

CHAPTER I

Taking Shape
Early Life in the Exeter Book Riddles

Send us, bright one, light one, Horhorn, quickening and wombfruit . . .
Before born babe bliss had.

– James Joyce, *Ulysses*

In considering the depictions of young beings in the Exeter Book *Riddles*, this chapter is not primarily looking for love. Even to define love at all is a challenge, although in its conventionalised romantic guises it has been understood as the ‘congealed aspect’ of desire – that is, ‘what happens to desire when it is obliged to adhere to the cultural forms and understandings that have been explicitly designed to capture and control this unstable force or phenomenon’.¹ That said, love is also commonly perceived to be an instinctive human universal, which immediately poses some problems: a phenomenon that is renowned for being deeply conventional and historically contingent is also supposed to be intuitively recognisable across time and space.

Discussion of childhood in the medieval period has long been dominated by a claim made by Philippe Ariès in 1960 that high rates of infant mortality in medieval societies inhibited parents’ emotional investment in children, and such ‘indifference towards a too fragile childhood’ indeed prevented an ‘idea [*sentiment*] of childhood’ from developing at all.² Historians have since rushed to provide counterarguments – tracing evidence of care and affection for children – in what has been described as ‘a first wave of historical childhood studies’ and (in a tone of considerably more irritation) a ‘decades-long, ill-conceived response’ to Ariès, much of which has appealed to perceived biological and cultural universals, begging the question, ‘Why write something called the history of childhood, if childhood is not historical?’³ Scholars of early medieval England such as Sally Crawford have strongly emphasised cultural alterity, agreeing with

Ariès that ‘childhood was never sentimentalised’, while at the same time striving to contest that ‘girls and boys were loved by their families’.⁴ Proving the phenomenon of emotional investment in children, recognisable to modern eyes as love, is certainly a difficult task. In the following, I step away from the fraught language of love, even ‘tough love’, and opt instead to approach the *Riddles* from other perspectives.⁵

This is not to deny that the *Riddles* are often charged with affect when describing young beings. A kind of ‘sweetness’ and ‘tenderness’ can be found in their depictions of early life, as Shu-Han Luo has argued – see, for instance, the use of terms such as *swas* (‘dear’) to describe family members (*Riddles* 70, ‘ox’, 7a; 7, ‘cuckoo’, 11b; 13, ‘hedgehog’ or ‘porcupine’, 22a). Sometimes a language of youthful happiness is present, most strikingly in *Riddle* 70 (‘ox’), while ‘the looming presence of danger’ elsewhere threatens young creatures, especially the family protected by the mother porcupine/hedgehog of *Riddle* 13. In this chapter, I am not substantially concerned with whether early stages of life are described ‘lovingly and nostalgically’, but like Luo I am interested in the *Riddles*’ pronounced preoccupation with environments which provide shelter and nourishment.⁶ These circumstances are consistently implied to be a prerequisite for survival – for staying in the world at all – and for the distinctly gradual process of taking shape that forms the basis of early life in these texts. In time (and often taking the form of a key moment of upheaval), riddle-creatures evolve away from this condition of extreme dependency, only to enter wider networks of service and interdependence in the form of new economies of work and the infliction, witnessing, and suffering of violence.⁷ These texts may not present us with recognisably nuclear family dynamics or clear signs of parental ‘love’ when they depict early life, but they are profoundly interested in movement through social structures, both human and nonhuman, and the formation of different kinds of attachment. They also stress the fragility of any kind of sustained life in the world, even (or especially) that of a very young being, so clearly dependent on others’ care.

In exploring the *Riddles*’ depiction of early formation, I question whether these texts actually do have what has been called a ‘hallmark fascination with reproduction’, and especially whether they are interested in birth.⁸ Emphasis on birth is in fact far more typical of Aldhelm’s *aenigmata* and the Latin collection known as the *Bern Riddles*, which may date from the seventh century.⁹ When they are not closely related to Latin analogues (and possible sources), the *Riddles* generally describe a gradual and cumulative emergence into being. Young creatures are often introduced while already growing, supported by their surroundings

but not generated by them *ex nihilo*. We can consider here the importance of the learned contexts of riddlic composition, and the ways in which these texts might comment on the meaning of childhood – or indeed the status of any kind of newcomer – in a monastic context, where a nurturing and transformative environment might quite logically supplant any distinct parental figures. However, as will be seen, other early medieval English sources outside of the *Riddles* offer comparable models of gradual, cumulative formation for the human body in its earliest forms – not only textual sources, but visual sources also.¹⁰ The *Riddles* may therefore access some even wider cultural and literary discourses of age when they depict a gradual experience of growth, contingent on the provision of nurture by a supportive environment.

Spatial dynamics play an important role in the age narratives of the *Riddles*, especially because young bodies are so closely associated with seclusion in a fixed place. Raymond P. Tripp Jr has theorised a ‘knot-body’ in Old English poetic tradition, whereby the joints of the human body must be securely fastened to enable controlled, purposeful movement.¹¹ At times, the *Riddles* seem to imply that very young creatures need time before controlled movement is possible, inviting comparisons with how other poets – such as that of *The Fortunes of Men* – view early human growth, as we will see shortly. The idea of initially uncontrolled, static bodies moving towards more purposeful movement and action offers one way to understand the spatial dynamics of the *Riddles*, but towards the end of this chapter, looking forward to the next, I explore another riddlic narrative of growth that Luo and I have recently identified as a progression towards usefulness in a wider social context.¹² As will be seen in the present chapter and Chapter 2, this aspect of the *Riddles* only gains significance when these texts are compared with other Old English poems, ones that are interested in human individuals growing into a condition of socially embedded usefulness. However, a large part of this functionality in the *Riddles* involves dynamics of hurting and being hurt, to the extent that this chapter also enters into a dialogue with Chapter 3’s discussions of later life as a matter of witnessing and surviving violence.

Firstly, this chapter will check in with the previously established ground zero for discussions of childhood in Old English writings: the opening to *The Fortunes of Men*. This passage has long been understood to reward searches for evidence of parental love in the wake of Ariès, but when these lines are relieved of such a heavy burden of proof, other kinds of narrative start to emerge. It is clear, for instance, that a deep sense of contingency and unpredictability is built into this passage’s view of the life course.

Children may be highly vulnerable and endangered by the world, but so are young people and adults. This passage therefore rings a keynote for this chapter's analysis of the *Riddles* as texts strongly concerned with life's precarity not only in its earliest phases – when continual nurture is needed to keep many of the riddle-creatures in a state of gradual development – but later in the creature's existence too.

Narratives of Formation in *The Fortunes of Men* and Plastic Art

The bulk of *The Fortunes of Men* lists diverse outcomes for human lives, but its first nine lines seem to act as a kind of preface, describing the beginning of life as it is frequently experienced:

Ful oft þæt gegonged, mid Godes meahnum,
 þætte wer ond wif in woruld cennað
 bearn mid gebyrdum ond mid bleom gyrwað,
 tennaþ ond tætaþ, oþþæt seo tid cymed,
 gegæð gear-rimum, þæt þa geongan leomu,
 lif-fæstan leoþu, geloden weorþað.
 Fergað swa ond feþað fæder ond modor,
 giefað ond gierwaþ. God ana wat
 hwæt him weaxendum winter bringað. (1–9)

It happens very often, with the powers of God, that a man and woman bring a child into the world with birth, and with colours dress it, encourage and cheer it, until the time comes, goes in a number of years, that the young limbs, life-fast joints, become grown. So the father and mother carry and lead, give gifts and prepare. God alone knows what the years will bring him as he grows up.

On multiple occasions, this passage has been celebrated as evidence that 'children were, normally, loved and wanted by both their parents'.¹³ Questioning the weight that has been placed on this passage as evidence of love, Stacy Klein has pointed out that the scenes in *Fortunes* need not be approached as 'realistic portrayals of . . . child-rearing', but – given the status of the text as a wisdom poem – instead as means of exploring 'the broader issues of human vulnerability and of how one might go about pursuing a productive life within an essentially hostile social world'.¹⁴ This idea of the importance of a 'productive life' is suggestive, especially given that many of the *Riddles* speak to a similar concern.

For now, I wish to draw attention to a particular crux in *Fortunes'* opening: the reliance of the child on its parents' attentions in order to

successfully grow its limbs and joints (5b, 6a). This detail can be contextualised in a variety of ways. We might turn to the monastic context of the Exeter Book's anthologising project, and note that the Benedictine Rule suggests that 'children's bodies are not fully developed', meaning that allowances should at times be made for children's weaker physical state, but also that harsh fasts and stinging lashes are efficacious for their correction.¹⁵ The whole opening to *Fortunes* has previously been approached as a text inflected by Benedictine thought, and a renewed case has recently been made for the emendation of line 4a, such that the parents do not 'tēnaþ ond tætaþ' ('encourage and coax') the child, but 'tēmiþ ond tæcaþ' ('tame and teach') it, thus accentuating the parallel with the description of the tamed hawk later in the poem (85–92), and giving a sense that both hawk and child are clothed and domesticated, resonating with indications elsewhere in early medieval culture that teaching is closely connected with the process of disciplining the body.¹⁶ *Fortunes'* emphasis on shaping children's bodies may thus be understood as powerfully meaningful within a Benedictine context.

At the same time, the poem's view of sculpted youth need not be understood as exclusively a matter of Benedictine, or even monastic, views on child-rearing. The reference to the shaping of limbs, implicating a process of 'shaping, hardening, and moulding . . . unformed material', might be freshly approached with reference to narratives of nonhuman infant formation, especially those in which animals lick their young into shape.¹⁷ Pliny the Elder, for instance, reports that a lion's cubs, when born, 'are mere lumps of flesh and very small, at the beginning of the size of weasels, and at six months they are scarcely able to walk, not moving at all until they are two months old' ('informes minimasque carnes magnitudine mustellarum esse initio, semenstres vix ingredi posse nec nisi bimenstres moveri').¹⁸ He claims that the young of lions, bears, and foxes bear their young 'unfinished' (*inchoatos*):

In quo sunt genere leaenae, ursae; et vulpes informe etiam magis quam supradicta parit, rarumque est videre parientem. Postea lambendo calefaciunt fetus omnia ea et figurant.

In this class being lionesses and bears; and a fox bears its young in an even more unfinished state than the species above-mentioned, and it is rare to see one in the act of giving birth. Afterwards all these species warm their offspring and shape them by licking them.¹⁹

The concept of unfinished cubs is mediated by Isidore, who specifically associates it with bears:

Ursus fertur dictus quod ore suo formet fetus, quasi orsus. Nam aiunt eos informes generare partus, et carnem quandam nasci quam mater lambendo in membra componit. Unde est illud:

Sic format lingua fetum cum protulit ursa.

The bear (*ursus*) is said to be so called because it shapes its offspring in its 'own mouth' (*ore suo*), as if the word were *orsus*, for people say that it produces unshaped offspring, and gives birth to some kind of flesh that the mother forms into limbs by licking it. Whence this is said:

'Thus with her tongue the bear shapes her offspring when she has borne it.'²⁰

These narratives of early life may be distinctly animal in their sphere of reference, but I wish to suggest that the ideas at play here are analogous to the narratives of human formation that we find in poems such as *Fortunes*.

Early medieval English visual sources offer some support for this claim. A little-discussed piece of stonework at Melbury Bubb (Dorset), currently used as a baptismal font and possibly originally designed for this purpose, provides some evidence for the currency of a tradition along Pliny's lines in the early eleventh century, in that lion-like animals here appear to be licking their young into shape. As set out in Figure 1's linear rendering, two pairs of quadrupeds face each other, interspersed by three smaller creatures. The second large animal from the right seems to be a lion, jaws open, working to 'revive the little quadruped by licking it'; this lion faces what has been identified as a hyena attacking the small creature, but this

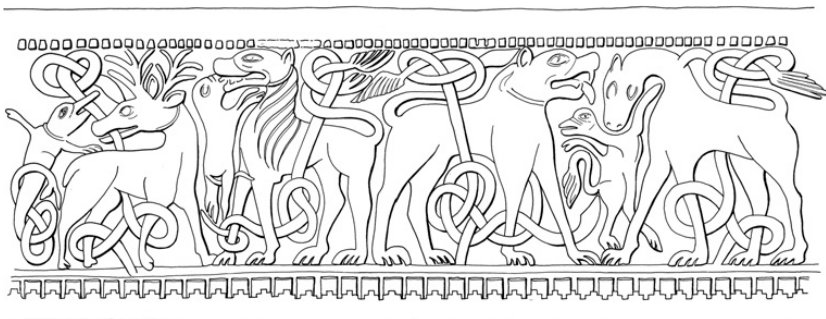


Figure 1 Font at Melbury Bubb. © Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, drawing by Yvonne Beadnell

figure could alternatively be a lioness holding the small animal steady and collaborating with its partner (they have the same tails and paws).²¹ The quadruped second from the left seems to be yet another lion breathing life into its born-lifeless cub, in accordance with a tradition evinced in later bestiaries.²² All three catlike creatures therefore seem to be engaging in some form of infant nurture.

The relation between the stag and its smaller neighbour is more unclear. It has been suggested that the pair represent a sick stag's ability to pull a serpent from the earth, eat it, and be restored, with the stag a figure of Christ and the serpent, the devil.²³ The stag has baptismal associations, evident elsewhere on a seemingly pre-Conquest font in Wiltshire, which bears an engraved quotation from Psalm 42:1: 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God' ('Sicut ceruus desiderat ad fontes aquarum, ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus').²⁴ However, the duo of serpent and stag are not presented in an obviously antagonistic relationship, nor are they in direct contact. Both animals bite onto a plant, of the same kind that springs from the ground under the two creatures licking their cub. Pliny describes female deer as eating certain herbs when they produce their young, partly to influence their milk:

Feminae autem ante partum purgantur herba quadam quae seselis dicitur, faciliore ita utentes utero. A partu duas herbas quae tamnus et seselis appellantur pastae redeunt ad fetum: illis imbui lactis primos volunt sucos quacumque de causa.

The females before giving birth use a certain plant called hartwort as a purge, so having an easier delivery. After giving birth they browse on the two plants named dittany and seseli before they return to the young: for some reason or other they desire the suckling's first draughts of milk to be flavoured with these herbs.²⁵

Isidore omits this detail about the herbs, though he does describe deer as self-medicating with dittany, which allows them to shake out arrows. Furthermore, he describes mother deer encouraging their young to conceal themselves from danger: 'the "young stag" is the offspring of deer, so called from "nodding", because they conceal themselves at a nod from their mother' ('Hinnuli filii sunt cervorum ab innuere dicti, quia ad nutum matris absconduntur').²⁶ For all that both Pliny and Isidore stress the role of the mother deer, their accounts do suggest one possible way of interpreting the scene: as a depiction of the stag and its offspring's carefully considered diet, and possibly also the concealment of the young. In later bestiary traditions,

does are thought to keep their young secluded in vegetation specifically until they become more mobile:

Nec qualibet partus suos educant, sed tenero studio oculunt et absconditos inter profunda fruticum vel herbarum, pedum verbere castigant ad latendum. Cum maturint ad fugam robur, per exercitium docent cursum, assuescunt salire per abrupta.

They do not rear their young just anywhere but hide them with tender care, concealed deep in bushes or grass, and they make them stay out of sight with a tap of the hoof. When the young grow strong enough to take flight, the deer train them to run and to leap great distances.²⁷

Although these sources refer again to female deer, they provide some further context for the pairing. If this reading is entertained, the overall design would provide three images of nurture necessary for infant animals to become fully animated or mobile: seclusion and/or feeding, enlivening breath, and licking into shape. If the stonework was initially a font, these images were evidently considered a meaningful juxtaposition with the sacrament of baptism, understood itself as an act of regeneration, allowing the infant to be ‘born again’ (John 3:1–21).

Around three centuries earlier, and originating much further north, the left panel of the early eighth-century Franks Casket, depicting the discovery of Romulus and Remus being nourished by a wolf, is marked by several unique features, some of which parallel those of the font’s design.²⁸ The runic inscription of the left side panel identifies a single wolf: ‘Romulus and Remus, two brothers: a female wolf nurtured them in the city of Rome, far from their native land’ (‘Romwalus ond Reumwalus twœgen gibroþær afoeddæ hiæ wylif in Romæcæstri oplæ unneg’). Not one, but two, wolves actually attend to the twins in the carved scene (Figure 2). Rather than crouching under a standing wolf, as is typical of classical models and in the scene’s treatment on late Roman and early medieval coins, the boys are suspended upside down (or splayed on the ground if we are given a bird’s-eye view), and they drink milk from the lower wolf, while another is positioned above them.²⁹ Both animals have their tongues extended, pointed towards the children’s limbs. Catherine Karkov asks, ‘what should we make of the second wolf’ who ‘licks at, bites . . . their feet?’³⁰ A possible source is Book VIII of the *Aeneid*, when one of the embossed scenes on Aeneas’ shield is described:

Fecerat et viridi fetam Mavortis in antro
 procubuisse lupam, geminos huic ubera circum
 ludere pendentis pueros et lambere matrem
 impavidos, illam tereti cervice reflexa
 mulcere alternos et corpore fingere lingua.

(630–4)



Figure 2 The Franks Casket, left panel, detail. © The Trustees of the British Museum

He had fashioned, too, the mother wolf lying stretched out in the green cave of Mars; around her teats the twin boys hung playing, and suckled their dam without fear; with shapely neck bent back she fondled them by turns, and moulded their limbs with her tongue.³¹

Virgil's scene, like the casket panel, is full of allegorical potential, but on a literal level the wolves' care is presented in both sources as multifaceted, extending beyond the provision of sustenance and involving also a process of shaping – on the casket this is underlined by the use of *afedan* in inscription, a semantically broad verb, capable of meaning 'to feed' but also 'to nurture, bring up, raise (a child)'.³² The casket thus depicts attentive care for the young, involving the shaping of limbs, taking place within a secluded vegetative setting, set apart from the encroaching shepherds. In these regards, for all its temporal and geographic distance from the font, the panel shares its interest in a dynamic process of formation at the start of life, enabled by a sheltering environment and attentive carer figures. It shares also a readiness to move between discourses of human and animal life, with this scene set alongside other age-related images on the casket, including the front panel's depiction of the Virgin and Child, the soon-to-be-pregnant Beadohild, the dismantled child of Nithhad (a consequence of Weland the Smith's own joints being punitively disconnected), and the three Magi, who may map onto three ages of man.³³

The narratives of nonhuman infant formation on the Melbury Bubb font and the Franks Casket offer a new set of contexts for the parents' facilitation of the child's growing limbs in *Fortunes*. All these sources suggest that early life in the world involves being shaped by nurturing figures. As such, they resonate with the process of 'becoming' that J. Allan Mitchell sees as typical of the treatment of childhood in later medieval English writings: to enable a child's physical 'becoming', carers must 'bind and shape the pliable newborn body', aiming sometimes to replicate aspects of the 'uterine experience'.³⁴ We may therefore appreciate *Fortunes* as offering a scene of infant formation which in fact draws human parents further towards the realm of creaturely parents. If we continue to move away from the theme of 'love' when discussing the opening to the poem, then other, so far overlooked, aspects of the text's treatment of infancy are likely to leap out.

In many of the *Riddles* too, nonhuman young creatures must be protected, fed, and nurtured in order to reach a fully grown and mobile state. Early life is a distinctly gradual process of formation. The rest of this chapter will deal firstly with the *Riddles*' surprising avoidance of birth scenes, then examine possible contexts for this evasion in the form of various models of foetal and infant formation outside of the *Riddles*, before returning to treat the texts' depiction of nourishment, understandably emphasised as key to the process of growth. It will finally emphasise that riddle-creatures tend to age into positions of social usefulness, but in a manner which involves a substantial risk of violence, against which they are no longer very protected. The process of taking shape is often followed by the risk of losing it, and indeed of being destroyed altogether.

The Absence of Birth in the Exeter Book *Riddles*

In the Introduction, a rationale was advanced for centring the *Riddles* in the study as a whole. This was founded not only on the stylistic links the *Riddles* have with various Old English genres, but also on the biographical structural tendencies they share with other Old English poems, with 'biographical' meant loosely here, encompassing, for instance, the life course of a community or of Creation. I also noted the *Riddles*' inclination towards, if not anthropomorphism, isomorphism – that is, the implication of congruencies and similarities between the experiences of humans, animals, and things, whether distinctly metaphoric or more literal. When

This riddle also has an analogue in an Anglo-Latin *aenigma* by Eusebius (*De pullo*, 'On a chicken'). Eusebius establishes a pronounced contrast between the chicken's existence inside and outside the egg – inside the shell, it is lifeless ('exanimis', 4), covered, clothed, tastes no food, and cannot see; outside, it is alive, eats food, and is stripped of its metaphorical skin (1–3) – but *Riddle II* presents no such binary.⁴⁰ The chickens are introduced while living (3a), and the poet stresses that, although they are stripped of their clothing, they are none the worse for this (5b–6a) and will soon be covered in a different kind of raiment, presumably their feathers (9b). Moreover, the breakout itself is described as an ambiguous kind of eating, as the eggshell itself is a kind of 'grey fruit' (9a). All of these details pull against any clear division between existence in and outside of the egg. The moment of animation is certainly not concomitant with the birds' emergence from the shell (here following ornithological tradition). Although these details might seem to specifically refer to the strange and paradoxical world of birdlife, the indistinct beginnings of vitality experienced by the birds reflect a wider theme of the riddle collection: emergence into the world is a sustained process, rather than a single event.

Birth is often seen as an inevitable crux in the life cycle, and it is therefore perhaps surprising that scenes of birth are largely absent from the *Riddles*, flying also in the face of their reputation as a place where day-to-day physical experiences of life, such as sex, work, and slavery, find articulation.⁴¹ Where explicit references to birth or parturition do occur, they correspond in all but one instance to a parallel in a closely related Latin analogue, and the single remaining example may be related to a more remote analogue. The mentions of parturition tend to parallel *aenigmata* by Aldhelm in particular; this is unsurprising given that almost one third of the *aenigmata* contain an 'explicit reference to birth' as part of Aldhelm's intense interest in generation and viscera.⁴²

The verb *cennan* ('to generate, to bear') and its relation *acennan* ('to generate, to bring forth, give birth to') are the main representatives of the Old English vocabulary of birth in the *Riddles*.⁴³ Table 1 traces instances of their occurrences when used to describe individual creatures in the *Riddles*.⁴⁴ As can be seen, they almost always correspond to the Latin verbs *gignere* ('to beget, produce') or *generare* ('to beget, engender, produce') in related Latin *aenigmata*.⁴⁵ Neither of the two Old English verbs is very precise in its designation: *cennan* has a wide breadth of meaning, capable of signifying 'to generate', 'to bear or bring forth (a child)', 'to conceive', and 'to be pregnant', while *acennan* is even broader and carries more abstract senses like 'propagate', 'grow', and even 'declare'.⁴⁶

Table 1. *References to birth in the Exeter Book Riddles*

Exeter Book riddle	Latin analogue, if extant
<i>Riddle 33</i> ('mail coat') ⁴⁸	Aldhelm, <i>Aenigma 33</i> (<i>Lorica</i>)
Mec se wæta wong, wundrum freorig, of his innape ærist cende[.] (1-2)	Roscida me genuit gelido de viscere tellus[.] (1)
The wet field, wondrously cold, first gave birth to me from its insides.	The wet ground gave birth to me from its freezing innards.
<i>Riddle 38</i> ('Creation')	Aldhelm, <i>Aenigma 100</i> (<i>Creatura</i>)
... ond ic giestron wæs geong acenned, mære to monnum, þurh minre modor hrif. (44-5)	... ecce, tamen matris homo generabar ab alvo[.] (24)
... and I was born young yesterday, celebrated among men, through my mother's womb.	... look, I was this year produced from my mother's womb.
<i>Riddle 48</i> ('fire')	Aldhelm, <i>Aenigma 44</i> (<i>Ignis</i>)
Wiga is on eorþan wundrum accenned dryhtum to nyrtte, of dumbum twam[.] (1-2)	Me pater et mater gelido genuere rigore, fomitibus siccis dum mox rudimenta vigebant[.] (1-2)
A warrior is on earth, useful to men, wondrously born of a dumb two.	My father and mother gave birth to me from freezing rigidity, and soon my beginnings started to thrive in dry tinder.
	<i>Bern Riddle 23</i> (<i>De ignis scintilla</i>)
	Durus mihi pater, dura me generat mater, verbere nam multo huius de uiscere fundor. (1-2)
	Rough is my father and rough also is the mother who gives birth to me, after much beating from whose innards I am shed.
<i>Riddle 80</i> ('water')	
An wiht is on eorþan wundrum accenned[.] (1)	
A creature is on earth wondrously born.	

This breadth is typical of verbs able to denote ‘to give birth’ in Old English; none denotes solely the moment of parturition, and most are versatile in that they ‘do not specifically designate one and only one phase in the process of a child’s coming into existence, but may alternatively refer to several phases’, with many used as ‘rather generic descriptions of the entire episode’.⁴⁷ The Old English terminology of birth thus itself harbours considerable ambiguity.

Riddle 80 offers the only instance of a riddle-creature described as being born with no obvious Latin analogue, but a relationship between *Riddle 48* and *Riddle 80* might nonetheless be posited, particularly as the half-line ‘wundrum acenned’ appears in precisely the same position in both texts. In both cases, it seems to describe the origins of an entity born ‘on eorþan’, although due to manuscript damage the phrase is supplied in *Riddle 80* by editors. *Riddle 80* may draw on *Riddle 48*: it has recently been suggested that the composition of the last block of riddles in the Exeter Book manuscript (*Riddles 59–91*) may have been informed by a reading of the first block (*Riddles 1–57*).⁴⁹ Alternatively, a possible source can be found for *Riddle 80* in the one-line *Aenigma 1* of pseudo-Symphosius, solvable as ‘Ice and Water’, cited by Aldhelm as a model and founded on a mother-daughter paradox which becomes widespread across the riddle tradition (surfacing also in Exeter Book *Riddle 31*): ‘My mother bore me, and the same is soon born through me’ (‘Mater me genuit, eadem mox gignitur ex me’).⁵⁰ Some influence from Latin *aenigmata* may therefore be detected in *Riddle 80*, whether by way of *Riddle 48* or through the pseudo-Symphosius riddle. In either scenario, each reference to the event of birth in the Exeter Book *Riddles* would then relate in some way to a Latin analogue and possible source. The poets of the *Riddles* therefore seem reluctant to introduce new scenes of birth or birth-like events beyond what is present in the Latin.

For context, we can turn to the wider landscape of early medieval English literary culture. The paucity of writings on birth in the medical literature surviving from pre-Conquest England has long been noted, even taking into account a lost chapter on gynaecology from *Bald’s Leechbook*.⁵¹ Birth may have been women’s area of expertise, situated at a distance from predominantly male contexts of textual production.⁵² Texts such as *Metrical Charm 6* (‘For Delayed Birth’) do convey both a gynocentricity and an anxiety about the connection between birth and death – this poem is found in the late tenth- or early eleventh-century compendium known as the *Lacnunga*, and describes a cure that a pregnant woman may bring upon herself through various actions and speech acts, including stepping three

times over a person's grave, which may represent a 'boundary between the living and the non-living'.⁵³ The charm stresses birth's difficulty as a physical event, and describes the multiplicity of its possible forms, including the 'loathed late-birth', 'oppressive painful birth', and 'loathed lame-birth' ('laþan læt-byrde', 4b; 'swæran swær-byrde', 5b; 'laðan lam-byrde', 6b).⁵⁴ Victoria Thompson points out that discussions of death and dying are largely absent from pre-Conquest medical texts, and the 'only major exception' are the charms dealing with unborn children, such as *Metrical Charm 6*.⁵⁵ On such a basis, it could be suggested that, at least in medical contexts, ideas of birth were more firmly associated with endangered life than with life's beginning. The event may not have seemed an obvious or secure starting point from which to imagine narratives of human life.

The only extended consideration of birth in the vernacular poetic corpus lends further support to this idea. The very late (possibly twelfth-century) *Soul's Address to the Body* from the Worcester Fragments seems to mediate Wisdom 7:1–6 in considering the dual sufferings of 'the time of birth' ('burd-tid', A26a) and death's 'spirit-journey' ('feorþ-siþ', A27a); the separation of body, life, and soul is prophesied by the behaviour at birth of a baby, as it 'groans and wails and laments that woe' ('greoneþ ond woaneþ ond mænæt þeo weowe', A7).⁵⁶ Birth is here violent and shocking, reminiscent of the kind of birth that Aldhelm is happy to explore in his *aenigmata* and which is also well represented in the *Bern Riddles*. The poets of the vernacular *Riddles* do not share this fascination, and neither do most other poets working in Old English, in that birth is not generally a major preoccupation of Old English poetry.

Of course, as a point of origin, birth was not the only conceptual model available to a learned poet of this period, given that a wealth of embryological writing survives, closely linked to traditions condemning abortion and concerned, therefore, with the phenomenon of ensoulment.⁵⁷ In the later seventh-century *Laterculus Malalianus* attributed to Archbishop Theodore, the formation of the foetal Christ is discussed in terms of Hippocratic and Augustinian notions of development in the womb.⁵⁸ When comparing Christ's development to that of normal foetal development, Theodore dwells on the progression from liquidity to solidity which characterises the latter:

per .vi. diebus lactis similitudinem habens manet semen in uulua. Dehinc conuertetur in sanguinem usque ad dies .viii.. Deinde augetur usque ad .xii.,

et dehinc adduntur .x. et .viii.: qui mox coaculatur et tendit ad liniamenta membrorum.

for six days the semen remains in the womb, having the appearance of milk. Then it is turned into blood for nine days, then it grows for twelve days, and after that it adds eighteen days: it is soon coagulated, and grows towards the outline of limbs.⁵⁹

Human formation according to this scheme is clearly gradual. Theodore describes the foetus' acquisition of limbs as something it 'reaches toward' ('tendit ad'). The development of the prenatal infant is accumulative, shortly afterwards described as involving the 'drawing-together' ('glutinatío') of semen.⁶⁰ A comparable framework characterises a vernacular embryology, the Old English *Formation of the Foetus*, surviving in a mid-eleventh-century manuscript. This account adapts part of Helvius Vindicianus' late fourth-century *Gynaecia* and describes foetal development as unfolding in monthly stages. In the third month the foetus is 'without a soul' ('butan sawle', 7), but in the fifth month, it is 'alive' ('cwicu').⁶¹ Here, the commencement of life is explicitly situated before birth.

In a less precise way, references to animation and vivification before birth appear throughout the Old English poetic corpus. *Genesis A* mentions the prenatal meeting between Enoch's soul and his body as the poet recounts the strange end of his worldly life. Enoch's soul is translated to heaven with his body in tow:

he cwic gewat mid cyning engla
of þyssum lænan life feran
on þam gearwum þe his gast onfeng
ær hine to monnum modor brohte.⁶² (1210–13)

he went journeying from this borrowed life while alive with the king of angels, in the clothing which his spirit received before his mother bore him to people.

A spirit here takes on 'clothing' or 'armour', figuratively, 'the body' (in the *DOE*'s only attestation of this meaning of *gearwe*), such that these lines are broadly congruent with the idea taken up by some Neoplatonists that pre-existent souls were implanted into bodies.⁶³ The poem *Instructions for Christians* similarly implicates a pre-existing soul when it addresses its audience, stressing ignorance of 'the journey of your soul, how it came into you or where it was before' ('wege þines gastes, / hu heo ðe on com oððe hwær heo æror was', 221b–2).⁶⁴ Other references to the moment of

ensoulment in the poetic corpus leave more space for the Creationist view that new souls are created at the moment of a person's ensoulment, such as *Soul and Body II*: 'the almighty Creator dispatched a soul into you, through his own hand' ('þe . . . sawle onsende þurh his sylfes hond, / meotud ælmihtig' 27–9a).⁶⁵ None of these poetic traditions around ensoulment strive towards scientific precision, but they do suggest that this moment has a good claim to begin the worldly life course, while also nurturing ambiguity and potential disagreement as to exactly when and how the process of ensoulment takes place. Birth, from this perspective, does not enjoy a particularly deep spiritual significance. Returning to avian analogues, we might also consider *The Phoenix*, which follows its Latin source in describing the coagulation of the bird's new body from its own ashes in terms which recall embryological theory: 'life' (*feorh*) is renewed 'after the ashes again begin to lock together' ('siþþan þa yslan eft onginnað / . . . lucan togædre', 224–5) – that is, 'to cling in a ball' ('geclungne to cleowenne', 226b), before the bird moves through multiple further shifts in form.⁶⁶

In a manner harmonious with both contemporary embryological science and the interest shown in prenatal life development elsewhere in Old English poetry, the *Riddles* foreground the gradual development of creatures in the earliest stages of their existence. This is seen particularly in the initial gestation-like periods in *Riddle 7* ('cuckoo'), *Riddle 8* ('barnacle goose'), *Riddle 51* ('battering ram' or 'gallows'), *Riddle 58* ('reed pen' or 'rune staff'), *Riddle 71* ('ash tree/spear'), *Riddle 74* ('oyster'), *Riddle 84* ('antler/inkhorn'), among others.⁶⁷ The speaking tree of *Riddle 71* begins by stating 'I grew in a field' ('Ic on wonge aweox', 1a), and very similarly the tree of *Riddle 51* begins as 'growing wood' ('wudu weaxende', 3a); I will compare these two texts more fully in what follows. This mode of presentation, in which the riddle-creature is first seen midway through the already-begun process of development, is not limited only to trees: the antler in *Riddle 84*, later fashioned into an inkhorn, introduces itself by stating, 'I grew where I stood' ('Ic weox þær ic stod', 1a). The emphasis on location in these lines will later in this chapter be discussed in its own right; it simply suffices here to note that the creatures first begin to speak midway through a process of gradual growth.

Transient and Precarious *Infantia*: The Augustinian Tradition

I have briefly surveyed contemporary theories of prenatal formation, but it should also be noted that an emphasis on the gradual experience of formation – this time, postnatal – also characterises exegetical traditions

attached to the ages of *infantia* ('infancy') and *pueritia* ('childhood'). Augustine aligns the human age of *infantia* with both the first day of Creation (the coming of the light) and the first age of the world, which spans from Adam to Noah. This age ends in near-obliteration: 'The flood came like the evening of this day, because our infancy too is wiped out by the flood of forgetfulness' ('Quasi vespera hujus diei fit diluuium; quia et infantia nostra tanquam oblivionis diluuiio deletur').⁶⁸ In his commentary on Genesis, Bede builds on Augustine, asserting the initial innocence of Adam and Eve but emphasising the moral decline of humanity in the evening of the First Age, necessitating the Flood:

hic dies ad uesperam iam coepit declinare cum protoplasti peccando felicitatem patriae caelestis perdididerunt . . . Plena autem uespera diei huius aduenit cum crebrescentibus uitiiis humani generis corrupta est omnis terra coram Deo et iniquitate repleta, adeo ut deleri diluuiio caro praeter quos arca mereretur.

this day now began to decline towards evening when the first created humans lost the happiness of their heavenly country by sinning . . . But the full evening of this day arrived when the whole earth was corrupted by the increasingly frequent sins of the human race before God, and was filled with iniquity, to such an extent that all flesh, except those creatures which he had shut in the ark, deserved to be destroyed in the flood.⁶⁹

As Bede further notes in his *De temporum ratione*, the event of the Flood parallels individual humans' experience of infancy; the world's *infantia* is wiped out, 'just as the first age of every person is usually submerged in oblivion, for how many people can remember their infancy?' ('sicut primam cuiusque hominis obliuio demergere consueuit aetatem; quotus enim quisque est, qui suam recordetur infantiam?')⁷⁰ For all that the model of the six ages seems to suggest an orderly and teleological progression through time, its linearity is almost immediately troubled – *infantia* seems to offer a point of origin, but in fact requires a new beginning.

According to Bede, the first stage actually remembered by a person is *pueritia*, descriptions of which tend to develop the imagery of the preceding stage. The deluge at the end of *infantia* is transformed into *pueritia*'s alignment with the division of the waters and creation of the firmament, paralleling the construction of the ark, as historically, this age spans the distance between Noah and Abraham:

Secundo die factum firmamentum in medio aquarum; et secunda aetate seculi arca, in qua reliquiae generis humani et semen, ut ita dixerim,

sequentium seruabatur aetatum, posita est in medio aquarum quas certatim hinc rupti fontes omnes abyssi, inde apertae caeli cataractae fundebant.

On the second day was made a firmament in the midst of the waters; and in the second age of the world the ark, in which was preserved what was left of the human race, and, as I would put it, the seed of the following ages, was placed in the midst of the waters, which all the ruptured fountains of the deep eagerly poured out on the one side and the opened flood gates of heaven poured out on the other.⁷¹

The firmament and the ark are balanced between two bodies of water. For Ælfric, summarising the ages of the world after Bede, the ark signifies God's people and the Flood, 'the holy water of our baptism which obliterates our sins' ('þæt halige wæter ures fulluhtes þe ure synna adilegað').⁷² Again the start of *pueritia* is associated with a new birth. An oblique reference to the perennial problem of infant mortality may even be detected in how Augustine, Bede, and Ælfric describe a wave of death washing over humanity in its *infantia*, such that only a remnant survives to *pueritia*.

Other details of the Augustinian scheme resonate with the *Riddles*, such as how both humanity and individuals grow towards integration in a fully functioning social sphere. The age of *pueritia* ends in the linguistic confusion of Babel, paralleling the acquisition of language in human childhood; as Bede explains in *De temporum ratione*, after Isidore, infancy 'is so called because an infant cannot speak' ('hinc appellata est, quod fari non potest').⁷³ The third age, *adolescentia*, is then characterised by a new spiritual productivity, because from this age, a person can reproduce. Historically, at this time, a people emerges that is ready for God, and Augustine notes that during Creation the land emerges 'dry, that is, thirsting for the heavenly rain of the Divine Commandments' ('arida, id est, sitiens imbrem coelestem divinorum mandatorum').⁷⁴ For Bede, the waters gathered in their 'own places' ('loca sua') leaving dry land, which is immediately clothed with plants – he aligns this development with the wandering nations finding their places, and dwells on the formation of distinct orders of the faithful, receiving God's word.⁷⁵ The use of vegetative language in connection with human flourishing is a key part of the ages of man scheme as understood by Augustine and Bede, often in a way which stresses movement towards use, consumption, and enjoyment.

We cannot presume knowledge of Augustine's writings for the 'typical . . . poet' in pre-Conquest England, but the scheme of the six ages of man and the world as mediated by Augustine, Isidore, Bede, and

Ælfric enjoyed considerable popularity, whether writers simply noted the names of the stages, or meditated further on their significance.⁷⁶ The qualities which characterise the passage of life in the six-age tradition, including as articulated by Bede and Ælfric, have elements in common with the pictures given in the *Riddles*. *Riddle 58*, for instance, presents a gradual beginning, closely associated with liquidity, followed by language acquisition and integration into a new, more socially complex structure. This text is usually understood to describe a reed (*hreed*) transformed into a pen or (as has also been suggested) a rune stave:⁷⁷

Ic wæs be sonde, sæ-wealle neah,
æt mere-faroþe, minum gewunade
frum-staþole fæst; fea ænig wæs
monna cynnes, þæt minne þær
on anæde eard beheolde, 5
ac mec uhtna gehwam yð sio brune
lagu-fæðme beleolc. Lyt ic wende
þæt ic ær oþþe sið æfre sceolde
ofer meodu-bence muðleas sprecan
wordum wrixlan. (I-10a)

I was by the sand, near the sea-wall, at the ocean shore, I dwelt fast in my first place; there were few if any of mankind who could observe there my dwelling in solitude, yet at every dawn the dark wave played about me in an embrace. I little thought that sooner or later I should ever speak, mouthless, above the mead-bench, exchange words.

The speaker is here initially placed within a watery landscape and draws attention to its position as proximate to a boundary through three different propositional phrases (1a, 1b, 2a). It is also situated relative to social space, as few humans behold its solitary home. A clear contrast is drawn with the later part of the poem, as the reed goes on to gain new importance in the human world, positioned over the mead-bench, founded on the reed's mysterious ability to speak. The second half of the poem takes care to depict the reed as both a product and agent of creativity, dwelling on the marvel of the craft which has allowed the speaker to speak intimately with a conversational partner, in such pronounced contrast with its early life (10b-17).

The significance of this newfound communicative skill is heightened if this text is understood as connected, even if only by a compiler, with the following text in the Exeter Book, known as *The Husband's Message*, which seems to constitute 'the vocalisation of an inscribed message, possibly

This picture of the bird on its wooden support, with water flowing above and below, chimes with Augustine, Bede, and Ælfric's visions of the ark of *pueritia*. Dry land does not make an appearance at the end of the riddle as it does in *Riddle 58*, but once enlivened and lifted into the air, the bird does similarly begin to travel new spaces, borne widely on the winds.

Striking in both *Riddles 8* and *58* is the peripherality of the ungrown creature, with the first creature clinging precariously to a piece of wood, surrounded by water, and the latter situated on the shoreline, lapped by a dark wave. The secluded liquid surroundings of the 'oyster' riddle, *Riddle 74*, with which the Introduction began, are also comparable. All these riddle-creatures are eventually separated from their place of nurture, and the oyster faces an immediate death. Several other riddles depict young creatures facing a threat of being drawn away into death or oblivion, whether in the form of the endangered young families of *Riddles 7* and *13*, or even more obliquely, a text like *Riddle 32* ('rake'), which concludes with a description of the vegetation that the tool encounters:

Aa heo þa findeð þa þe fæst ne biþ;
 læteð hio þa wlitigan, wyrtum fæste,
 stille stondan on stapol-wonge,
 beorhte blican, blowan ond growan. (6–9)

She always finds those that are not secure; leaves the beautiful ones, fast in their roots, standing still in their established plain, shining brightly, flourishing and growing.

Those plants which are established firmly are able to keep developing, keep becoming more beautiful. Others are hunted, plundered, and dragged away. The importance of being anchored within a nurturing environment is therefore very clear, allowing these plants to be spared the rake's purge.

Although I have suggested *Riddles 8* and *58* have some similarities with the intellectual traditions of *infantia* and *pueritia*, they need not be understood as drawing directly on Bede's or Augustine's formulations of human infancy and childhood. Viewed together, these texts form part of a varied and nebulous tradition linking the precarious process of early growth and formation with environments of seclusion, protection, and liquidity. All depict early life as a period of gradual growth, with the young creature situated as peripheral to fully active, social existence in the human world, with all its dangers. In the *Riddles* – as in the visual scenes on the Melbury

Bubb font and the Franks Casket – nurturing environments are crucial to the business of early growth, as in those visual sources, the process of feeding is particularly important.

Consumption and Nourishment in the *Riddles*

The nurturing environments of the *Riddles* are characterised by a powerful rhetoric of nourishment, already notably encountered in *Riddle 74*. The oyster describes the sea's nurture through the verb *fedan* – closely related to *afedan*, encountered on the Franks Casket. This verb is used widely in the *Riddles* in connection with young creatures, describing, for instance, the mother bird's attention to the cuckoo in *Riddle 7* (9b). As discussed previously, its sense is ambiguous and wide-ranging, capable of signalling not only feeding, but other kinds of nurture and bringing-into-being. The divisions between its senses are not neatly drawn, but in *Riddle 74*, the verb's concrete sense of 'feeding' is suggested in context – the oyster opens its mouth against the water, referencing the creature's practice of filtering its food. Other senses of *fedan* may be simultaneously invoked, but the text opens with a scene of physical nourishment, providing an ironic parallel to the second half of the riddle, in which the oyster gives sustenance to another.

This pattern of an initially maintained state of consumption, eventually displaced by later life experiences, shapes several other riddles. The young trees in *Riddle 51* and *Riddle 71*, again statically positioned like the oyster, receive food from their environment through absorption. This process continues until the later function of the tree is introduced with a climactic table-turning *oppæt*, common in the *Riddles* and reminiscent of similar *oppæt* moments in *Beowulf*:⁸¹

Ic seah on bearwe beam hlifian,
tanum torhtne. Þæt treow wæs on wynne,
wudu weaxende. Wæter hine ond eorþe
feddan fægre, oppæt he frod dagum
on oþrum weardð aglac-hade[.]

(*Riddle 51*, 1–5)

I saw a tree towering in a grove, bright in its branches. That tree was delighted, growing wood. Water and earth nourished it splendidly, until, advanced in days, it came to be in a different, miserable state[.]

Ic on wonge aweox, wunode þær mec feddon
hruse ond heofon-wolcn, oppæt me onhwyrfdon
gearum frodne, þa me grome wurdon[.]

(*Riddle 71*, 1–3)

fedan in *Riddle 51*, giving the sense ‘my sister fed me splendidly’. The scene of nourishment is continued in the intact passage which follows:

Oft ic feower teah
 swæse broþor, þara onsundran gehwylc
 dæg-tidum me drincan sealde
 þurh þyrel þearle. Ic þæh on lust,
 oþþæt ic wæs yldra (6b–10a)

Often I pulled at four dear brothers, who each separately during the daytime gave me drink in abundance through a hole. I drank with pleasure, until I was older[.]⁸⁶

Again, the state of consumption is directly contrasted with a later state by a table-turning use of *oþþæt*, while a phase of pleasurable eating is identified with life before a creature becomes ‘older’ (*yldra*). The act of consumption is, furthermore, a kind of generalised experience whereby sustenance is delivered by more than one source, here from a peer level of siblings (the udders). As when the water and earth feed the trees and the sea surrounds the oyster, the care provided is derived from diffuse sources in the environment.

The motif of consumption is thus repeatedly used to signal early life in the *Riddles* (as, indeed, on the Melbury Bubb font and the Franks Casket). It seems that situating a child-figure in the role of a feeder is rhetorically a more attractive option than dwelling on the event of birth. The *Riddles* here strike a different note to what might be surmised from the lexical field of childhood in Old English, which does not on the whole emphasise the identity of children as eaters. A handful of words relating to infancy can be found rendering Latin *lactans* (‘suckling’) in glosses and homilies, based either on the verb *deon* or *sucan* (‘to suck’), sometimes with a pre-modifying *meolc-* (‘milk’), while Crawford points out that the compound *hlaf-ata* (‘loaf-eater’), in signalling a dependent or member of a household, may point to a child in the laws of Æthelbert of Kent (c.595–616).⁸⁷ Overall, though, emphasis on feeding is not characteristic of the lexical field of childhood.

Nonetheless, some evidence for the conceptual identity of children as feeders can also be found in the archaeological record, largely in grave arrangements from the early period. In some grave arrangements, as suggested by Christina Lee, ‘careful layout of food items in a vessel seems to suggest a form of posthumous “feeding” of the children’; this care is evident, for instance, in two graves found to contain pots of eggs.⁸⁸ Pots are associated with children in cemeteries otherwise without ceramics, and

indeed the most likely person to be buried with a pot in the sixth and seventh centuries was a small child, with pottery vessels usually forming containers for food and drink. Peter Didsbury concludes that pottery may be associated with the whole concept of 'the hearth'.⁸⁹ The distribution of knives in graves also seems to connect children with the condition of being fed. As stressed by Crawford, these implements were 'general-purpose tools, and especially . . . eating equipment', and are 'among the most ubiquitous finds in adult male and female burials'. At the earliest, knives are found only with those aged two to three years; their increase after this point may signal or symbolise the increased control over food associated with older children.⁹⁰ The *Riddles*' tendency to present young creatures as being fed, therefore, has some parallels in the semiotics of grave arrangements, as well as in the visual sources discussed at an intersection with *Fortunes*.

Becoming Useful, Being Hurt, and Hurting Others

I have elsewhere suggested that the *Riddles* forge a connection between maturity and movement into a new social sphere, including the taking up of a function or 'vocation'; this new social realm is often distinctly human, in contrast to the riddle-creature's previous enjoyment of secluded natural spaces.⁹¹ Luo has since independently come to some related conclusions in this area, observing that 'If the earliest moments of a life's plot lines are associated with the home and family, the turning point is often marked by a journey', and that subsequent to this journey the riddle-creatures 'tend to move towards something like a career'; they are 'shaped to be useful to society', in a manner comparable to how humans are shaped for this purpose. In particular, Luo calls our attention to: the horn of *Riddle 12*, who 'enters into aristocratic company'; the crafted gospel book of *Riddle 24*, who 'works as an educator'; the reed of *Riddle 58*, who becomes a 'poet-like figure in the mead-hall'; *Riddle 70*'s plough-pulling ox; and the antler of *Riddle 84*, transformed into an inkhorn and thus made 'to join the monastic orders of the scriptorium'.⁹² In the same way that wisdom catalogues such as *The Gifts of Men* and *Maxims I* and *II* survey the different social functions through which human beings channel their abilities, the *Riddles* do something similar for nonhuman entities.

The implications here are considerable, and I am concerned in Chapter 2 with working out how far other kinds of Old English poetry, especially extended narratives of the lives of saints, similarly suggest that humans grow towards usefulness. In the present, final section of this

chapter, I take this idea in a new direction by emphasising the violent nature of the transformations in the *Riddles* and the work that the riddle-creatures take up. Their movement into a condition of usefulness frequently involves experiencing and perpetrating harm. This conflict is not necessarily degrading, as the imagery of being wounded and hurt is intimately related with both heroic battle exploits and enduring persecution and martyrdom in the name of God elsewhere in Old English poetry.⁹³ It is nonetheless often concomitant with grief, with the register of the riddles often sliding towards lament. Objects, animals, and people all age into the experience of receiving and perpetrating violence at different points in the *Riddles*, in a manner which suggests that exposure to escalating conflict and loss is fundamental to how these texts understand the life courses of their subjects – a contrast with the protected spheres and physical flourishing associated with youth, but congruent with the sense of danger that often lurks around the edges of these protected spaces.

The influence of the Anglo-Latin *aenigmata* upon the vernacular *Riddles* is obvious in this area, as the Latin texts habitually stage conditions of violence that would be unliveable on a human level – Aldhelm depicts a universe of ‘warring elements’, while the *Bern Riddles* are notably interested in violence.⁹⁴ Riddle-creatures in Latin *aenigmata* often become physically violated, but remain somehow intact as conscious, speaking subjects. The Exeter Book *Riddles* tend to string out these unbearable tensions even further on a narrative level, as part of their more pronounced interest in sequentiality and experiences unfolding through time. Aldhelm’s *Aenigma 87*, for instance, describes a shield enduring the trials of battle and ends by asking: ‘What warrior endures such cruel misfortunes or so very many deadly wounds in war? (‘*Quis tantos casus aut quis tam plurima leti / suscipit in bello crudelis vulnera miles?*’, 5–6)⁹⁵ At far greater length, the speaker of *Riddle 3* (‘chopping board’/‘shield’, Old English *bord*) describes the unceasing sensation of being wounded along with a spiritual condition of despair:

Ic eom an-haga iserne wund,
 bille gebennad, beado-weorca sæd,
 ecgum werig.

Oft ic wig seo,
 frecne feohtan. Frofre ne wene,
 þæt me geoc cyme guð-gewinnes,
 ær ic mid ældum eal forwurðe,
 ac mec hnossiað homera lafe,
 heard-ecg heoro-scearp, hond-weorc smiþa

5

bitað in burgum; ic abidan sceal
 laþran gemotes.

Næfre læce-cynn
 on folc-stede findan meahte,
 þara þe mid wyrtum wunde gehælde,
 ac me ecga dolg eacen weorðað
 ðurh deað-slege dagum ond nihtum.

10

I am a solitary one, wounded by iron, injured by swords, having had my fill of battle-deeds, wearied by edges. Often I see warfare, a terrible fight. I do not expect comfort, that safety will come to me in the toil of war, before I am entirely ruined among men, but the hammer's remnants beat me, hard-edged terribly sharp handwork of smiths bites me in the towns; I must wait for a more dreadful meeting. I could never find any kind of doctor in this dwelling-place, one of those who can heal wounds with herbs, but the wounds caused by edges increase on me through death-blows day and night.

Given the references to battle, this riddle is often understood as operating in a pseudo-heroic or mock-heroic vein, while the early use of the compound *an-haga* has led to specific comparisons with the first line of *The Wanderer*.⁹⁶ There is also much here, though, that resembles the register of an individual lament psalm, especially given that the *bord* endures its suffering day and night, just as several voices in the Psalms cry out night and day (see, for instance, Psalm 21:3 and Psalm 87:1), and describe (in the words of Psalm 87) becoming 'as a man without help' ('sicut homo sine adiutorio', 5). Rather than echoing any specific psalm, the speaker of *Riddle 3* seems to be employing a psalmic 'structure' for its lament, in Jane Toswell's terms.⁹⁷ Part of the psalm-like quality of *Riddle 3* is the way in which it begins *in medias res*, rather than, like *Riddle 7*, literally *ab ovo* ('from the egg'). It is light on concrete details about individuals or places and avoids telling us the prehistory of the object – Aldhelm's *aenigma* actually provides more detail about the material origins of the shield, demonstrating that the Old English *Riddles*' interest in sequential narratives of life courses does not mean each text systematically addresses every phase of a creature's life. The Old English lament focuses instead on the predicament of the shield's later life, its indistinct enemies and continual suffering.

The kind of condition that the *bord* falls into is elsewhere presented by the *Riddles* as concomitant with growing older. The antler of *Riddle 84*, for instance, leaves its place on the stag's head, protectively covered above by leafy foliage (12b–14a), and is instilled in a desk as an inkhorn. If we see this

riddle-creature as joining the scriptorium, he is a deeply unwilling oblate, and one who does not personally find spiritual growth:

Nu mec unsceafta innan slitað,
 wyrdap mec be wombe; ic gewendan ne mæg.
 Æt þam spore findeð sped se þe se . . .
 . . . sawle rædes. (29–32)

Now monsters slash at my insides, wound me in the stomach; I cannot turn away. The one who looks for the success of the soul's guidance finds it in those tracks.

This kind of violence (like that done to the gospel book of *Riddle 24*) leads to the spiritual benefit of humans, but this does not seem to be much consolation to the inkhorn. The register of lament is again dominant – this speaker cannot escape, and describes the kind of ‘terror of bodily unmaking’, including the ‘threat of social and physical nothingness and invisibility’, that Amy Cottrill detects in the lament psalms.⁹⁸ If the first part of *Riddle 84* was about taking shape and forming an identity, the latter is about the threat of losing these integrities, even as the inkhorn has become part of the orderly socioeconomic structures of the world.

A number of other riddle-creatures grow towards being hurt and oppressed, sometimes at the same time as hurting others. Participation in a network of violence seems to be a key part of being ‘useful’ in the *Riddles*, whether this violence is endured by the creature or enacted on behalf of others. Like the *bord* understood as ‘chopping board’, several of these creatures do not belong themselves on the battlefield. A physically tortured victim of violence can be found in the loom or pole lathe of *Riddle 54*, brought to grief by wounds caused by darts, which may be a metaphor for fabric picks (1–6a).⁹⁹ Meanwhile, a servant who hurts others can be found in *Riddle 4* (‘sun’), coming on the heels of the ‘shield’/‘chopping-board’ riddle. Acting as a warrior of Christ, this speaker boasts that in addition to pleasing people on earth, ‘I burn the living ones, countless peoples . . . I crush them with affliction’ (‘ic cwice bærne, / unrimu cyn . . . / næte mid niþe’, 2b–4a). In *Riddle 15* (‘beehive’), the creature both spews sharp points and swallows them (3b–9a). All these creatures deal in violence: sometimes receiving it, sometimes meting it out to others, and in the beehive’s case, both at once.

On occasion, riddle-creatures are described as maturing and journeying away from their home in a more neutral manner. In *Riddle 7*, once the cuckoo has grown up, it declares ‘I . . . could wider set my paths’ (‘ic . . .

widdor meahte / siþas asettan', 10–11b). The mother bird's nurture has enabled a body that can move in a deliberate way and travel freely. This positive kind of journeying resembles the kind that Sánchez-Martí has previously associated with ageing in Old English poetry, namely 'the culminating activity in the young one's preparation for adulthood', offering 'a series of much sought-after life experiences' and conferring 'greater respectability among [a person's] fellow countrymen'.¹⁰⁰ One of the eleventh-century *Durham Proverbs* offers some support here – 'He boasts somewhat who travels widely' ('Hwon gelped̥ se þe wide siþað̥') – as well as the Exeter Book poem *Widsith*, which does suggest that travel bestows status, at least for poets:¹⁰¹

Swa ic geondferde fela fremdra londa
 geond ginne grund. Godes ond yfles
 þær ic cunnade cnosle bidæled,
 freo-mægum feor, folgade wide.
 Forþon ic mæg singan ond secgan spell[.] (50–4)

So I travelled through many foreign lands over the wide earth. I experienced there good and evil, separated from my family, far from my kin, I served widely. So I can sing and tell a story[.]

The experience of learning is also closely associated with travel in the *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues.¹⁰² At the same time, we risk over-investing these passages with modern ideas of travel as 'cultural capital' (in Pierre Bourdieu's terms) in the form of valuable 'identity work' for young people, widespread in modern middle-class Anglo-American contexts.¹⁰³ Indeed, the particular significance of travel in *Widsith* seems partly to do with encountering 'good and evil' (51b), as well as the fulfilment of obligation, as *Widsith* 'serves' or 'follows' others through the verb *folgian* (53b). These aspects of *Widsith*'s travel away from home are more reminiscent of the kind of travel usually found in the *Riddles*.

Most vivid in this regard is the travel of the ox in *Riddle 70*, who, as Britt Mize once observed, moves from its 'carefree days as a calf' to a 'miserable adult life of labour' pulling a plough, with a pivotal *oppæt* again dividing the two phases of experience:¹⁰⁴

oppæt ic wæs yldra ond þæt an forlet
 swartum hyrde, siþade widdor,
 mearc-papas træd, moras pæðde,
 bunden under beame, beag hæfde on healse,
 wean on laste weorc þrowade,
 eafoda dæl. (10–15a)

until I was older and gave that up to the dark herdsman, travelled more widely, trod the boundary-paths, traversed the moors, bound under a beam, having a ring around my neck, on a trail of misery, suffered toil, a share of woes.

I will discuss this riddle in more detail in Chapter 2, because this poem, and indeed the symbolic associations of the ox more generally, are richly suggestive of contemporary ideas surrounding adulthood and maturity. For now, I wish simply to note that the ox's later experience is marked by suffering, the endurance of pain, and both compliance and subservience, such that the creature's strength can be harnessed by another. In a very different way to the poet figure of *Widsith*, the ox must likewise leave its kin, discover a more morally complex realm, and enter into painful service to another.

A similar progression shapes the lives of the trees in *Riddles 51* and *71*, both of whom are fashioned into weapons and in this sense are – from one perspective – shaped ‘forcefully into useful members of society’; however, they simultaneously fall into wounded and degraded conditions reminiscent of the cross's suffering in *The Dream of the Rood*, as Corinne Dale has recently emphasised, perceiving a theme of postlapsarian alienation from the natural world.¹⁰⁵ *Riddle 51* has not been solved with any confidence, but it may point to ‘battering ram’ or ‘gallows’: once the tree has been ripped from the land, the wooden creature certainly travels, breaking boundaries as it ‘creates room’ (‘rymeð’, 10a), and is situated in a new social context in its alliance with the ‘other battle-guest’ (‘hilde-gieste / oþrum’, 9b–10a). This is not a comfortable relationship, and the weapon's condition recalls the excessive wounds of *Riddle 3*:

oþpæt he frod dagum
on oþrum weaðð aglac-hade,
deope gedolgod, dumb in bendum,
wriþen ofer wunda, wonnum hyrstum
foran gefrætwed. (4b–8a)

until, experienced in days, it fell into a distressing state, deeply wounded, dumb in fetters, injuries wrapped around, decorated in front with dark adornments.

In a more muted way, *Riddle 71* (‘ash spear’) offers a similar narrative. The ash tree is shaken from its place of nurture by hostile ones (5b–6), describing the subsequent phase as a kind of terrible afterlife: the creature is turned

away from its ‘nature’ (‘gecynde’, 4a) while ‘alive’ (‘cwic’, 4b). Upon then implicitly entering a kind of death state, the speaker announces that ‘they made it so I must bend to the will of a slayer, against my nature’ (‘gedydon þæt ic sceolde wiþ gesceape minum / on bonan willan bugan hwilum’, 6–7). *Riddles* 51 and 71 certainly seem to show a concern with the violence that humans inflict upon nature, especially trees, while also suggesting that to move through a life course (if here a strongly discontinuous one, encompassing a death state) is to find oneself enmeshed in violence and fraught bonds of obligation.¹⁰⁶

Elsewhere in the *Riddles*, human figures are positioned as progressing through life courses which culminate in entry into an economy of hurting and being hurt. I turn finally to *Riddle* 69, a little-discussed text which survives in a damaged state, but which seems to point towards a solution of all three meanings of Old English *secg*: ‘sword’, ‘man’, and the plant ‘sedge’.¹⁰⁷

Ic eom rices æht, reade bewæfed,
 stið ond steap-wong. Stapol wæs iu þa
 wyrta wlite-torhtra; nu eom wraþra laf,
 fyres ond feole, fæste genearwad,
 wire geweorþad. 5

Wepeð hwilum
 for minum gripe se þe gold wigeð,
 þonne ic yþan sceal . . . fe,
 hringum gehyrsted. Me . . . i . . .
 . . . gold-dryhtne min . . .
 . . . wlite bete. 10

I am owned by a powerful one, wrapped around in red, stern and steep-cheeked. My place was once that of beautifully bright plants; now I am a remnant of enemies, of fire and file, contained narrowly, honoured by wires.

One weeps sometimes because of my attack, the one who wears gold, when I must destroy . . . adorned in rings. Me . . . to my gold-lord . . . better glory.

This creature’s dislocation from its earlier place amid the plants is reminiscent of the reed’s movement away from its *frum-stapol* (‘first place’, 3a) towards the mead hall in *Riddle* 58. The life development narrated by the hybrid speaker of *Riddle* 69, though, is far more clearly shaped by violence. In describing itself as a ‘remnant’ (3b) the various ambiguities of *laf* are activated, as this word spans the realms of human and nonhuman, signifying ‘weapon or warrior, man or women, and assailant or victim’.¹⁰⁸

The survivor figure of *Riddle 69* is both assailant and victim: the sword's original ore has been shaped in the forge only to be pressed into the role of creating other survivors, like the one who mourns the sword's attack in lines 5b–7a. In the parallel narrative of the sedge, this sharp-edged plant is plucked from its home and then induces tears in its holder, just as the *eolhx secg* (possibly Great Fen Sedge) of the Old English *Rune Poem* 'stains with blood any warrior who takes any hold of it' ('blode breneð beorna gehwylcne / ðe him ænigne onfeng gedeð').¹⁰⁹ As for the human *secg* – the warrior – like the sword and the sedge, he is bloodied and hurts others, but as a *wrapra laf* the implication is that he too is shaped violently by external forces, forced to become a survivor of something.

When describing entities ageing into usefulness, then, the *Riddles* stress the often brutal nature of the transformations that are necessary, the attacks that must be endured, and the violent work that must often be carried out. If this is useful work, perhaps it is the kind of miserable postlapsarian work with which God punishes Adam (Genesis 3.17–19). Alternatively, given the concern of many of these *Riddles* with weapons (or weapon imagery) and battlefield wounds, perhaps we should receive the *Riddles* as reflecting mainly on the destructive work of warriors. But the work of the warrior is not usually understood as wholly different in kind from other kinds of work, especially spiritual work, in Old English poetry, or even in prose. 'Three orders' of praying men, fighting men, and working men are described in the Old English *Boethius* and later by Ælfric (c.992–1002): 'The fight of the monks against the unseen devils who plot against us is greater than that of the men of the world who fight against earthly enemies' ('Is . . . mare þæra muneca gewinn wið þa ungesewenlican deofla þe syrwiað embe us þonne sy þæra woruld-manna þe winnað wiþ ða flæsclican').¹¹⁰ In the wisdom catalogues, warriors are depicted (like poets and smiths) as valuable members of society, exercising their God-given gifts. Among many other social actors, the poet of *Fortunes* calls attention to how one is given 'glory in battle, mastered war-play' ('guþe blæd, / gewealdenne wig-plegan', 68b–9a), and to another, skill at 'throwing or shooting' ('wyrp oþþe scyte', 69b). Much has been made of the *Fortunes*' implication of the vulnerability of the child as it grows up, including the possibility that it may meet one of the violent deaths listed between lines 10 and 57, such as death in battle (14). However, this poem is also concerned with individuals growing into positions of power, including the ability to hurt others. The continuous possibility of violence is a threat to life on an individual level, but practising it is also simply part of what it means to have strength and to live in a world that is inevitably violent.

In the same way, the riddle-creatures encounter violence and physical violation as they grow up, but they also acquire physical power and efficacy in a way that can be harnessed to cause hurt. Some of the *Riddles* only briefly note the martial prowess of the entity they describe, but many others focus on the misery felt by those who survive and perpetrate physical harm. It is here that the *Riddles'* affinities with lament literature are most clear. As in a poem like *The Wanderer*, being increasingly embroiled in the battles of the world, and feeling the threat of death and destruction, is something to lament and reflect upon – as will be seen in Chapter 3, meditating on such destruction has much to do with what it means to live into old age.

Ultimately, the Exeter Book *Riddles* do not privilege birth as a crux in narratives of early life. Instead, the coming-into-being of a new creature is a gradual, cumulative process of formation from indistinct origins, enabled by a surrounding environment which adopts a nurturing role. This emphasis on incremental growth focuses attention, to a large degree, on the points of continuation between the young creature and those responsible for its raising, rather than stressing any major disjunctions at the start of life. The experience of secluded nurture in early life is then often abruptly curtailed, as creatures move into new social spheres, make new alliances and enemies, and take up new tasks. Such tasks may be painful, and many riddle-creatures enter into a kind of economy of violence, hurting others and being hurt themselves. The kind of extreme protection which enables early life is therefore revealed as only ever temporary, as it must be supplanted by much increased exposure to wounding forces.

After spending some time with these Old English texts, it is perhaps unsurprising that a poetic compound for 'child' found elsewhere is *magotimber*, a combination of *magu* 'child, son' and *timber* 'material, frame, structure' (*Genesis A*, 1115a, 2237b; *Maxims I*, 33a) – indeed, Izdebska has encouraged comparison with *fugel-timber* ('a young bird'), and noted the fundamental building metaphor seems to suggest that 'a bird or a child is in the process of developing, possessing the right "material" or "structure," but not quite "built up" or finalized yet'.¹⁴¹ The *Riddles* certainly see the language of youth and infancy as a neat fit with narratives of creatures or material found, shaped, and put to use. As will be seen in the next chapter, the young heroine of the Exeter Book poem *Juliana* invokes an architectural metaphor for building identity congruent with the idea of *magotimber*. More generally, the verse saints' lives offer us views of maturity which parallel those of the *Riddles*, given the focus of both on using one's

strength in service to another (in the context of saints' lives, God). Unlike the speakers of the *Riddles*, the mature figures of these narratives do not commonly take up a posture of lament, instead presenting service and obedience in maturity as an opportunity to flourish socially and spiritually. It will not be until Chapter 3's discussion of depictions of old age that texts will be found to foreground again the idea of hurt and loss as a condition of living in the world, and we will return to the question of what it means to survive violence.

The *Riddles* point us towards these further investigations in staging a process of becoming and then becoming-useful. If they avoid the imagery of violent birth so favoured by Aldhelm and the author of the *Bern Riddles*, violent fates are only provisionally held at bay. When the riddle-creatures enter new social spheres, forge alliances, make enemies, and act on behalf of others, they remain vulnerable. As such, the *Riddles* may not give us empirical proof of love for children, if this is what we should be looking for, but they do offer some striking visions of the experience of growing into the world.