects interestingly with some of the things (not 'objects') described in riddles, as explored in the second half of this chapter. Poems such as *Beowulf* or *Andreas*, alongside prose works such as King Alfred's 'Preface' to the translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*, take animals and rocks and trees for granted as materials for human consumption. The riddles include things and objects as varied as icebergs and storms, weapons and chalices, items of utility or of spiritual symbolism that are made from materials that describe being torn from their 'homelands' by human enemies. Wood and stone voice subjectivity and thus make a claim for ethical consideration and agency.

Decentering the Human

Many of the *Exeter Book* riddles are written from the point of view of a non-human speaker, with an object or animal describing itself beginning

with 'ic' ('I') and concluding with some variation of 'say what I am called.' In addition, there are several that describe themselves as having been torn away by human enemies from some kind of homeland. In Riddle 93 ('Antler'), examined in the previous chapter, the antler speaks of having had its place on 'eard' ('earth,' 'homeland') stolen by a younger brother – the new antler that grows in after the stag sheds the previous year's growth.

In seeking an ethical reading of things, Bill Brown asks 'What are the conditions ... for sympathizing with animals and artifacts, and how does such sympathy threaten Locke's "thinking thing," the self?' (7). Locke's self, of course, post-dates the *Exeter Book* riddles by several centuries, but the Anglo-Saxons, too, had a sense of self; they imagined the chest cavity as the center of emotion and reason. The *Exeter Book* riddles imagine sympathy for things in conjunction with a human sense of self. Plumwood suggested an answer to the question of how sympathy for objects challenges human subjectivity in her argument challenging dualisms such as those posed between human and animal, thing and object, and indeed challenging the very category of 'other'. Plumwood rejected dualistic thinking altogether, in a series of publications with profound implications for ecocriticism but unfortunately given too little attention in more recent ecocritical studies. She points out that 'nature must be seen as a political rather than a descriptive category' (3), and thus the distinction between human and nature (or, as ecologists often call it, 'non-human nature') is a distinction constructed and renewed by social norms and practices rather than one that exists 'in nature.'

In Riddle 35, usually solved as 'Ore,' the speaking subject says that it was born from the earth: 'Mec se wæta wong, wundrum freorig, / of his innape ærist cende' ('The damp earth, wondrous cold, first bore me out of his innards,' ll. 1-2). The idea that stone can be birthed suggests a parallel with humans and animals. Adam, the first man, is also said to have been born from earth, in another riddle found only in MS. Cotton Tiberius A. iii among a list of biblical curiosities and lore:

Hwæt wæs se on þissere worulde seðe acænned næs, 7 þeah hwæðere
wæs to men geworden 7 lange lifde? 7 þa eft æfter his deaðe þæt he wæs
bebyrged innon his modor innoðe? 7 æfter þam deaðe eft þæt hit gelamp
æfter manegum wintrum þæt he wæs gefullwad, 7 næfre his lichama ne
fulode ne ne brosnode innon þære eorðan? ... Þæt wæs Adam, se æresta
mann þe þis bigelumpen wæs.

Who was he, who in this world was not born, and nevertheless was made
among men and lived long? And then again after his death, he was buried

inside his mother's womb? And again after death, it occurred after many winters that he was baptised, and his body never fouled or decayed in the earth? ... That was Adam, the first man, that this happened to. (Estes 2012: 643-44)

Adam's 'mother's womb' is the earth, from which he was made. The source of the ore is, likewise, the earth, so that the 'brother of earth' can be understood as the brother of ore: human and stone are siblings.

The Cotton Tiberius riddle uses 'acænnan' and 'innoð' with the feminine noun 'eorðe,' while Riddle 35 uses 'cennan' and 'innaþ' with the masculine noun 'wong.' 'Cennan' and 'acænnan' have very similar ranges of meaning. Both refer to bearing a child, being born, begetting a child, as well as to raising plants, and both also have a meaning connected with proclaiming or making something known through speech. Both words can refer to the mother's role in giving birth as well as to the father's role in conception. Both verbs appear in reference to God as father begetting Jesus, but only 'cennan' is associated specifically with Mary as the mother. 'Acennan' has the additional connotation of spiritual birth in Christian contexts (*Dictionary of Old English*, s.v.). 'Innoð' can refer to the inside of the body: 'stomach, womb, bowels, the breast, heart' (Bosworth-Toller, s.v.). Given this range of definitions, it is difficult in the context of Riddle 35 to interpret 'cennan' as 'beget' rather than 'give birth to,' so it might be appropriate to think of 'wong' in this case as feminine despite its grammatical gender.

Kellie Robertson argues that in texts of the later Middle Ages, 'medieval stones were irrepressibly vital: inner virtues bestowed upon them quasi-animate powers of motion and action, while "mineral souls" linked them to the plants, animals, and humans further along the scala naturae, or ladder of nature' (92-93). She argues that in the Aberdeen Bestiary, written about 1200, 'anthropomorphizing accounts of fire-producing stones suggest a natural world motivated by recognizably human desires and behaviors' (93). The depictions of objects made from ore in the riddles also frequently feature anthropomorphizing descriptions that push the human out of, then back into, the center. Objects are described as participating in what seem like human networks, for example in the discussion of being 'born' or of contemplating heirs. But when ore calls the human the enemy, it resists affiliation with the human, locates itself potentially outside of human economies and human concerns.

Like Riddle 35, Riddle 83 is solved as 'Ore' by most commentators, though Williamson identifies it as 'Gold' (483). The speaker opens: 'Frod wæs min fromcynn' ('My origin was ancient,' ll. 1-2a). In the biblical paradigm that

governed medieval thought, ore is older than humans, because it was created with the earth on the third day, and humans not until the sixth (Gen. 1: 9-31). The speaker of the riddle states that ore was made to live among men only after humans had learned to use fire, and continues: 'Nu me fah warað / eorþan broþor, se me ærest wearð / gumena to gyrne' ('Now the brother of earth remains hostile to me, he who at first did me evil among men,' ll. 4b-6a).

The identity of 'brother of earth' is vexed; Patrick J. Murphy accepts Franz Dietrich's suggestion that it is Tubalcain, 'the traditional founder of the foundry and metalworking' (142), though he points out that Williamson and Nelson take the solution to be more general (141). Murphy reads 'fah' as meaning 'cursed,' which he sees reflecting Tubalcain's descent from the cursed Cain. Another possible brother of earth is Adam, and humans in general who, as Adam's descendants, could be said to remain 'brothers of earth.' Whether the reference is to Adam, Tubalcain, or humans in general, the riddle suggests that human and stone are allied in kinship. At the same time, the speaking 'ore' places the human in a position of hostility. The idea that humans could be hostile to ore, or to earth, recorded in a riddle inscribed on parchment a thousand years ago, challenges environmentalists' easy assumptions that an awareness of the human violation of earth is a recent concern. Riddle 83 suggests that humans in general are the illegitimate usurpers of the earth's ore. The ore is centered and given temporal and ethical priority, while the human is marginalized.

Cohen argues that, taken together, the words 'inhuman' and 'nature' 'foreground the difficulties of speaking of that which is not us within narratives we fashion' (2014: ii). But Cohen also points out that various 'inhuman' objects are necessary for humans to communicate. 'Although their agency is not necessarily easy to behold, without a networked alliance of nonhumans you would not be reading these words,' Cohen writes, commenting on the word processor and the page, twenty-first century successors to the 'Book' riddle's skin, feathers, and ink. (2014: ii). Cohen further argues 'as Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality or what Laura Ogden describes as material entanglement make clear, segregation of human and inhuman, nature and culture belies a complicated reality, and intertwined environmentality' (2014: iv). The traces of the Anglo-Saxons survive today only in material items such as jewelry and weapons, as well as textual objects made of skins, created with the help of ore and antlers, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In considering the earth to be a 'womb' from which someone can fashion a sword that is itself barren, the riddles point to such entanglements and articulate human needs for the inhuman in a reversal of the inhuman

need for the human seen in *The Ruin* (Chapter 3). Many environmentalists today argue that students and scholars must venture away from built environments to experience the 'natural' world in order to think ecologically. At the risk of essentializing an entire culture, perhaps the fact that the Anglo-Saxons lived in closer proximity to nature than most European and American environmentalists, when food and shelter were precarious and human connections to natural sources constantly foregrounded by daily living conditions, enabled them to understand human entanglements with natural objects and non-human living beings more easily than humans in developed urban areas can today in our movements among climate-controlled homes and workspaces by way of climate-controlled conveyances and our easy access to food in packages of plastic and metal rather than on the hoof or in the field.

Riddle 20 is written in the voice of a weapon made of iron, wound about with gold and decorated with precious gems. Most editors solve the riddle as 'Sword,' though Bitterli tentatively follows Trautmann's reading of 'Falcon,' also suggesting 'Hawk' as a possibility (19). The subject of the riddle describes itself as a participant in human networks and economies: 'Cyning mec gyrweð / since ond seolfre ond mec on sele weorpað' ('A king adorns me with jewels and silver, and honors me in the hall,' ll. 9b-10). The sword also refers to its inability to beget children: 'Ic me wenan ne þearf / þæt me bearn wræce on bonan feore' ('I may not expect that offspring could avenge me against my killer,' ll. 17b-18). This seems to be the voice of a lifeless creature that obviously cannot bear offspring because it is not alive. Yet the example of the childless Beowulf makes it clear that the inability to engender an heir is a serious human problem. It is difficult to think in terms of the sword, an inanimate object, bearing children or being incapable of doing so. However, in the context of the 'Ore' riddles, which describe the earth as a womb, the idea of a product of the earth bearing children, or being barren, has potential significance. But Riddle 20 can simultaneously be read in terms of anthropomorphic metaphor, placing the sword literally and the riddle figuratively in service of humans. In describing miners and metalsmiths as the enemy, Riddle 83 pushes human concerns to the margins. Riddle 20 makes it possible to centralize them, but in a context that always threatens to decentralize them with different possible interpretations.

In an essay introducing a volume of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to theorizing things, Bill Brown limns a distinction between 'object' – a work of art or other item socially elevated to the status of museum piece, and 'thing' – an everyday item that we take for granted until it breaks or malfunctions. In Riddle 26 ('Book'), discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter, the

parchment to be inscribed is a 'thing,' each leaf functionally interchangeable with other leaves. The feathers used to write, the oak gall from which tannic acid is extracted to mix with iron oxide: these are all 'things.' The book made from these things, however, is an 'object.' A book today, even a Bible, might be a mere 'thing,' identical to thousands of other copies in homes and stores and warehouses, functionally interchangeable perhaps even with millions of other printed copies. But in the year 1000, a book of scripture was a rare object, the product of numerous artisans and 'whole villages of animals' (Holsinger 619). The 'Book' of Riddle 26 is bound in gold-decorated covers, perhaps resembling the ninth-century binding of the Lindau Gospels, now in the Morgan Library.

Similarly, Riddles 48 and 59 both describe ritual 'objects' made of gold. In contrast to riddles speaking directly in the voice of its subject, these two riddles are both written from the point of view of a human viewer rather than from the point of view of the object whose identity is to be guessed. Riddle 48, 'Chalice,' begins 'Ic gefrægn ... hring' ('I have heard... [of a] ring,' l. 1), and Riddle 59 begins, 'Ic seah in healle hring gyldenre' ('I saw in the hall a golden ring,' l. 1). Each begins, then, with the riddling speaker as a human who has seen an object, which also becomes the grammatical object subordinated to the human subject. The 'ring' of each riddle is, however, immediately followed by references to humans who are also objects of the sentence, subordinated to the speaking subject 'I.' Riddle 48 continues: 'Ic gefrægn for hælepum hring endean, / torhtne butan tungan, tila þeah he hlude / stefne ne cirmde, strongum wordum' ('I have heard of a ring deliver in strong words a message for men, splendid without a tongue, competent though he cried out with no loud voice,' ll. 1-3). This 'ring,' chalice or plate, is personified as speaking in words though it has no tongue and no voice, thus sending a strong message through its symbolic force. Riddle 59 places the 'ring' at a double remove, with the riddle's speaking voice describing the object via the men who in turn observe it: 'Ic seah in healle hring gyldenre / men sceawian, modum gleawe, / ferþþum frode' ('I saw in the hall men looking at a golden ring, wise in mind, sage in spirit,' ll. 1-3a). Riddle 48 also continues by making the 'ring' the object of the gaze of men: 'Ryne ongietan readan goldes / guman galdorcwide' ('In the red gold, men could perceive a mysterious saying, mysterious song,' ll. 6-7a). Riddle 59 echoes the emphasis in Riddle 48 on the silent symbolism of the object: 'Him torhte in gemynd / his dryhtnes naman dumba brohte' ('Splendidly, mutely, it brought god's name into their minds,' ll. 7b-8). The idea of being unable to speak yet 'torht' – 'bright, splendid, noble, beautiful' (Bosworth-Toller, s.v.) – appears in both riddles.

For Brown, things are important in that they are external to individual selves, and as such function analogously to living beings, including other humans. He writes: 'Theodor Adorno ... understood the alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact. Most simply put, his point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such' (12). In Brown's formulation, it does not really matter if the riddle is sheep or text, ore or chalice, inanimate object or animal, or even another human being. Everything is different from the perceiving human. The two riddles describing ritual objects enact this differentiation, though this is complicated by riddle 48 with its doubled objecthood, describing the object beyond the gaze of human viewers, who are also the objects of the riddle's opening 'I heard.'

Graham Harman argues from the perspective of Object-Oriented Ontology that 'objects exist at many different levels of complexity, and they are always a hidden surplus deeper than any of the relations into which they might enter' (100). He further adds, 'gold is an inscrutable object existing at countless layers of reality simultaneously' (120). This is potentially true of all objects, but Harman uses gold as an example because of its value, its limited quantities, the fact that it can be mined by humans but not created. The high monetary value of gold gives it greater economic importance in Anglo-Saxon England and greater symbolic value in Old English literature than iron. Objects made of gold are cherished not only for their economic value but also for their provenance, given for instance as gifts from queen or lord to warrior. As objects used in Christian worship, they also attain symbolic value. Interestingly, though, the 'Ore' riddles give subjectivity to the baser metal by narrating them in the first person, while the riddles describing objects made of gold do so from the perspective of human narrators.

The 'Ore' and 'Gold' riddles, then, offer a sequence of depictions that suggest different relationships with the human, sometimes making the object metaphorically human, sometimes placing the thing as the object of human vision, even doubly object of human seeing humans seeing object. Centering the object is possible, but the next line of the same riddle might push the object back to the edge with a reference to human concerns, whether literal or metaphorical, or impossible and therefore perhaps humorous – or poignant (e.g., the desire of a sword to procreate).

Like ore and the objects made from it, and like the animal of the 'Book' riddle (26) discussed in the previous chapter, trees ripped from the ground to make things for human use are depicted in the riddles as protesting their treatment. Riddle 73 is solved by most editors as 'Lance/Spear', but Trautmann proposed 'Battering-Ram' (127), a suggestive reading especially

from an ecocritical perspective. The tree contrasts its life in the woods with its treatment by humans:

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

I came forth/grew in the field, lived where ground and clouds nourished me, until in advanced years they turned me upside down, those who were hostile toward me, of that nature/kind that I earlier saw living, disturbed my being, shook me out of the earth, caused me against my nature/fate to bend indefinitely to the will of a killer. (ll. 1-7)

Anne Harris writes that, in *The Dream of the Rood*, 'the Cross does not just have consciousness, desire, and suffering; it also has memory' (34). The tree of Riddle 73 remembers its origins, much like the ore of Riddles 35 and 83 and the sheep of Riddle 26. The fact that objects are depicted as remembering their origins in different states of being is particularly intriguing in the context of the myth the Anglo-Saxons crafted of their origins on the other side of the sea, in a different land and context than that in which the *Exeter Book* riddles were written down, in the same manuscript as *Guthlac A* with its (mostly suppressed) narrative of battle by invading Saxons against native Britons (Howe 1989; also see Chapter 4). More broadly, the shared quality of possessing memory transcends boundaries among human, animal, plant, and stone, locating different kinds of being on continuums rather than on opposite sides of a series of dichotomies.

The tree has a nature, a destiny, a fate even ('gesceap,' l. 6) independent of human concerns, independent of its utility or aesthetic interest to humans. It has a will, and has been taken from the earth and bent to the will of humans, caused to act against its own will and inclinations. It is presented as having both consciousness and conscience. It is used by humans to harm other humans, a weapon in human affairs even though it calls humans the enemy. As Cohen has argued, 'things matter' (2012: 5). Stones, water, the parchment and the wood gnawed by the bookworm: whether 'things' or 'objects,' they are not simply inanimate. Cohen and Lowell Duckert argue that things have 'complicated agency,' adding that 'humans are not simply called upon to save, preserve, or conserve a lifeless material world

(what hubris), but to recognize the life that already pulses within inorganic forces, manufactured and found objects, nature, and things' (2015: 3). Cohen further argues that 'things matter in a double sense: the study of animals, plants, stones, tracks, stools, and other objects can lead us to important new insights about the past and present; and ... they possess integrity, power, independence and vibrancy' (2012: 7).

Several riddles describe their suffering at the hands of human 'enemies.' Riddle 23, 'Bow,' refers to its use by a warrior as 'wite' ('torment,' l. 6). The reference to 'torment' comes between a description of the bow shooting an arrow in combat and a description of its being bent and then released to shoot the arrow. The 'torment' could refer specifically to being bent into bow-shape and then allowed to straighten, or more generally to the process of being put to human use in battle, much as the tree protests its use as a weapon in the wars between humans. Riddle 81, 'Weathervane,' refers to 'wonsceft mine' ('my misery,' l. 12) caused by a storm, which it calls 'aglac' ('monster,' l. 6) – the same word used repeatedly for Grendel and once for Beowulf himself. The shield of Riddle 5 comments on the wounds it had to suffer: 'Ic eom anhaga iserne wund, / bille gebennad, beadoweorca sæd, / ecgum werig' ('I am a lonely being, wounded by iron, wounded by sword, weary of the [sword's] edge,' ll. 1-3a).

The unusual word 'bennan' also appears in Riddle 53, in which a human narrator describes the misery of a tree turned into a battering-ram – at the hands of the humans that kill and shape it. The narrator begins, like the narrator of Riddle 59 ('Chalice'), 'Ic seah on bearwe beam hlifian' ('I saw a tree living in the wood,' l. 1). 'þæt treow wæs on wyne... oppæt he frod dagum / on oprum wearð aglachade / deope gedolgod' ('The tree lived in joy... until in ancient days he was deeply wounded in misery by others,' ll. 2b, 4b-6a). Though 'treow' is a neuter noun and one would expect the pronoun 'hit' ('it'), 'he' is used, suggesting perhaps that the tree is seen as masculine, perhaps that it is seen as personified and thus possessing natural, rather than merely grammatical, gender. The riddles suggest the idea of object suffering analogous to human suffering a thousand years before the possibility is contemplated again by modern theorists of the environment.

The riddles depend on polysemy, using it to trick audience members as to their solutions, but the very multiplicity of possible meanings also contributes to slippage in the boundaries between different kinds of things, alternately foregrounding and marginalizing the human. It is important that the human narrator of Riddle 53 recognizes the possibility that the tree is made miserable by human actions. The fact that three objects used in fighting – bow, shield, battering-ram – all comment on the miserable

conditions of battle is also an oblique commentary on the problems that war causes for humans as well as the environment.

Trees have a particularly wide range of potential references for the Anglo-Saxons. In an often-quoted passage from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, the pagan chief priest Coifi accepts the spiritual superiority (or political expediency) of conversion to Christianity, gets on a horse, takes up a weapon, and desecrates the grove of trees in which he has previously worshiped, throwing a spear into it and destroying its idols. 'Ond he ða heht his geferan toweorpan ealne þone herig & þa getimbro & forbærnan' ('And then he commanded his companions to tear down that sacred place and the buildings and burn them,' II. 13, ll. 10-11).

Despite Coifi's dramatic conversion, pagan practices persisted in Anglo-Saxon England, as attested by place names, especially at the margins of political entities. In the 'Preface' to the translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*, Alfred lists several ways in which trees can provide utility to humans, in a passage that reads like a response to lingering pagan practice:

Gaderode me þonne kigclas, and stuþansceaftas, and lohsceaftas and hylfa to ælcum þara tola þe ic mid wircan cuðe, and bohtimbru and bolttimbru, and, to ælcum þara weorca þe ic wyrcan cuðe, þa witegostan treowo be þam dele ðe ic aberan meihte. Ne com ic naþer mid anre byrðene ham þe me ne lyste ealne þane wude ham brengan, gif ic hyne ealne aberan meihte. On ælcum treowo ic geseah hwæthwugu þæs þe ic æt ham beþorfte.

I then gathered for myself cudgels, and posts, and bars and handles for each of the tools that I could work with, and wood for building for each of the jobs that I could do: the finest tree of that valley that I could carry. I did not come home with a burden, because it did not please me to bring all of the wood home, if I could carry it all. On each tree I saw something that I needed at home. (47)

Alfred's discussion places materials from the trees at a double remove from natural growth. He lists a variety of ways in which parts of trees can be used by humans, as tools as well as building materials. But his discussion of taking things from the forest for human use is simultaneously metaphorical: all the varieties of timber represent bits of knowledge to be gained from Augustine's *Soliloquies*, for which the passage stands as a preface, and perhaps also from other books belonging to Alfred's program of translation and education of his people. As Valerie Allen notes 'measurement is no self-evident exercise and ... its representations speculate as well as and maybe

better than metaphor' (63). Measuring the utility of weapons made from plants in war or other human activities is a way of assigning importance to trees as objects as well as to landscape, anticipating the meditations of contemporary philosophers about the importance of things.

In 'Hewn,' Harris points out that felling trees is analogous to human death. 'The hewn becomes the inhuman. It is the thing after the cutting: wood after tree, statue after stone, jewel after gem' (19). Riddle 73 has the tree hewn down to become the battering ram that attacks the walls of human habitations. The shield of Riddle 5 protests its absorption of blows meant for humans: 'Ic eom angaha iserne wund, / bille gebennad, beadoweorca sæd, / ecgum werig' ('I am a lonely being, wounded by iron, wounded by sword, weary of the [sword's] edge,' ll. 1-3a). Echoing Alfred's *Preface*, Riddle 30, copied twice in the *Exeter Book*, describes wood as a functional substance turned to a wide variety of different human uses:

Ic eom legbysig,	lace mid winde,
bewunden mid wuldre,	wedre gesomnad,
fus forðweges,	fyre gebysgad,
bearu blowende,	byrnende gled.
Ful oft mec gesipas	sendað æfter hondum,
þæt mec weras ond wif	wlonce cyssað.
þonne ic mec onhæbbe,	ond hi onhnigaþ to me
monige mid miltse,	þær ic monnum sceal
ycan upcyme	eadignesse.

I am busy with fire, dance with the wind, wound about with glory, weather's companion, ready for a journey, afflicted by fire, blossom in a grove, a burning coal. Often fellows send me from hand to hand, so that proud men and women kiss me. Then I raise myself up, and they bow down to me, many with favor; there I shall prolong the source of men's happiness. (ll. 1-9)

The riddle describes different natural states in which trees occur, as well as various uses to which wood can be put. It can play with the wind perhaps as branches growing high or a mast for a ship; 'fus forðweges' ('ready for a journey') may reference a ship made of wood. Wood can burn, in a forest fire, to heat a home, or when the home itself burns down, as foreshadowed in *Beowulf*. Passed hand to hand and kissed by men and women, wood has been fashioned into a cup for mead, ale, or wine, as also described by several other riddles. At the conclusion of the riddle the wood is raised as a cross to be worshipped by men in order to lengthen their prosperity.

The Dream of the Rood is not a riddle, but it uses language similar to that in the 'Tree' riddles as it describes a tree wrenched from its homeland to be turned into a cross to bear Jesus during his crucifixion and then be worshiped by Christians. Much as the riddles speak in the voices of objects, the tree of the *Dream* speaks, though framed by the narration of the dreamer; it recalls being cut down and 'genaman me ðær strange feondas' ('strong enemies seized me there,' l. 30b). It is turned into a cross and, in the dreamer's vision, covered alternately with Jesus' blood and adorned with jewels. The movement from living tree to blood-stained gallows to jeweled cross echoes the movement across categories depicted in many of the riddles, notably Riddle 26 in its movement from sheep to parchment to book of scripture (see Chapter 5).

Harris ('Hewn') points out that portions of the poem *The Dream of the Rood* are inscribed in the stone of the Ruthwell Cross, enabling further shifts in the identity of the carved/bejeweled/blood-stained cross/tree/cross. 'The cross remembers itself as wood and calls itself forth as jeweled reliquary.... The ecology of the hewn is one of shifting materialities and serialized ontologies: tree becomes wood becomes Cross on stone carved with vines and animals' (27). Because the Cross speaks to a sleeping dreamer, 'human consciousness [is] eclipsed by the bright light of a dream vision' (34). Yet 'stefn' (l. 31) means not only 'root' or 'stem, trunk,' but also 'voice' – the dreamer perhaps hears the tree say not only that it has been severed from its trunk but also that it has lost its original voice as tree, so as to be able to become the cross on which Jesus was hanged.

The highly valuable materials used for decoration, the reference to the sign of the cross, and the riddling nature of the description in *The Dream of the Rood* echo the themes of Riddle 55, also about trees uprooted to make an object useful to humans. Riddle 55 describes an object made of wood and decorated with gold and jewels, bringing various literal and symbolic meanings of timber and minerals into play simultaneously. A variety of solutions have been proposed for the riddle. Tupper argued for 'Cross' (189), a solution accepted by Bitterli (129); Dietrich suggested a shield or scabbard and Trautmann a harp (Williamson 1977: 301); Williamson suggests a rack or strong-box for weapons in comparison with a rood or gallows (1977: 303); Murphy accepts 'weapon rack' (2011: 62). Muir agrees that 'some sort of sword-rack or -box seems intended... perhaps in the shape of a cross' (622) and he is followed by Niles, who argues for 'a wooden structure used to hang and/or store weapons' (2006: 75). A T-shaped or cross-shaped form for storing chain mail or other armor is another possibility, though the construction out of four species of wood suggests a decorative or spiritually meaningful object, rather than a utilitarian one.

Like the chalice/gold plate riddles, this one is narrated in human voice, rather than speaking in the voice of the object to be guessed. Like the church plate of Riddles 48 and 59, this object is placed at a double remove from the audience, seen by the narrator as it is carried by other people: 'Ic seah in healle, þær hæleð druncon, / on flet beran feower cynna, / wrætlic wudutreow' ('I saw in the hall, where heroes drink, a wondrous wooden tree brought onto the floor, of four kinds...' ll. 1-3a). It is decorated with gold, silver, jewels, 'ond rode tacn' ('and the sign of the cross,' l. 5a). The riddle goes on to catalogue the species used in making this wondrous object: 'þær wæs hlin ond acc ond se hearda iw / ond se fealwa holer' ('there was maple and oak and the hard yew and the pale holly,' ll. 9-10a). The catalogue recalls the list of different uses for wood in Riddle 30 as well as in King Alfred's 'Preface' to the *Soliloquies*. Like the 'Preface,' it merges an aesthetic description of the decorated object with awareness of the utilitarian qualities of different species of wood, and likewise seems to carry a rejection of pagan practice at the margins of Anglo-Saxon Christian and political communities.

Riddle 26, 'Book,' provides an interesting analogy: a sheep becomes parchment, which is written on by the dancing wing of a bird to become a sacred text, bound into a codex (see Chapter 5). Interestingly, in the context of the two 'Chalice' Riddles (48, 59), the book is, in the last lines of the riddle, described as decorated with gold and gems to become an object of physical value as well as spiritual significance:

	Mec siþþan wraht
hæleð hleobordum,	hyde beþenede,
gierede mec mid golde;	forþon me gliwedon
wrætlic weorc smiþa,	wire bifongen.

Then a man covered me with book-covers, covered me with hide, be-decked me with gold, further adorned me with a smith's wondrous work, circled me with wire (ll. 11b-14)

The Dream of the Rood, the 'Chalice' riddles, and the 'Book' riddle all narrate transformations of materials into objects of substantial economic value as well as symbolic importance within a Christian context. The words written in the book or on the Ruthwell Cross, like the holes pierced in the tree/cross, carry meaning greater than simply their words or syntax, because they point to subjects and objects of Christian faith.

The book of scripture, the cross, the plate, and the faith they describe and symbolize, are understood as 'alive' by those of the Christian faith. The Cross and the Book 'live' in senses different from the lives of the tree

and animal that enable their creation, and that metaphorical 'life' enables a different meaning than the constructed existence of Shield or Bow or Battering-Ram, all objects of human utility and more specifically implements of war associated with death. Chain Mail, Ore, and Battering Ram are described as voicing protests at being killed and transformed into items of use to humans. But these voices are anthropomorphic and metaphorical without the layer of spiritual meaning given to Chalice, Rood, and Book.

Several of the riddles describe humans as their subjects, both in the narrative voice of the person and in the narrative voice of a third-person narrator that makes the person into an object. They are not given memory, not presented in transition from one state to another, but are presented as static, much as earth and landscape are often used in literary contexts. Object-oriented ontology levels all objects, giving them the same metaphysical status. As Alan Montroso points out, Graham Harman has argued that even humans should be read as things: 'in a move quite rare for the literature of OOO, Graham Harman pauses to reflect on the nature of real objects using a human, American philosopher Richard Rorty, as an example' (Montroso 40). The *Exeter Book* riddles anticipate Harman by a thousand years when they place human bodies on the same level as objects, as in the example of the equivalence of fingers and feather in Riddle 26 (see Chapter 5) as well as in Riddle 86.

Riddle 86, whose object is a human, complicates the position of human narrator as subject and thing as object (grammatically as well as conceptually) within the riddles. Riddle 86 is narrated by a human voice that reduces the other person described to a collection of disconnected body-parts, recalling the isolated fingers of Riddle 26 (see Chapter 5). The riddle's narrator begins by calling the person 'wiht' ('creature,' l. 1), a word also used in the riddles for objects such as icebergs, in the third person. But the riddle concludes with the first-person formula, 'Saga hwæt ic hatte' ('Say what I am called,' l. 7). The being is described thus:

hæfde an eage	ond earan twa,
ond II fet,	XII hund heafda,
hrycg ond wombe	ond honda twa,
earmas ond eaxle,	anne sweoran
ond sidan twa.	

had one eye, and two ears, and two feet, and 12 hundred heads; a spine and a stomach and two hands, arms and a shoulder, one neck and two sides. (ll. 3-7b)

Eyes are frequently metaphorical. Already in Old English, an 'eye' can refer not only to the human organ of vision, but also to the hole in a needle; it may also carry reference to cognitive or spiritual vision, or lack thereof. But 'an eage' in this riddle turns out to refer literally to 'one eye.' Likewise, 'earan twa': while ears as the organ of auditory intake can signify the ability to understand intellectually or to receive spiritual wisdom (*Dictionary of Old English*, s.v.), in this poem, they are simply 'two ears.' The twelve hundred heads, however, are heads of garlic, rather than human heads – heads lacking any intellectual or spiritual or sensory or emotional association. 'Heafod,' too, has multiple extended senses referring to the seat of intelligence for a human being as well as to a source, a highest point, a front (e.g., of a ship), or a beginning of something in space or in time. But the 'heafda' of Riddle 86 are simple vegetable forms that have grown underground, lacking in voice, reason, or emotion. The solution to the riddle is generally taken to be 'one-eyed seller of garlic.' It is interesting to note in this context that of all the body parts mentioned for the person in the riddle, the mouth is missing. The all-but-headless human of the riddle is as silent as the heads of garlic he is carrying; person and vegetable are comparable in their object status. The human becomes an object, in anticipation of Harman's discussion of Rorty. And the objectification of this human points to the objectification, more subtly, of other humans described in other riddles.

Gender and Ethnicity as Hyperobjects

Morton's notion of 'hyperobject' is probably applicable to the 'Storm' riddles (1, 2, and 3), describing various kinds of storm on earth and in sea, but it is even more valuable as a way of thinking about the operations of gender and its intersections with other social categories in many of the riddles. Hyperobjects, as Morton defines them, are different in scale from what humans usually are able to apprehend and can be understood only through their traces and through their relationships with other objects (1). Morton argues that it is precisely their vast size that makes hyperobjects so hard to see: 'The octopus of the hyperobject emits a cloud of ink as it withdraws from access' (39). Moreover, Morton writes, 'Hyperobjects are contradictory beasts' (47). Because hyperobjects are impossible to perceive in their entirety, they can be difficult to understand at all, and as a result they are subject to challenge by those who cannot or will not connect the various kinds of evidence for their existence. Morton argues that human beings exist inside climate change, unable to see it from an independent or objective

vantage point. 'Because they so massively out-scale us, hyperobjects have magnified this weirdness of things for our inspection: things are themselves, but we can't point to them directly' (12).

In semantics, thematic roles identify both agents and causatives as the subjects of sentences that do things, but distinguish agents as sentient beings from causatives as natural forces without free will. A person is an agent, as an animal also can be; a hurricane or an earthquake is a causative. Yet Morton argues that all objects, including hyperobjects, 'forcefully exert ... the imperative' (67). They exist in large swaths in both space and time, making them more difficult to apprehend: 'We can only see pieces of hyperobjects at a time. The reason why they appear nonlocal and temporally foreshortened is precisely because of this transdimensional quality' (Morton 70).

For the weather-channel deprived Anglo-Saxons, storms are apprehensible only in their local effects, and in that context they fit Morton's definition of 'hyperobject.' The 'Storm' riddle(s), like the other riddles, are by their nature contradictory, giving hints and clues as to their solutions while also working deliberately to obscure their solutions. Hyperobjects are 'weird'; so are the subject/object solutions of the riddles, and their positioning with respect to humans. Storms and climate change are hard to access because of their size, but the riddles' solutions are deliberately withdrawn from access to those who seek to solve them, through the use of language that deliberately mystifies, confuses, and confounds.

It is not clear whether Morton thinks that, today, a 'normal' storm would count as a hyperobject, given weather imaging satellites capable of seeing storm systems in their global entirety, while predicting paths and intensities with various computer-assisted models. When he writes, 'Heavy rain is simply a local manifestation of some vast entity that I'm unable directly to see' (47-48), it seems he means a storm as impacted in its severity by global warming, not simply an 'innocent,' pre-climate-change storm. But Morton acknowledges that climate change is not the only, or the first, hyperobject, arguing that the Iranian physician and philosopher ar-Razi 'discovered hyperobjects in the tenth century.' Ar-Razi, according to Morton, points to natural disasters such as plagues or floods, and writes, 'such events create ruptures between epochs so that the time of one entire people can pass to the time of another' (66).

Writing at nearly the same time as ar-Razi, the authors and scribes of the Old English riddles evoke the notion of hyperobjects in their descriptions of storms. The first 104 lines of the *Exeter Book* riddles have been read as three different poems (Muir, Krapp-Dobbie, Bitterli) or as one long one

(Trautmann, Williamson). In either case, they describe storms through details about their natural force and their effects on human life, rather than through an overview of their origins and expected paths such as might be expected in modern weather reporting:

ic astige strong,	stundum reþe,
þrymful þunie,	þragum wræce
fere geond foldan,	folcsalo bærne,
ræced reafige	

I rise up strongly, sometimes savage, thunder mightily, sometimes cause calamity throughout earth, burn the people's houses, ravage the halls.
(ll. 3-6a)

... hwælmere hlimmeð,	hlude grimmeð,
streamas staþu beatað,	stundum weorpaþ
on stealc hleoþa	stane ond sonde,

The whale's home roars, loudly rages, waves beat the shore, sometimes throws stones and sand against the steep cliffs. (Riddle 2, ll. 5-7)

Hwilum ic þurhræse,	þæt me on bæce rideð
won wægfatu,	wide toþringe
lagustreama full,	hwilum læte eft
slupan tosomne.	
Swa ic þrymful þeow	þragum winne,
hwilum under eorþan,	hwilum yþa sceal
hean underhnigan,	hwilum holm ufan
streamas styрге,	hwilum stige up,
wolcnfare wrege,	wide fere
swift ond swiþfeorm.	

Sometimes I rush through, so that dark clouds ride on my back, widely scattering full streams of water; sometimes afterward I let them slip together... Like a powerful servant, at times I labor, sometimes under the earth, sometimes I must go underneath the high waves, sometimes a stir the waters up into a high wave, sometimes I climb up, excite the moving cloud, travel widely, swift and violent. (Riddle 3, ll. 36-39a, 67-73a)

Morton argues that climate change has taught humans ecological thinking (48), and has forced humans into a recognition of their decentered status. 'What ecological thought must do, then, is unground the human by forcing it back into the ground...' (18). But as shown repeatedly throughout this

chapter and the previous one, the *Exeter Book* riddles already unground the human by describing animals and objects returning the human's gaze, anticipating Derrida, and making the human the object of comments, observations, and even direct challenges from animals, trees, and earth. The riddles also depict some humans as the decentered and object-like with respect to other humans, not only to the animals and things that are the solutions to some of the riddles.

Morton's primary concern in inventing the term 'hyperobject' is to think through social formulations around global warming as a phenomenon that cannot be seen in its entirety but can only be interpreted from signs and traces, from partial views, and thus to help to understand why people can take individual weather events, for example a snowstorm, as evidence against it. But it is also a highly useful concept for thinking about social phenomena such as 'gender' and 'race' that transcend cultures and persist across centuries. Much as Morton points out of the weather, people exist inside of gender, race, religion, dis/ability, and related social structures, and we can perceive ourselves only within them or at intersections among them, so that they are difficult if not impossible to see in their entirety.

In describing objects of everyday life, the riddles make references, sometimes oblique and sometimes direct, to human beings who use those objects. Men and women are mentioned, specifically as slaves and as Welsh but neither as English nor as free, suggesting the latter markers of status are seen as the norm, not needing characterization because they can be assumed in the absence of other descriptors. Social relationships such as the distinction between slave and free person, between 'English' and 'Welsh' or 'Briton' (which I characterize, problematically, using the term 'ethnicity'), and the conditions that structure gender are difficult to see in their entire structures and the ideologies that shape them. They are visible in individual examples. Religion can likewise be difficult to see its entirety, observable only in its symptoms and expressions. Christianity's status as the dominant religion in Europe and then the Americas for nearly two millennia makes it nearly impossible to see it as a whole, across time and space and in its myriad variations. Gender, religion, and ethnicity, like Morton's climate change and other hyperobjects, are sets of relations outside which humans cannot stand.

The descriptions of things in many of the riddles, whether 'natural' objects or things made by humans of materials such as ore, trees, and the skins or feathers of animals, are deeply bound up with notions about gender and class. As noted above, 'eorðe' is gendered feminine, and the ground and fields as a source of life are imagined as feminine even when

masculine-gender words such as 'wong' are used. The ice, or iceberg, of Riddle 33 is also described as a feminine creature, one prone to violence. The solution to the riddle has been disputed. Trautmann argued that the solution could not be 'iceberg,' because icebergs were not known in the seas around the British Isles (93). Moreover, the word 'iceberg' is not attested in Old English. The lack of any record of a word in Old English is quite possibly accidental, but it is suggestive that no word for a floating mountain of ice is recorded in any surviving Middle English text, though cognates exist in Middle Dutch and Middle Low German, and 'iceberg' was apparently borrowed from Dutch only in the eighteenth century (see Bosworth-Toller, the *Thesaurus of Old English*, the *Middle English Compendium*, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*). However, Williamson notes that a traveler such as Ohthere sailed far enough north to encounter icebergs, and Anglo-Saxon sailors could have encountered occasional erratics drifting far from their sources (237-38).

Whether the solution is 'ice,' 'iceberg,' or a patch of river ice large enough to threaten a boat or ship, the object is clearly feminine: 'Wæs hio hetegrim, hilde to sæne, / biter beadoweorca; bordweallas grof, / heardhīpende' ('She was malignantly cruel, lazy to battle, bitter war-work, carved shield-walls, bold in purpose,' ll. 5-7a.) The riddle combines a narrator's description of the object with four concluding lines in the first person, enabling use of the gendered pronoun 'hio' ('she') as well as references to both 'modor' and 'dohtor' ('mother' and 'daughter,' ll. 9, 11). The identification of destructive natural forces as feminine resonates with the depiction of Grendel's mother and the mere filled with aggressive fish that attack Beowulf during his approach to her cave but disappear after she is dead.

Riddle 12 enacts a complicated series of dichotomies, including between male and female, slave and free, while also challenging boundaries between human, thing, animal, and land. It is worth quoting in full:

Fotum ic fere,	foldan slite,
grene wongas,	þenden ic gæst bere.
Gif me feorh losað,	fæste binde
swearte Wealas,	hwilum sellan men.
Hwilum ic deorum	drincan selle
beorne of bosme,	hwilum mec bryd triedeð
felawlonc fotum,	hwilum feorran broht
wonfeax Wale	wegeð ond þyð,
dol druncmenn	deorcum nihtum,
wæteð in wætre,	wyrmeð hwilum

fægre to fyre;	me on fæðme sticap
hygegalan hond,	hwyrfeð geneahhe,
swifeð me geond sweartne.	Saga hwæt ic hatte,
þe ic lifgende	lond reafige
ond æfter deape	dryhtum þeowige.

While I possess spirit, I walk, slice the earth, the green fields, with my feet. If life leaves me, I bind dark Welshmen, and sometimes better men. Sometimes I give drink to dear ones, to heroes, out of my stomach; sometimes a stately wife steps on me with her feet; sometimes a darkhaired Welshwoman brought from afar bends and presses me, dumb drunkard in the dark night wets me in water, sometimes warms me pleasantly by the fire; sticks me in her lap with a wanton hand, moves rapidly, swivels me in the dark place. Say what I am called; I who living plunder the earth and serve men after death.

The verb 'swifan' makes only two other appearances in surviving Old English texts. In *Panther*, also in the *Exeter Book*, the Panther rests in a mountain cave after eating: 'ðær se þeodwiga þreonihtra fæc / swifeð on swefote, slæpe gebiesgad' ('there the mighty warrior for a span of three nights twists in his dreams, busied with sleep,' ll. 38-39). The other attestation occurs in the Old English *Boethius*, in a passage about the transient nature of all things: 'Hwæt, eac se broc, þeah he swife of his rihtryne, ðonne þær micel stan wealwiende of þam heohan munte oninnan fealð' ('Look, also the brook swerves from its rightful course, when a huge stone rolling from the high mountain falls into it,' 6. 14). By Chaucer's time, the word had come to refer to sexual relations, and the *Middle English Dictionary* derives the word in that sense from Old English 'swifan.' A bawdy word for sexual activity might not be preserved in the surviving Old English corpus, with its heavy lean toward heroic and Christian poetry as well as documentary and religious prose. But this poem suggests that 'swifan' had already acquired a sexual connotation in Old English.

The boundary between human and animal is breached by the living animal's use of human speech, both before and after its death. The dead animal's skin is put to a variety of uses: leather strips used as rope for binding prisoners; a floor-covering; a bottle to hold warm water; a sex toy. As with Riddle 30 ('Wood'), the skin can be used for many thing. In life, the animal had stepped on the ground; its skin becomes, among other things, a rug stepped on by humans. In linking together stepping on the ground and killing plants, and stepping on skin from an animal already killed, this riddle also challenges the boundary between woman and animal and between

woman and object. Much as the animal treads on earth, a woman treads on the animal used as a floor covering. The proud bride devolves into a 'Wale,' which seems to have meant both 'slave' and 'woman from Wales,' who seems to be using a portion of the animal's skin as a dildo. As Dorothy Yamamoto writes, 'women, despite being humans, are not accorded either the symbolic or the practical dignity of centrality within medieval culture' (10). The focus on the drunkenness and stupidity of the woman who uses the skin in its other forms deprives her of full humanity, much as does Riddle 52 (discussed below) in associating the female (grammatical) object of the riddle with the physical objects of the solution. Moreover, the woman in the riddle is given no voice, whereas the animal speaks at the beginning of the riddle, and then speaks in turn as the objects made out of the skin.

In a discussion of the film *Brokeback Mountain*, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson argue that dominant mid-twentieth century discourses 'attach wilderness spaces to performances of *heterosexual* masculinity' (3). They point out that relationships between humans and lived environments are constructed alongside norms, and challenges to norms, surrounding gender and sexual identity. 'The critical analysis of these locations and co-productions is what we mean by "queer ecology": there is an ongoing relationship between sex and nature that exists institutionally, discursively, scientifically, spatially, politically, poetically, and ethically, and it is our task to interrogate that relationship in order to arrive at a more nuanced and effective sexual and environmental understanding' (5). Like *Brokeback Mountain*, the *Exeter Book* riddles articulate a masculine, heteronormative context for the enactment of puzzles about things that in turn become puzzles about sexual relationships and identities. Heteronormativity is another hyperobject, as illuminated in its functions in the riddles. Men appear on horseback with hawks, a symbol of high status, or blowing horns to summon warriors, or drinking too much mead; women appear as slaves or servants, passing a cup of wine among the drinkers but not themselves drinking. In expanding on Mortimer-Sandilands' and Erickson's comments, Will Stockton notes that the 'environment' includes 'humans who are sometimes abjected as waste from the category of humanity, including nonwhites, perverts, the homeless, and the insane' (171). Unfortunately, the *Exeter Book* riddles provide several examples of that kind of abjection, as does Felix's *Vita Guthlaci* in casting native Britons as demons (see Chapter 4).

Male humans feature as the solutions to several riddles: two men with hawk riddles (19, 64), the one-eyed seller of garlic mentioned above (86), and Lot and his daughters (46). Women, however, appear within the riddles in

ways that incorporate them into parts of a solution rather than as the whole of a solution. A possible exception is the one-line Riddle 76, which reads in full, 'Ic ane geseah idese sittan' ('I saw a lady, sitting alone'). But scholars have not allowed this riddle to rest. Tupper declines to give it a solution, referring to scholarship that reads it as parts of Riddle 75 or Riddle 77 (219). Williamson sees the line as forming the last line of Riddle 75, which he solves as 'piss,' with a distinction between men and women in the act of urinating (352-53); Muir agrees with the solution (687) but sees the runic line as an interpolation (669). Murphy (2011) also sees Riddle 76 as the final line of Riddle 75, but follows Niles in reading the solution as 'hound and hind' (173 n. 75). Bitterli notes that 'the capitalization and punctuation leave no doubt that ... the two entries [75 and 76] constitute two individual Riddles,' but he finds the solution to be impossible (106). Krapp and Dobbie (371) report with apparent agreement W.S. Mackie's 'possible solution' of 'hen' and are followed by Crossley-Holland (114). Any bird incubating an egg would seem a rather obvious solution. A woman involved in any of a myriad of household tasks from sewing or spinning to hulling peas would also be possible. If the vision of a houseful of children and domestic animals makes this seem improbable (though eventually, they do sleep), another possibility would be a nun in contemplative prayer. It might say more about modern scholars than about the scribe of the riddles that it has been deemed impossible to solve a riddle about a solitary seated woman. The inability to solve a riddle about a woman is evidence that gender is a hyperobject the operations of which extend from the Anglo-Saxon period into the present, as well as backward from the present, to influence the ways in which scholars continue to think about medieval literature.

Several riddles include human females in sexualized terms: examples include Riddle 12, with its reference to a woman, 'wonfeax Wale' ('dark-haired Welsh woman,' l. 8) who appears to be masturbating (Rulon-Miller); and Riddle 25 in which a 'ceorles dohtor' ('churl's daughter,' l. 6) grasps a penis/onion. In a postcolonial reading of Ælfric's narratives of Agatha and Lucy, Andrea Rossi-Reder points out that women's sexuality is an institutional concern for religion in Anglo-Saxon England because it is 'intertwined with issues of controlling marriage and reproduction' (184). Women's sexual activity in the riddles is confined to women of lower classes; from an aristocratic point of view, women's sexual freedom is less dangerous when it does not threaten the orderly inheritance of property. The presence of female sexuality in the riddles is complex, and a full treatment is beyond the scope of this chapter (and see Rulon-Miller, Salvador-Bello, D.K. Smith, and Stewart for excellent work on the subject), but some discussion has

bearing on the treatment of women as objects parallel to the other objects in the riddles.

Riddle 62, which Williamson calls a 'delightful double entendre riddle,' points to the presence of sexual violence in Anglo-Saxon culture. The solution of 'penis' is ominously doubled with proposed solutions including fiery arrow, poker, and tool for boring holes, all implying that a woman is a passive recipient of male sexual energy, with varying amounts of violence implied in the different possible solutions. Solutions proposed for Riddle 61, including vagina as well as shirt, mail-shirt, or helmet, also suggest a connection between sexuality and violence toward women. The varying operations of sexual violence functioning in conjunction with heteronormativity in locating women in subordinate social positions are difficult to perceive in their connections and as a whole. As such, they contribute to the status of gender as hyperobject.

Morton argues that patriarchal discourse treats women as objects and objects like women: 'think of the gendering of cars and ships' (2013: 6). The riddles point to a similar equivalence in the gendering of ice and earth as feminine, as mothers, variously, of ore and of water and of Adam, so that the feminine is also identified insistently with motherhood (and see Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering*). In a study of the intersections in Patristic and medieval attitudes toward Jews and women, Lisa Lampert has shown that early Christian commentators saw masculinity as the default condition, from which femininity necessarily deviates (29-32). In *De Virginitate*, Ambrose writes: 'Quae non credit, mulier est, nam qui credit, in virum perfectum resurgit, in mensuram aetatis plenitudinis Christi' ('She who does not believe is a woman; moreover, whoever believes is raised to complete manhood, to the measure of adulthood of Christ,' *PL* 16: 270C). Some exemplary women can attain the honorary status of manhood, which is revealed as the norm. In his commentary on the third Epistle to the Ephesians, Jerome argued that women are deficient specifically as a result of bearing children: 'Quamdiu mulier partui servit et liberis, hanc habet ad virum differentiam, quam corpus ad animam. Sin autem Christo magis voluerit servire quam saeculo, mulier esse cessabit, et dicetur vir' ('As long as woman is for birth and children, she is as different from man as body is from soul. But if she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man,' *PL* 26: 533B-33C). In *De Trinitate*, Augustine makes explicit a hierarchy that places woman below man: 'Caput mulieris, vir; caput viri, Christus; caput autem Christi, Deus' ('The head of woman is man; the head of man is Christ; also, the head of Christ is God,' *PL* 42: 930). Two manuscripts of *De Trinitate* (both

now fragmentary) survive from Anglo-Saxon England. Augustine made similar comments in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, of which one complete manuscript from the period survives (Gneuss 57).

Aside from Riddles 63 and 80, which make passing reference to women handling vessels containing wine or mead, only Riddle 52 includes a human female described in terms that are not connected with sexual activity. Riddle 52 makes reference to a Welsh woman, apparently a slave; it is brief, and quoted here in full:

Ic seah ræpingas	in ræced fergan
under hrof sales	hearde twegen,
þa wæron genamnan,	nearwum bendum
gefeterade	fæste togædre;
þara oþrum	wæs an getenge
wonfah Wale,	seo weold hyra
bega siþe	bendum fæstra.

I saw captives conveyed into the hall, two hard ones under the roof of the hall; they were of the same name, fettered firmly together with narrow bonds; near [pressing upon?] one of them was a dark-haired Welsh woman, she had power over both of their movements through fixed bonds. (ll. 1-7)

The riddle is solved variously: a pair of oxen led into a barn by a female slave, a pair of buckets tied together with rope, a flail, or a broom (Crossley-Holland 106, Tupper 185, Williamson 295, Muir 622). The stated text, in which a woman of Welsh origin is in charge of two bound criminals, interacts interestingly with the subtext, in which the same woman – of low class and possibly a slave or peasant – is engaged in agricultural manual labor, herding oxen, carrying water, or processing grain before grinding.

Commentators have always taken the ‘wonfah Wale’ as non-metaphorical, though all of the other elements in the riddle are subject to re-interpretation. This demonstrates the force of the hyperobject of gender across time and also shows how powerfully it intersects with the hyperobject of ethnic affiliation or, today, national status. As discussed in Chapter 4, Guthlac’s body is legitimate, because he is male and Christian and of high social status; the bodies of the Britons are demonized and rendered illegitimate. The conjunction in Riddle 52 of the woman’s status as both female and Welsh reduces her to an object comparable to the ‘ræpingas,’ (‘captives’), which can be interpreted as humans or as things.

Yamamoto points out that, in medieval culture, 'all bodies are not of equal value' and that evaluating claims about which bodies are 'good' or not are complicated by the additional problem that 'individual bodies do not always stay the same' (3). She quotes Michael Camille on what he calls 'marginal art,' a category in which he includes gargoyles and marginal drawings that he finds 'expressive of resistance to the "official" culture of the primary text' (Yamamoto 5). Several of the riddles contain a text that appears to describe one thing, but behind which a different solution is hidden. In some cases, there is a marginalized 'obscene' solution as well, but in other cases, the 'marginalized' presence is the voice of ore or an antler, or of a woman of low status. Riddle 52 places a lower-class woman in power over fettered male criminals, a closely limited situation. In the various solutions, the 'criminals' come to represent animals or objects – buckets, oxen, segments of a flail – but the woman remains a woman. Her static position in the text of the riddle puts her in a position of equivalence with animals and objects, unlike the two fettered men, who stand in for objects specifically in opposition to them. The identification of a person as both woman and foreign appears to make her impervious to symbolic interpretation.

Morton suggests that feminist philosophy requires recognition of the 'presence' of things that acknowledges their continuous existence without reducing them to essential qualities. 'Ontology should respect the strangeness and uncanniness of things, acknowledging that objects are unique entities, and thus ontologically separate, no matter how much they may interact or be entangled with one another... A feminist ontology might support objects that merely exist, without any interaction whatsoever. Objects should be allowed to be inward, introverted – to exceed any gaze, any encounter at all' (Morton 2013: 65). But recognizing the presence of women as 'strange' despite entanglements with other entities does not recognize social formulations such as gender, ethnicity and class as hyperobjects. It sees the individual entities without recognizing their participation in complex networks that are apprehended only in their effects but difficult to see as a whole.

Morton's project is to develop and articulate an ethical sense that encompasses the entire world, and all the beings in it, living and non-living. 'This would constitute a move toward a democracy that included nonhumans – or better, realized that nonhumans were already part of social space, that social space was never fully human. Rather than extending humanlike powers to nonhumans, we could instead dismantle what makes humans different from nonhumans' (2013: 67). The creation of an ethics that requires that things have agency, and that places humans on a spectrum with various

kinds of different non-humans, is a valuable enterprise. But like some other ecocriticisms and ecofeminisms, it does not go far enough in challenging the power of the social structures that differentiate among different kinds of humans, rendering some of them objects while others retain subjectivity and power.

Karl Steel has argued that Middle English texts use animals in opposition to humans to help define the human, but also to draw distinctions among humans. 'Medieval writers often drew on the natural subjugation of animals to degrade other humans by animalizing them and in order to generate, defend, and resist various dominant ideologies and elite practices' (2008: 4). Susan Crane argues, similarly, 'the founding human/animal dichotomy is so unstable that it has migrated all too easily *within* the human, to define as bestial certain slaves, women, colonials, criminals, and foreigners' (Crane 4). In the *Lives* of Guthlac examined in Chapter 4, Britons are cast as subhuman. Likewise, some of the *Exeter Book* riddles challenge boundaries not only between humans and animals but among humans, animals, landscapes, and objects, suggesting that the Anglo-Saxons saw some humans not merely as animals, devoid of reason, but also as comparable to inanimate things.

Riddles that articulate agency for sheep (26), tree (53), and deer (93) challenge the subordinate placement of animals and objects in a hierarchy dominated by humans, even if only briefly, and even if such provocations are elided as soon as the riddle is solved and its disruptive potential once again suppressed. The play of meanings in Riddle 52, with its competing ideas of a woman carrying buckets of water or supervising captives, similarly challenges the subjugation of the Welsh slave-woman, much as other riddles challenge the object status of animals. Bynum argues that 'marginal and disadvantaged groups in a society appropriate that society's dominant symbols and ideas in ways that revise and undercut them' (16-17). The riddle can be read to imagine a low-status woman appropriating and reimagining a dominant culture's ways of thinking about women and Welsh and slaves and simultaneously imagining an object in the process of the same kind of appropriation. A similar appropriation of dominant cultural tropes can be seen in the insistent voice of the sheep in the 'Book' riddle (26).

Rossi-Reder argues that female saints symbolize their native land: 'The violation of the woman saint's body ... reflects her occupied homeland's exploitation' (184). Ælfric makes explicit the connection between a woman's body and the landscape in his narratives of female saints when he 'compares Agatha and Lucy to components of the land – stones, rocks, and minerals' (Rossi-Reder 190). Yamamoto insists that while some discourse associates women with nature, they are not in fact therefore excluded from culture.

In important ways, too, women are not 'outside,' or 'around' culture but profoundly involved with it. Rather than giving women a fixed place, or places, within a two-dimensional schema, I believe it is more illuminating to think of them as both wholly present and wholly absent, from the dominant, male point of view. This mixing of presence and absence generates anxiety, since men cannot always be sure which style is operative. (206-07)

Morton's suggestion that women exist as beings and not simply as assemblages of cultural operations is workable, but it risks a movement toward seeing gender as a fixed quality of a woman's body rather than a cultural artifact, or rather a vast collection of cultural artifacts impossible to apprehend in their totality, a hyperobject. Yamamoto's acknowledgement that women have a multiplicity of places within the hyperobject of culture allows a challenge to its paradigms.

Conclusion

The *Exeter Book's* first sequence of riddles (numbers 1-59) begins with Storm and ends with Chalice. While there does not seem to be a particular order to the riddles in between those endpoints, there is a beginning in 'inhuman nature' (Cohen) and an ending in an object the description of which includes several references to God, as both creator and savior of humans. Cohen argues: 'Inhuman forces and objects ultimately refuse domestication' (2014: iv). The presence of the Chalice at the end of the first series of riddles suggests that all that has come before might be read as subordinated to a higher power. But the cultural force of the individual riddles, and the animals and objects and storms brought to life in them, does not recede thoroughly into the background despite the presence of the 'Chalice' Riddle at the end of the sequence, much as the animal that narrates its own death in the first line of Riddle 26 ('Book') is never completely subsumed into the document inscribed into its skin, and never completely disappears.

The asymmetries in depictions of male and female characters make the human a category as complex and porous as those of animals (Derrida) and things (Morton and Cohen). Humans are objectified, things metaphorically depicted as humans, and the breach in boundaries between animals and humans that has been limned by Steel and Yamamoto, and that between animals and things in several of the riddles, challenges in turn the boundaries between humans and things. As Morton writes, 'Hyperobjects seem

to phase in and out of the human world: they occupy a high-dimensional *phase space* that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional human-scale basis' (70). Hyperobjects interact with more prosaic objects in the riddles, in the presentation of Storms and Icebergs by way of details about their effects rather than information about them as wholes, as well as in the formation of cultural networks within which humans can become objects, which are in turn imagined as humans, and animals challenge the boundaries among both.

John Bellamy Foster argues that ecological critique is caught in disagreements between cultural and deep ecological analysis of contemporary climate problems (and how to solve them), which then 'perpetuate the "humanity vs. nature" conceptions' rather than recognizing the human as part of (albeit alienated from) nature (18). Instead, making 'things matter,' (Cohen 2012: 7) opens the possibility of demolishing dichotomies between human and animal, soul and body, living and dead, animate and inanimate, and imagining full moral accountability and agency across entire spectrums of existence. Collectively, the Tree and Gold riddles measure the value of things as they enumerate kinds of trees and manners and materials used in decoration for human utility, aesthetic pleasure, and spiritual contemplation. Materials from the earth are given voice, and that voice provides a radical break from the usual centering of the human within human thought and expression, but at the same time the voices given to such materials are subordinated to human concerns by their context within the riddles – manuscripts written by humans, riddles created to puzzle humans, solutions designed to amuse humans. The riddles speak to audiences trying to identify their objects/subjects, through language that deliberately obfuscates and confuses in order to create the challenge and the game. The cognitive shifts between perspectives, alongside the misleading language and the descriptive shifts deny stability and conclusiveness to either perspective, pushing a re-evaluation of the place of the human and the place of things.

Alfred's meditation on the utility of trees, and Bede's narrative of Coifi's desecration of the grove, articulate a point of view that seems to suggest difficulty in taking seriously the narratives of plant and earth suffering presented in the riddles, and the transformation of sheep into scripture and tree into cross would seem to imply, within that same ideological framework, a radically different sense of importance for the religious objects that would be seen as completely 'normal' in transcending any claim to moral value for the animal or the tree. Yet the riddles also open the possibility for a reading that prioritizes the non-human, even briefly. In radically decentralizing the human, they make humans objects of a planetary subjectivity.

The metaphorical use of trees has become particularly complicated for modern philosophy. Tree metaphors and tree structures are widespread in our cultural and intellectual formulations, used to diagram sentences, schematize relationships between manuscripts, prioritize human thought in Cartesian foundationalism, or claim that Judaism has been superseded by Christianity. But these metaphors have recently been challenged. As Alfred Siewers comments, 'Hierarchy justifiably bears a bad name in the modern West, and this is at the heart of the Deleuzian critique of the arboreal in the abstract' (2014: 103). Siewers reaches back past Deleuze and Guattari to the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite to argue that trees can be rhizomatic as well, allowing for interlinked, non-hierarchical networks of thought.

The riddles describe trees and ore and sheep, high-status men with hawks and horses and an enslaved woman from Wales, yet they are still composed and written down by humans. They could be interpreted as proposing limitations in the possibilities of human voice, yet such a reading is composed, transmitted, and heard only by humans, and never by the objects or animals described within them. Cohen argues that attending to the ways in which our notions of and relationships with objects are bound up in politics can help to articulate 'a politically and ecologically engaged ethics in which the human is not the world's sole meaning-maker, and never has been' (2012: 7). Animals are different from plants, and plants are different from rocks. The examples of sea cucumbers and Venus fly traps complicate questions of how, in fact, animals are different from plants, but it is clear that there is a difference. But there is also a commonality in that both are entitled to moral consideration, and both are given an articulation of such entitlement in the riddles, even though we cannot be sure what was behind the articulation of that entitlement: a seriousness about the idea of granting moral agency to landscape, or a sense of absurdity at the idea. Even if the ascription of agency to animals and objects is suffused with laughter, the riddles still open a window to the idea.

Steel writes that critical animal theory 'describ[es] humans and nonhumans as co-constituted by their shared worlds, and ... proposes affective nonprogrammatic relations of caring, protection, and humility' (Steel 2011: 4). Cohen proposes an ethics that includes the Mississippi river and stone. Such an ethics needs also to acknowledge the fact that things, like humans, act differently and are perceived differently in different contexts. 'Relativity theory destroyed the idea of consistent objects: things that are identical with themselves as constantly present all the way down' (Morton 10). The riddles that contain double entendres can be said to do the same, but in being riddles, in making language complicated, in describing multiple

phases or uses of the same object or material, they also make problematic the idea that objects are consistent.

Harman argues that objects should neither be 'undermined' to their atomic constituents nor 'overmined' to their importance to humans (106). Objects such as the plate or chalice of Riddles 48 and 59 should be reduced neither to elemental gold nor to their importance to humans in terms of great monetary value and simultaneously of religious symbol; their full range of meanings and connotations needs to be held in mind. Attending to the multiple meanings of objects has among its effects the de-centering of the human. 'Humans lose their place as the metaphysical core of the universe in object-oriented thought, but only because *no* object is allowed to occupy that core, including the inanimate sort. Instead, all objects are equally decentered' (Harman 107). In the riddles, humans are de-centered, as one object after another takes center stage as the speaking subject and object to be guessed. As demonstrated above, however, some of these objects re-center the human through descriptions that point to human presence through metaphor or by emphasizing the symbolic importance of things. Patricia Hill Collins argues, quoting Elsa Barkley Brown, that since there is no single point from which all human experience can be understood, we must constantly 'pivot the center,' remain in dialogue with one another, listen as well as speak (270-71). Humans must move out of the center not only to allow for the voices of other humans, but also to hear the voices of things and to craft an ethics that acknowledges the legitimacy of earth and ore, trees and reeds, crows and cows, alongside and equal to humans: all humans.

In the concluding chapter which follows, I attempt to bring together into a single conversation the ideas put into motion in each of the preceding chapters. I have discussed wilderness, sea, ruins, animals and objects in various configurations and in connections with several different environmentally inflected theories. Ecocriticisms make valuable claims for re-considering textual representations of the natural world and human places in it, but they are enriched when challenged by ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, critical animal studies and theories of objects. I point to some of the things that this book does not accomplish: for instance, I do not bring ecologically based criticism into dialogue with queer theory or disability study, both of which would enrich environmental cultural studies. I conclude with a brief discussion of three post-Anglo-Saxon texts as a gesture to what might be gained by reading Anglo-Saxon literary environments against those of other peoples and/or places.

