

“I” IS FOR ISIDORE

ISIDORE OF SEVILLE AND EARLY ENGLISH POETRY

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AN ESSAY ON Isidore of Seville in a volume dedicated to poetry must sound like a practical joke or a contradiction in terms, as Isidore was very much a prose author, or, rather, a *compiler*, perhaps *the compiler* per excellence of the early Middle Ages.¹ Yet, as I hope to show, Isidore is not *that* out of place here, as he was both a reader of earlier poets and a source for many subsequent generations of poets. Some first-hand evidence as to his poetic preferences is provided by one of the very few verse texts that can be attributed to Isidore himself, the *Versus in bibliotheca*—a series of elegiac couplets modelled on Martial’s epigrams originally intended as inscriptions placed in Isidore’s library beneath the portrait of the author to whom they referred.² The *Versus* sketch out a remarkably well stocked library, including both pagan and Christian authors. Notably, the only pagan authors identified by name are poets: Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Persius, Lucan, and Statius. Admittedly, they are named in some apparently polemical lines where Isidore invites his readers to give up pagan poetry and points to Christian alternatives, namely the Christian poets Prudentius, Avitus, Juvenius, and Sedulius.³ However, rather than as a condemnation of pagan poetry *tout court*, these lines should be read in view of the project inspiring the vast Isidorean output, especially his *Etymologiae*, that is the merging of the vast classical heritage with Christian culture. As an aside, Isidore’s *Versus* concerning the Church Fathers and Christian poets are echoed in Alcuin’s description of the York library in his York Poem,⁴ and

1 On the modes of authorship in the Middle Ages, see Kraebel, “Modes of Authorship”; Patridge and Kwakkel, eds., *Author, Reader, Book*; Bolduc, “The Author in the Middle Ages”; and D’Angelo and Ziolkowski, eds., *Auctor et auctoritas*.

2 CPL 1212; SK 15860; Isidore of Seville, *Versus in bibliotheca*.

3 Isidore, *Versus in bibliotheca*, 11.1–10, 223.

4 Alcuin, *Versus de patribus regibus et sanctis*, lines 1541–46 and 1551–54, 122–25.

Bede's epigram on Jerome borrows verbatim from the corresponding lines by Isidore.⁵

Rather than a poet himself, Isidore was essential reading for generations of early medieval poets, both for content (because he dealt with virtually every field of human knowledge), and for style (because, as the heir of the antique schools of grammar and rhetoric, Isidore dealt with virtually every aspect of literary language).⁶ In his monumental task of linguistic analysis and encyclopaedic synthesis, Isidore effectively relied on four grammatical categories, inherited from antiquity: *analogia* (analogy),⁷ *ethimologia* (etymology),⁸ *glossa* (gloss),⁹ and *differentia* (difference),¹⁰ which he

5 Bede, *Liber epigrammatum*, § 18 (a), 348–49. Also, at least one manuscript witness of the *Versus in bibliotheca* circulated in pre-Conquest England: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 304 [s. viii¹, Italy; prov. s. ix^{ex} or xⁱⁿ, England (Canterbury, Christ Church? Malmesbury?)], Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, no. 87.

6 See Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 241–43 and Curtius, *Europäische Literatur*, 53–55.

7 “Analogia Graece, Latine similitum comparatio siue proportio nominatur. Cuius haec uis est ut quod dubium est ad aliquid simile quod non est dubium referatur, et incerta certis probentur”; Isidore, *De grammatica*, 28.1, 121–23. (“The Greek term ‘analogy’ (*analogia*) is called in Latin the comparison (*comparatio*) or ‘regular relation’ (*proportio*) of similar things. Its force is that something doubtful is compared to a similar thing that is not doubtful, and uncertain things are explained by means of things that are certain”; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 54).

8 “Ethimologia est origo uocabulorum, cum uis uerbi uel nominis per interpretationem colligitur...Nam dum uideris unde ortum est nomen, citius uim eius intellegis. Omnis enim rei inspectio ethimologia cognita planior est”; Isidore, *De grammatica*, 29.1–2, 125. (“Etymology (*etymologia*) is the origin of words, when the force of a verb or a noun is inferred through interpretation...for when you have seen whence a word has originated, you understand its force more quickly. Indeed, one’s insight into anything is clearer when its etymology is known”; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 54–55).

9 “Glossa graeca interpretatione linguae sortitur nomen. Hanc philosophi aduerbium dicunt quia uocem illam, de cuius requiritur, uno et singulari uerbo designat. Quid enim illud sit in uno uerbo positum declarat, ut conticescere est tacere”; Isidore, *De grammatica*, 30.1, 127. (“‘Gloss’ (*glossa*) receives its name from Greek, with the meaning ‘tongue.’ Philosophers call it *adverbium*, because it defines the utterance in question by means of one single word (*verbum*): in one word it declares what a given thing is, as *conticescere est tacere* (‘to fall still’ is ‘to be silent’)”; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 55).

10 “Differentia est species definitionis quam scriptores artium de eodem et de altero nominant”; Isidore, *De grammatica*, 31, 129. (A differentiation (*differentia*) is a type of definition, which writers on the liberal arts call “concerning the same and the different”; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 55).

defines in the opening book of the *Etymologiae*, *De grammatica*, dedicated to the foundational discipline of the Isidorean system of knowledge.¹¹ On the one hand, these categories represent the main means to establish a *pura latinitas*, that is, the linguistic and semantic precision which Isidore saw as the main support of orthodoxy;¹² on the other, they serve as veritable epistemological tools, which Isidore applies even to crucial matters of Christian doctrine.¹³

This chapter will assess the impact of Isidore and his pan-grammatical system on the poetry of early medieval England, considered in its bilingual dimension. The survey will inevitably be selective, and will focus on two genres of poetry, the elegy and the riddle tradition, and on the two Isidorean texts which had the most impact on them: the *Synonyma*¹⁴ and the *Etymologiae*.¹⁵

Isidore in Pre-Conquest England

The question of the transmission of Isidore's works to the Insular world is a controversial one, with the role of the Irish as the chief and earliest intermediaries being a particularly contentious point.¹⁶ Be that as it may, as regards England we can rely on the evidence of the Biblical Commentaries and the Leiden corpus of glossaries which attest to the circulation of at least four of Isidore's texts—*Etymologiae*, *De natura rerum*, *De ecclesiasticis officiis*, and *De differentiis verborum*—at the Canterbury school of Theodore and Hadrian by the late seventh century, a few decades after Isidore's death

11 Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique*, 1:27–56, and 2:869–71.

12 Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 220–23.

13 Elorduy, "S. Isidoro. Unidad orgánica," 293–95, and Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 211–41.

14 Isidore, *Synonyma*.

15 The current complete edition of the *Etymologiae* is the early twentieth-century one by Lindsay (Isidore, *Etymologiae siue Origines*), which is not, however, a critical one, as Lindsay himself admitted; Isidore, *Etymologiae siue Origines*, ed. Lindsay, 1.v–vi; cf. Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique*, 1:112n1. A project for the critical edition and translation of the individual books of Isidore's encyclopaedia started in the 1980s under Fontaine's supervision for the series *Auteurs latins du Moyen Âge* of the Parisian publishers Les Belles Lettres and is now nearing completion; where available, I have consulted these more recent editions.

16 For the most recent scholarship on this long-debated matter, see Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 37–76; Di Sciacca, "Isidore of Seville in Anglo-Saxon England"; Smyth, "Isidorian Texts"; and Ryan, "Isidore Amongst the Islands."

(636).¹⁷ Isidorean works apparently enjoyed sustained popularity up to the Conquest and beyond, exerting a significant influence on virtually every field of early English literary culture. As Lapidge has pointed out, Isidore was, together with Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory, one of the four major Patristic authorities in pre-Conquest England, and his *Etymologiae*, *De natura rerum*, *Synonyma*, and *De ecclesiasticis officiis* belonged to the “small core of staple patristic texts” housed in a typical library.¹⁸

The *Synonyma*

Generally classified among Isidore’s minor works, the *Synonyma* enjoyed a wide and long-lasting success in early medieval England and its diffusion was also actively promoted by the Bonifatian missions in their continental foundations.¹⁹ The main reason of the popularity of the *Synonyma* with early English *literati* can be pinpointed in the peculiar combination of, in Isidore’s own words, *eloquium* and *uotum*—a distinctive style employed to express devotional and penitential effusion.²⁰ As to the *eloquium*, the *Synonyma* are eponymous with the figure of speech of synonymy, with which Isidore deals in the second book of the *Etymologiae* devoted to rhetoric.²¹ In turn, synonymy became synonymous—with apologies for the obvious pun!—with Isidore himself, since the so-called *stilus isidorianus* is a style where synonyms and *homoeoteleuta* are systematically employed and where sentences are broken into short *commata*; these are in turn often isosyllabic and juxtaposed asyndetically, but linked by sound effects such as assonance and rhyme.²²

17 Di Sciacca, “Isidorian Scholarship,” 76–91 and Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 47–48.

18 Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, 127, and Jones, “The Book of the Liturgy,” 667.

19 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 51–52 and 72–74; Hussey, “The Franco-Saxon *Synonyma*”; Hussey, “Ascetics and Aesthetics,” 77–140; and Hussey, “*Transmarinis litteris*.” On the *Fortleben* of the *Synonyma* in general, see Elfassi, “Les *Synonyma* d’Isidore de Séville”; Elfassi, “Los centones de los *Synonyma*”; Elfassi, “Trois aspects inattendus”; Elfassi, “La réception des *Synonyma*”; and Elfassi, “Les *Synonyma* d’Isidore de Séville (VIIe s.).”

20 Isidore, *Synonyma*, 5, line 21. See Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 23–34.

21 “Synonymia est, quotiens in conexa oratione pluribus uerbis unam rem significamus” (*Synonymia* occurs when in one context we use several words to signify the same thing); Isidore, *De rhetorica*, 21.6, 78–79.

22 Fontaine, “Théorie et pratique du style”; Fontaine, “Isidore de Séville auteur

One might consider the following examples:

euadendae calamitatis indicia non comprehendo, minuendi doloris argumenta non colligo, effugiendi funeris uestigia non inuenio (*Synonyma* 1:5, 6)

I do not understand the hints to eschew my misfortune, I do not gather the arguments to lessen my pain, I do not find the vestiges to escape death (my translation)

Quaeso te, anima, obsecro te, deprecor te, imploro te, ne quid ultra leuiter agas, ne quid inconsulte geras, ne temere aliud facias (*Synonyma* 2:1, 63)

I ask you, soul, I beseech you, I entreat you, I implore you, that you shall no further do anything lightly, that you shall not do anything unreasonable, that you shall not do anything rash (my translation)

Omi ope, omni ui, omni arte, omni ratione omni consilio, omni ingenio, omni uirtute, omni instantia, sume luctamen contra temporales molestias (*Synonyma* 1:24, 20)

With every deed, with every strength, with every device, with every argument, with every resolution, with every wit, with every virtue, with every vehemence, take up the fight against worldly nuisances (my translation)

The *stilus isidorianus* was one of the four major kinds of Latin *Kunstprosa* in the Middle Ages and the *Synonyma* can be considered its ultimate handbook.²³ This idiosyncratic style coexists with the *uotum*, that is contemplation on worldly transience as well as devotional and penitential elements, which made the *Synonyma* and their epitomes a popular read in monastic circles throughout the Middle Ages.²⁴ The distinctive combination of rhetorical flourish and devotional meditation proved greatly influential on early English literary culture. On the one hand, the *stilus isidorianus* aptly interacted with native stylistic devices such as alliteration, echoic repetition, and patterned syntax, as well as with the lexicographic indulgence which appealed to different generations of English *literati*, from the baroque Latinity of Aldhelm and his epigones up to the tenth-century Latin hermeneutic style.²⁵ Finally, it was also congenial to the principles of word selection

'ascétique"; Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 24–31; Elfassi, "Genèse et originalité"; and Botturi, *I "Synonyma" di Isidoro di Siviglia*.

23 Fontaine, "Les trois voies," 7 and 12.

24 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 34–36 and Elfassi, "La réception des *Synonyma*," 112–17.

25 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 105–52. On Aldhelm's style, see Orchard, *The*

implemented by Æthelwold's Winchester school,²⁶ and by the scholastic colloquies—the Late Antique conversational exercises which were revived in the wake of the Benedictine Reform.²⁷ Indeed, the structure of the *Synonyma* as a virtual dialogue between *Homo* and *Ratio* may have represented a further enticement for the pedagogues of the Reform movement.²⁸ On the other hand, the meditation on human fleetingness was fully consonant with the pervasive elegiac inspiration of early English literature,²⁹ as expressed in particular in the *ubi sunt* topos.

The *Synonyma* and the *ubi sunt* Topos in Early English Poetry

A universal elegiac motif, the *ubi sunt* topos has been defined as an “obsession” for the early English authors,³⁰ and, as J. E. Cross demonstrated over sixty years ago, the *Synonyma* were “quite the favourite individual source” of the *ubi sunt* in both Anglo-Latin and Old English and in both prose and poetry.³¹ The *ubi sunt* passage from the *Synonyma* reads:

Breuis est huius mundi felicitas, modica est huius saeculi gloria, caduca est et fragilis temporalis potentia. Dic, ubi sunt reges? ubi principes? ubi imperatores? ubi locupletes rerum? ubi potentes saeculi? ubi diuites mundi? Quasi umbra transierunt, uelut somnium euanuerunt (*Synonyma* 2:91, 138)

This world's happiness is short, this world's glory is scanty, secular power is fleeting and temporary. Tell [me], where are the kings? Where the princes? Where the emperors? Where the rich in possessions? Where the powerful of this world? They passed away as if they were a shadow, they vanished like a dream (my translation)

Poetic Art of Aldhelm, 8–18; Orchard, “Artful Alliteration,” 451–58; and Winterbottom, “Aldhelm's Prose Style.” On hermeneutic Latin, see the classic study by Lapidge, “The Hermeneutic Style.”

26 Gneuss, “The Origin of Standard Old English”; Gretsche, “In Search of Standard Old English”; Gretsche, “Winchester Vocabulary and Standard Old English”; Hofstetter, “Winchester and the Standardization of Old English Vocabulary”; and Hofstetter, *Winchester und der spätmittelenglische Sprachgebrauch*.

27 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 164–69. On the scholastic colloquies, see Lapidge, “Colloquies.”

28 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 17–18.

29 Fell, “Perceptions of Transience” and Greenfield, *Hero and Exile*.

30 Koch, trans., *Beowulf*, xxvii.

31 Cross, “‘Ubi sunt’ Passages in Old English,” 25.

The earliest English formulation of this motif is attested within the conclusion of Aldhelm's *Epistola ad Acircium* (685×695), an extensive, composite text—including an arithmological tract on the number "seven," two treatises on Latin metre (*De metris*) and scansion (*De pedum regulis*), and a collection of one hundred *aenigmata*³² that has already been shown to be indebted to both authentic works by Isidore and some of the vast array of pseudoepigrapha which circulated in the Insular world under Isidore's name.³³ Aldhelm explicitly mentions the *Synonyma* in the *De metris*, 10, as an example of a text employing a dialogical structure.³⁴ Incidentally, Aldhelm associates the *Synonyma* with Augustine's *Soliloquia*, itself a popular text in early medieval England,³⁵ and he is not alone in establishing this link.³⁶ I quote Aldhelm's *ubi sunt* passage (along with the relevant translation), reproducing the lay-out proposed in a dedicated study by Andy Orchard, with alliteration highlighted in bold and rhyme and/or assonance underlined:³⁷

Quae est enim labentis mundi **p**rosp^{er}itas aut fallentis uitae felicitas? Nonne simillima collatione ut somnium **e**uanescit, ut fumus **f**atescit, ut spuma marcescit? Diuitiae, inquit psalmigrafus, si adfuerint, nolite cor apponere!

Utinam nobis praesentium rerum **p**ossessio non sit futurarum remuneratione! Utinam caducarum copia **s**ecutarum non sit inopia! Utinam lenocinantis mundi oblectamenta aeternae beatitudinis non gignant detrimenta!

32 Aldhelm, *Opera*, 33–204.

33 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 48–49.

34 Aldhelm, *Opera*, 81, lines 11–16.

35 Augustine's *Soliloquia* are attested in no fewer than three manuscripts written or circulating in pre-Conquest England: London, British Library, MS Royal 2. A. xx, Salisbury, Cathedral Library, MS 173, and Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 8558–63 (2498); see Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, nos. 450, 752, and 808. An Old English version of the *Soliloquia* is attested in London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv, Part I (the so-called Southwick Codex) and, fragmentarily, in London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A. iii, fols. 2–173: see Ker, *Catalogue*, no. 215, art. 1 and no. 186 art. 9(g). Notably, the Salisbury manuscript contains the *Soliloquia* and the *Synonyma* as its only two items, whereas the Tiberius manuscript contains an Old English epitome of the *Synonyma*, as well as an excerpt of the Old English version of the *Soliloquia*; see Ker, *Catalogue*, no. 186 art. 24. For a recent edition and translation of both the Latin and Old English *Soliloquia*, see Augustine, *Augustine's Soliloquies*. See also Szarmach, "Augustine's *Soliloquia*"; Szarmach, "Alfred's *Soliloquies*"; and Lockett, "Towards an Understanding."

36 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 16–18 and 24.

37 Orchard, "Artful Alliteration," 457, translation at n92.

Quin potius transacto fragilis uitae interuallo succedant suffragante Christo perpetua praemia meritorum! Quod ipse praestare dignetur, qui pro nobis in patibulo pependit, cum aeterno patre uiuens ac regnans una cum spiritu sancto per infinita semper saecula saeculorum! AMEN.

For what is the prosperity of the transitory world, or the happiness of a failing life? Does it not, by a most apt comparison, vanish like a dream, disperse like smoke, fade like foam? 'Do not,' says the psalmist, 'set your heart on riches, if they are to be had.' Would that the possession of present goods were not recompense for those of the future! Would that a wealth of transitory possessions does not prove a dearth of those to come! Would that the blandishments of the fading world do not produce risks to eternal blessedness! Much rather, when the brief span of fragile life is passed, should, with Christ's help, the perpetual prizes of just deserts appear! And may He himself deign to grant this, He who hung for us on the Cross, who lives and reigns with the eternal Father, together with the Holy Spirit for ever and ever, age upon age, amen.

Though strictly speaking in prose, the passage is a rhetorical *tour de force*, embellished with rhyme, rhythm, patterned syntax, and alliteration—all features which Aldhelm probably derived from his skills as a versifier. What is more relevant here, however, is that Isidore's *Synonyma* are not just the ultimate source of this particular passage—though radically recast and ingeniously supplemented with echoes from Aldhelm's vast memorised reading—but could themselves have played a role in Aldhelm's idiosyncratic style in general.³⁸

Two of the most poignant early English *ubi sunt* passages feature in the two iconic vernacular elegies *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, and both are ultimately indebted to the *Synonyma*.³⁹ The relevant lines (80b–85b) from *The Seafarer* read:

Dagas sind gewitene,
ealle onmedlan eorþan rices;
næron nu cyningas ne caseras
ne gold-giefan swylce iu wæron,
þonne hi mæst mid him mærpa gefremedon
ond on dryht-licestum dome lifdon.

The days have departed, all splendour of the kingdom of earth;
there are not now kings nor caesars nor gold givers as there once

38 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 149–51.

39 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 138–44.

were, when among themselves they performed the greatest of glorious deeds and lived in magnificent fame.⁴⁰

In fact, *The Seafarer* does not feature any proper *ubi sunt* rhetorical questions, but the reference to the kings and Caesars immediately recalls the *Synonyma* questions "Dic ubi sunt reges? ubi principes?" though the phraseology and imagery of the Isidorean source-text are embedded within a wider passage (lines 80a–102), where they are creatively combined with echoes from a variety of other sources—biblical, Patristic, homiletic—both Latinate and vernacular.⁴¹

The *ubi sunt* passage of *The Wanderer* reads (lines 92–96):

Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? Hwær cwom maþþum-gyfa?
Hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon sele-dreamas?
Eala beorht bune! Eala byrn-wiga!
Eala þeodnes þrym! Hu seo þrag gewat,
genap under niht-helm, swa heo no wære!

Where has the horse gone? Where the warrior? Where the treasure? Where the seats of feast? Where are the hall joys? Oh, the bright cup! Oh, the mailed warrior! Oh, the prince's glory! How that time departed, grew dark under the night helmet, as if it hadn't been!⁴²

The closest analogue to these lines has been identified by Stephen Pelle in an anonymous Latin homily attested in a ninth-century Bavarian manuscript, which in turn expands on the *Synonyma*.⁴³ The synoptic table on the following page shows the relevant three *ubi sunt* passages, with the most stringent overlaps highlighted in bold, although laxer parallels are also detectable.

The homily *ubi sunt* passage is a lengthy one, combining a long sequence of questions and a varied imagery, but the first questions and the concluding similes clearly overlap with those of the *Synonyma*. In turn, the series of rhetorical questions in the Old English poem, while evoking the distinctive context of the early Germanic aristocratic society and its mead-hall rituals, seem to echo the corresponding questions in the homily, especially when mentioning the steed. Thus, *The Wanderer* can be said to rely on the same kind of Latinate material as *The Seafarer*, though probably at more removes and via earlier vernacular elaborations. In turn, both Old English poets

⁴⁰ *Old English Shorter Poems*, 2.32–35.

⁴¹ Cucina, *Il Seafarer*, 279–330 and Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 138–41.

⁴² *Old English Shorter Poems*, 2.8–9.

⁴³ Pelle, "Contextualizing the Anglo-Saxon Composite Homily."

Synonyma II, 91	Anonymous Homily in ms. Munich, BSB, Clm 14364 (s. ix ^{2/4} , Bavaria), fol. 39v	The Wanderer, lines 92–96
Breuis est huius mundi felicitas, modica est huius saeculi gloria, caduca est et fragilis temporalis potentia. Dic, ubi sunt reges? ubi principes? ubi imperatores? ubi locupletes rerum? ubi potentes saeculi? ubi diuites mundi? Quasi umbra transierunt, uelut somnium euanuerunt [.]	Dic mihi: Ubi sunt qui in seculo aliquando gloriati fuerunt? Ubi sunt reges, ubi imperatores, ubi principes, ubi potentes seculi? Ubi superbi, ubi luxoriosi, ubi ebriosi, ubi rapaces, ubi fures? Ubi mali consiliatores? Ubi detractores; ubi inuidia et nequitia eorum? Ubi aurum, ubi argentum, ubi splendor gemmarum? Ubi pretiosissima uestimenta? Ubi equi et equitatus illorum? Ubi pompę et ornamenta, uel cursus equorum uelocissimus? Quomodo omnia tamquam umbra transierunt, uelut somnium euanuerunt!	Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa? / Hwær cwom symblla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledreamas? / Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga! / Eala þeodnes þrym! Hu seo þrag gewat, / genap under nihthelm, swa heo no wære!
(This world’s happiness is short, this world’s glory is scanty, secular power is fleeting and temporary. Tell [me], where are the kings? Where the princes? Where the emperors? Where the rich in possessions? Where the powerful of this world? They passed away as if they were a shadow, they vanished like a dream.) (my translation)	(Tell me: where are those who had once vaunted their worldly glories? Where are the kings, where the emperors, where the princes, where the powerful of [this] world? Where [are] the proud ones, where the wanton ones, where the drunkards, where the greedy ones, where the thieves? Where [are] the evil counsellors? Where [are] the detractors, where their envy and wickedness? Where [is] the gold, where the silver, where the splendid gems? Where [are] the costliest garments? Where [are] the steeds and their riders? Where [are] the parades and the decorations, or the swiftest riding of the horses? Alas, everything passed away as if a shadow, it vanished like a dream!) (my translation)	(Where has the horse gone? Where the warrior? Where the treasure? Where the seats of feast? Where are the hall joys? Oh, the bright cup! Oh, the mailed warrior! Oh, the prince’s glory! How that time departed, grew dark under the night helmet, as if it hadn’t been!)

freely adopted and adapted such material in accordance with poetic diction and alliterative measure.⁴⁴

Indeed, the artful conflation of different antecedents, the creative recycling and repurposing of vocabulary and imagery, and the ingenious tension between Latinate Christian material and rhetorical devices typical of the vernacular literary tradition can be pinpointed as the hallmark of the vast

44 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 141–42.

and varied *ubi sunt* tradition in early England,⁴⁵ which incidentally makes the *ubi sunt* passages perfect case studies of the very "art and craft" of early English verse, as highlighted by Andy Orchard's Gollancz lecture of 2019.⁴⁶

The two key, interdependent components of the *ubi sunt* motif are transience and wisdom or, in other words, the elegiac and the gnomic. *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer* have been said to "occupy...a 'hinge' position between the... 'elegies' and the... 'wisdom poems,'"⁴⁷ and Richard North has interpreted *The Wanderer* as a riddle within which the poet concealed "the essence of *De consolacione philosophiae*."⁴⁸ This association with *De consolacione* is most intriguing, in that *De consolacione*, the *Soliloquia*, and the *Synonyma* can be considered to make up a key triad of sapiential *Trostbücher* in early medieval England.⁴⁹

Indeed, Isidore did prove a major source, or rather *the* key source for gnomic poetry, especially for the vast riddle tradition of early medieval England, but for that we have to turn to his most famous work, the *Etymologiae*.

The *Etymologiae* and the Riddle Tradition

Of the four grammatical categories, etymology was the most prominent, as the most effective heuristic tool, according to the principle that *in origine veritas*. It was also the most economic, because the principle that the name of a thing or creature can explain its nature⁵⁰ allowed Isidore to collect and systematize a great mass of lore in his encyclopaedia, the *Grundbuch des ganzen Mittelalters*, according to Ernst Curtius's famous definition.⁵¹ In early medieval England, the impact of Isidorean etymology has been detected at all levels of literary culture:⁵² it offered a way from designation to essence—from

45 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 105–59; Di Sciacca, "Il topos dell'*ubi sunt*"; Di Sciacca, "An Unpublished *ubi sunt* Piece"; and Pelle, "Continuity and Renewal," 52–53 and 181–83.

46 Orchard, "Alcuin and Cynewulf."

47 Shippey, "*The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*," 146–49, quotation at 146.

48 North, "Boethius and the Mercenary," 98.

49 Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 142–44. On *De consolacione* in pre-Conquest England, see at least Szarmach, "Boethius's Influence in Anglo-Saxon England."

50 See Isidore's definition of etymology, above, note 8.

51 Curtius, *Europäische Literatur*, 487.

52 See, for example, the comments by P. Hunter Blair ("the works of Isidore of Seville were a major influence on the development of Anglo-Saxon intellectual life in the age of Bede"), or R. Frank ("Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* charmed the literati of Anglo-

verba to *res*.⁵³ And knowledge of the etymon (whether putative or not) of a word, as well as Isidore's teaching that a word could be divided into smaller units as a means of determining its meaning, proved instrumental to the ornamental sound- and word-play of both literary languages of early England.⁵⁴

Borrowings and echoes from the *Etymologiae* have long been identified in a wide range of early English verse,⁵⁵ but the genre where the impact of Isidore's etymology and *Etymologiae* was most pervasive is undoubtedly the riddle one. In spite of their deceptively frivolous name, riddles are the most bookish genre of early English poetry,⁵⁶ practised by the most learned and renowned *literati*, such as Aldhelm,⁵⁷ Boniface,⁵⁸ Bede,⁵⁹ and Alcuin.⁶⁰ However, as I hope the following discussion will show, many other poets from pre-Conquest England, whether named or anonymous, writing in Latin or the vernacular, earlier or later in the period, composed riddle-like verse "in their manner of simultaneously giving and withholding information."⁶¹ Indeed, it has been argued that riddles can be considered a microcosm of the macrocosm of early English poetry, in that the latter fundamentally "relies on its audience ability to decipher metaphorical language, to fill out many details that remain unexpressed, and to savour whatever satisfaction resides in the solving of upscale crossword puzzles."⁶² (In this regard, the

Saxon England from Aldhelm, Bede, and Boniface to Ælfric, Byrhtferth, and beyond"); Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede*, 293 and Frank, "Reading *Beowulf*," 245.

53 Curtius, *Europäische Literatur*, 487.

54 Howe, "Aldhelm's *Enigmata*," 38–39.

55 Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 137–38 and 148–49, and Robinson, "The Significance of Names," 197 and 201. Recently, Roberta Frank has argued that the *Beowulf*-poet must also have been familiar with Isidore's *Etymologiae*: "Whenever *Beowulf* was composed, Isidore was in the neighbourhood, relentlessly channelling the words and things of classical antiquity into the medieval present"; Frank, "Reading *Beowulf*," 245.

56 Defined as "catalogue poetry" composed by "the literary elite," riddles "[control] nature on the page, [organize] human knowledge into manageable form and show us the created world reshaped by human hands"; Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 101–2.

57 *OEALRT*, 2–93 with notes at 610–11 and 639–73; and *COEALRT*, 1–112.

58 *OEALRT*, 182–221 with notes at 612 and 715–22; and *COEALRT*, 230–57.

59 *OEALRT*, 94–109 with notes at 611 and 673–81; and *COEALRT*, 113–31.

60 As well as authoring verse riddles, Alcuin included a number of (prose) riddles in his *Disputatio Pippini*: see *OEALRT*, 222–65 with notes at 623 and 722–34; and *COEALRT*, 257–89. See also Bayless, "Alcuin's *Disputatio Pippini*."

61 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 4.

62 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*. In fact, Niles refers specifically to the

very etymology of the verb "to read" in both literary languages of early England, Lat. *legere* and OE *rædan*, is intriguing,⁶³ and, on the vernacular front in particular, the frequency of figures such as *kenningar* is again revealing of this enigmatic quality of early English poetry.⁶⁴

At the same time, riddles possess a distinctive didactic potential.⁶⁵ Riddles are a genre where encyclopaedism, grammar, and glossography often converged.⁶⁶ The most influential encyclopaedia of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages was the *Etymologiae* and indeed they proved the single most influential source of the early English riddles, as the sheer extent of Orchard's recent "Concordance of Parallels with Isidore's *Etymologiae*" startlingly shows.⁶⁷ Moreover, Mercedes Salvador-Bello has argued that the early English *aenigmata* collections derived from the *Etymologiae* also structural criteria and organizational patterns.⁶⁸

Isidore himself deals with the *aenigma* in the *Etymologiae* and revealingly includes it among the grammatical tropes of the first book:

Enigma est quaestio obscura quae difficile intellegitur, nisi aperiatur...Inter allegoriam autem et enigma hoc interest quod allegoria uis gemina est et sub res alias aliud figuraliter indicat; enigma uero sensus tantum obscurus est et per quasdam imagines adumbratus. (*Etymologiae* 1:37, 26, in Isidore, *De grammatica*, 181–83)

vernacular context of the Old English riddles and poetry, but I think his acute observation can equally apply to Anglo-Latin *aenigmata* and poetry. On the bilingual nature of the early English riddle tradition "and on the perils of perceiving it in a merely monoglot manner," see the monumental two-volume study by Orchard, *OEALRT* and *COEALRT*, esp. *OEALRT*, vii–xviii, quotation at xviii. On the complex intertextuality linking Latin and vernacular riddles, see Aldhelm, *The Poetic Works*, 67 and Orchard, "Enigma Variations," 294–99.

63 Scardigli and Gervasi, *Avviamento, s.u. to read*; Orel, *A Handbook, s.u. rēðjanan*; and Pokorny, *Wörterbuch*, I, 59–60 and II, 658. See also Rudolf, "Riddling and Reading," 502–3; Parkes, "*Rædan, areccan, smeagan*"; and Weaver, "Premodern and Postcritical," 46–50.

64 For a recent discussion of *kenningar* and *heiti*, see Battaglia, *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, 85–90. For illuminating comparisons between the early English and Old Norse riddle traditions, see *OEALRT* and *COEALRT*.

65 Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 101–2; Rudolf, "Riddling and Reading," 499–500; Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 52–60; and Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, 448.

66 Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, 74–87.

67 *OEALRT*, xx–xxi and *COEALRT*, 697–700.

68 *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*.

A riddle is an obscure question that is difficult to solve unless it is explained [...] Between allegory and the riddle there is this difference, that the force of allegory is twofold and figuratively indicates one subject under the guise of other subjects, while a riddle merely has an obscure meaning and its solution is hinted at through certain images. (Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 63)

Following Donatus and his commentators—his major sources throughout the first book of the *Etymologiae*—Isidore defines the *aenigma* as one of the seven types of allegory, particularly, as a linguistic device to contrive images capable of disclosing an obscure meaning.⁶⁹ In turn, the association between *aenigma* and grammar is very much intrinsic to the early English riddle tradition: all the major authors of riddles—Aldhelm,⁷⁰ Boniface,⁷¹ Tatwine,⁷² Bede,⁷³ Alcuin⁷⁴—also wrote grammatical handbooks, manuals of orthography, and/or metrical treatises.

Aldhelm, the earliest, most prolific, and most influential English author of *aenigmata*, composed riddles that are essentially “linguistic exercises,” according to Nicholas Howe’s fitting definition,⁷⁵ though I would prefix that “linguistic” with a “meta.” In other words, Aldhelm’s *aenigmata* are not so much investigations on the *res* or the object of the riddle, as an exploration of the linguistic possibilities of its *nomen*.⁷⁶ Aldhelm’s collection of one hun-

69 Isidore, *De grammatica*, 372–73. On the sources of *Etymologiae* I, see Isidore, *De grammatica*, cvii–cxiii and 452–63. In keeping with his pan-grammatical system, Isidore provides a purely grammatical definition of *aenigma*, whereas Bede, in the wake of Cassiodorus, will highlight that the obscurities of *aenigmata* ultimately convey spiritual meanings: see Bede, *De schematibus*, ed. Kendall, 162–63, lines 191–98.

70 Aldhelm authored two metrical treatises *De metris* and *De pedum regulis* included in the *Epistola ad Acircium*.

71 Boniface authored an *Ars grammatica* and an *Ars metrica*; see CPL 1564b and 1564c, and Sharpe, *A Handlist of Latin Writers*, no. 166.

72 Tatwine authored an *Ars grammatica (de viii partibus orationis)*; see CPL 1563 and Sharpe, *A Handlist of Latin Writers*, no. 1681.

73 Bede authored *De arte metrica*, *De orthographia*, and *De schematibus et tropis seu de arte metrica libri ii*; see CPL 1565–67 and Sharpe, *A Handlist of Latin Writers*, no. 152.

74 Alcuin authored the *De dialectica*, the *Dialogus Franconis et Saxonis de octo partibus orationis*, and the *Orthographia*, as well as editing Priscian’s *Institutiones grammaticae* (CPL 1546); see Sharpe, *A Handlist of Latin Writers*, no. 87.

75 Howe, “Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*,” 38.

76 However, Howe’s argument that Aldhelm’s *aenigmata* did not pose any challenge content-wise as they regularly circulated with their solutions (“Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*,” 37), has been convincingly challenged by Orchard, “Enigma Variations,” 285–87.

dred *aenigmata* was apparently composed early in his career and is embedded between the two metrical treatises, *De metris* and *De pedum regulis*, of the *Epistola ad Acircium* to illustrate and purportedly exemplify the various metrical principles discussed.⁷⁷

According to Orchard's "Concordance of Parallels with Isidore's *Etymologiae*," no fewer than fifty-seven out of Aldhelm's one-hundred *aenigmata* are indebted to the *Etymologiae*.⁷⁸ But beside or beyond any specific thematic or stylistic debts to Isidore's encyclopaedia, Aldhelm's *aenigmata* collection shares the cosmographic scope of the *Etymologiae*,⁷⁹ as well as the very Isidorean concept and practice of etymology as an epistemological tool establishing an "equivalence between the name and the thing it signifies."⁸⁰ And if the etymological method is pervasive, the other categories of *analogia*, *differentia*, and *glossa* skilfully interlace in the intricate fabric of associations and/or contrasts that make up both a given riddle collection as a whole,⁸¹ and individual *aenigmata*, as they try to establish analogies between objects or beings belonging to different categories and to convey them via polysemic words.⁸² A fitting case in point is Aldhelm's *Aenigma* 91, relying on *Etymologiae* 18.12.1–6, where the solution "palm tree" gradually emerges only after the reader has worked through the analogies and differences between the meanings of the polysemic Lat. *palma*: "palm (of the hand)" > "hand," "palm tree," "leaf of the tree" > "wreath of victory (made from the leaves)," the latter meaning in turn interpretable in both a secular and a Christian sense, as the palm leaf is the distinctive attribute of worldly as well as spiritual fighters, that is, martyrs.⁸³

77 Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 6; OEALRT, xx–xxi and COEALRT, 697–700.

78 See *aenigmata* nos. 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12–18, 20, 23–25, 27, 28, 30, 31, 33, 35–37, 39–43, 45, 46, 49, 50, 51, 53, 56, 60, 61, 63–65, 70, 77, 78, 82, 84, 86, 88, 89, 91, 92, 95–100. Throughout the essay, the numeration of *aenigmata*, both in Latin and Old English, follows the one assigned by Orchard in *OEALRT*.

79 Weaver, "Premodern and Postcritical," 50–51.

80 Howe, "Aldhelm's *Enigmata*," 58: "the linguistic practice of the *Enigmata* reveals the decisive influence of Isidore on Aldhelm's habits of thinking and composing." On the etymological principle in the early English riddle tradition in general, see Bitterli, *Say What I am Called*, 35–56 and Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 54–55 and 59–60.

81 On the thematic groupings of *aenigmata* collections, see Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, 88–283.

82 Rudolf, "Riddling and Reading," 499–500.

83 Howe, "Aldhelm's *Enigmata*," 44–45, though he does not consider the palm leaf as a symbol of martyrs' victory; *OEALRT*, 76–77 with notes at 670, and *COEALRT*, 94–95.

Aldhelm's *aenigmata* also exhibit his penchant for the synonymous style and the *copia verborum*, in that "some of [his] *aenigmata* may be read as exercises in synonymy,"⁸⁴ as is the case with *Aenigma* 70, the solution of which, *tortella* "loaf of bread," is couched in militaristic terms as various kinds of shield (*pelta*, *scutum*, *clipeus*, *umbo*, *parma*), all of which occur in the dedicated chapter of *Etymologiae* 18.12.1–6.⁸⁵ And yet, Aldhelm's greatly varied and erudite, at times even arcane, vocabulary does not just consist of a mere combinatory divertissement or of a smug piling-up of ever longer lists of synonyms, but it ultimately inspires a meditative, experimental reading and provokes interpretation.⁸⁶

The Manuscript Tradition

The manuscript tradition also affords revealing evidence as to the contiguity between Isidore and the early English riddle tradition. The southern English codex Saint Petersburg, Russian National Library, MS Q. v. I. 15⁸⁷ contains almost exclusively Isidorean texts (including *De differentiis rerum* and the *Synonyma*), alongside the second-earliest extant copy of Aldhelm's *Aenigmata*,⁸⁸ as well as an acrostic poem on St. John attributed, though not universally, to Boniface,⁸⁹ an author of Latin *aenigmata* himself⁹⁰ and a keen and experimental practitioner of acrostics.⁹¹

84 Howe, "Aldhelm's *Enigmata*," 56n56.

85 OEALRT, 56–59, and COEALRT, 77.

86 Weaver, "Premodern and Postcritical," 50–56. Indeed, according to Weaver, Aldhelm's role as the key model of the hermeneutic style can be put down precisely to his *Aenigmata*, which, "combined with his signature style and formal gamesmanship...provided the framework for the self-conscious cultivation of a register of written Latin and English that was explicitly designed to cultivate hermeneutic responsiveness": "Premodern and Postcritical," 54.

87 The manuscript has been dated to s. viii² (prov. Corbie, s. viii): Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, no. 845. See also CLA 11:1618 and Di Sciacca, *Finding the Right Words*, 68–70 and 72.

88 The Saint Petersburg manuscript contains the following texts by Isidore: *In libros ueteris et noui Testamenti prooemia*, *De ortu et obitu patrum*, *De ecclesiasticis officiis*, *De differentiis rerum*, and the *Synonyma*. Aldhelm's *Aenigmata* occur as the last item of the codex, whereas their solutions are sandwiched between Isidore's *De ecclesiasticis officiis* and *De differentiis rerum*.

89 The acrostic poem is SK no. 8331. On the questioned authorship, see Howlett, "A Possible Author."

90 OEALRT, 182–221 with notes at 612 and 715–22; and COEALRT, 230–57.

91 Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 202–9 and Thornbury, "Boniface as Poet and Teacher," 106–8 and 115–17.

Riddle collections often co-occur with grammatical works, as well as with scholia and glosses of grammatical and encyclopaedic content.⁹² Indeed, the major pre-Conquest manuscript witness of *aenigmata*, Cambridge, University Library, Gg. 5. 35 (s. xi^{med}, Canterbury, St. Augustine's?; prov. Canterbury St. Augustine's), also contains curriculum texts, most of which intensely glossed, and has therefore been considered, though controversially, a 'classbook.'⁹³ Somewhat disappointingly, none of the twenty-two manuscript witnesses of the *Etymologiae* included in Gneuss and Lapidge's *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* also features riddle collections,⁹⁴ but evidence of the close interplay between early English riddles and encyclopaedic lore is afforded by another major manuscript witness of the riddle tradition, London, British Library, MS Royal 12. C. xxiii (s. x² or x/xi, Canterbury, Christ Church), where sizeable quotes from the *Etymologiae* gloss Aldhelm's *aenigmata*.⁹⁵

Aenigmata and litterae

The peculiar blend of grammatical and encyclopaedic lore in riddles is also evident in their fascination with the very activity of writing as well as with the material and iconic quality of the written word. Riddles about the objects of the scriptorium abound,⁹⁶ and so do those concerning the very basic ele-

92 Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, 74–87 and *OEALRT*, xviii–xx. On the relationship between the *Etymologiae* and early English glossaries, see Lazzari, "Isidore's *Etymologiae* in Anglo-Saxon Glossaries" and Lazzari, "Isidore's *Etymologiae* and the Bilingual Antwerp–London Glossary."

93 Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, no. 12. On the contents and structure of this vast volume, see Rigg and Wieland, "A Canterbury Classbook," and on its glosses, see Wieland, *The Latin Glosses on Arator and Prudentius*. On the allegedly didactic role of glossed manuscripts, see Lapidge, "The Study of Latin Texts in Late Anglo-Saxon England, I"; Page, "The Study of Latin Texts in Late Anglo-Saxon England, II"; Page, "On the Feasibility of a Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Glosses," 80–93; Wieland, "The Glossed Manuscript"; Wieland, "Interpreting the Interpretation"; and Stanton, *The Culture of Translation*, 9–54.

94 Cf. items nos. 154.5f, 173e, 176e, 185e, 188.8e, 311e, 391e, 460e, 469, 497.2e, 498.1e, 524.4f, 561, 682e, 690e, 749e, 784.5e, 808.0e, 821f, 885f, 889, and 919.3e.

95 Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, no. 478. The codex contains the *Aenigmata* of Aldhelm, Symphosius, Eusebius, Tatwine (all with glosses and scholia), as well as an anonymous Hiberno-Latin poem, the *Versus cuiusdam Scotti de alphabeto* (SK 12594), which can be associated with the early English riddle tradition; see *OEALRT*, 548–61 with notes at 635 and 844–50, and *COEALRT*, 607–23.

96 See below, Appendix A. See also Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called*, 135–50.

ments of script, that is the letters of the alphabet,⁹⁷ which are explored in both their graphic dimension and their symbolic and spiritual meanings as *signa*.

Notably, the *Etymologiae* open with an (Augustinian) definition of letters precisely as *signa*, that is as token of things (*indices rerum*), with the power (*uis*) to convey and preserve the voice of those who are now absent.

Primordia grammaticae artis litterae communes existunt...Litterae autem sunt indices rerum, signa uerborum, quibus tanta uis est, ut nobis dicta absentium sine uoce loquantur...Litterae Latinae et Graece ab Hebreis uidentur exortae. Hebreorum litteras a Lege cepisse per Moysen. (*Etymologiae* 1. 3, 1–5, in Isidore, *De grammatica*, 5–9)

The common letters of the alphabet are the primary elements of the art of grammar...letters are token of things, the signs of words, and they have so much force that the utterances of those who are absent speak to us without a voice...The Latin and Greek letters seem to be derived from the Hebrew...the Hebrew language is the mother of all languages and letters...The letters of the Hebrew started with the Law transmitted by Moses. ([Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 39)

Thus, writing is “a memory system and a precondition for knowledge,”⁹⁸ since it transcends generations—a point that must have powerfully resonated with the earliest English *literati*, such as Aldhelm, Boniface, Bede, who were leading the momentous transition from orality to literacy and laying the foundations of the textual culture of England.⁹⁹ Also, letters and writing are assigned an ultimate divine origin and sacred function, in that Hebrew is said to be the mother of all languages and letters, and in turn, the letters of Hebrew themselves started with the Law transmitted by Moses, according to a theory validated by no less Fathers than Jerome and Augustine.¹⁰⁰

The very shape of a letter can convey a deep and complex symbolism, as shown in particular in Isidore’s discussion of the five mystical letters of the Greek alphabet in *Etymologiae* 1.3.7–9.¹⁰¹ Indeed, Isidore is aware of the twofold physical dimension of letters as both sounds and graphemes, the relationship between which is explained in pre-Saussurian terms as causal rather than arbitrary (*Etymologiae* 1.4.17).¹⁰² Incidentally, the causal rela-

97 See below, Appendix B.

98 Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, 102.

99 On this transition, see the classic study by O’Brien O’Keefe, *Visible Song*.

100 Isidore, *De grammatica*, 222–24.

101 Isidore, *De grammatica*, 10–13 and 227–29, and Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 40.

102 Isidore, *De grammatica*, 24–27 and 241, and Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 41.

tionship between sound and grapheme is in line with the principle that the etymology of a word reveals the nature of the object or being it signifies, since it ultimately establishes a causal relationship between words and objects or beings.¹⁰³

The Isidorean account of letters seems to underlie what has been defined as a distinctively English focus on spelling and an equally distinctive "belief that knowledge of individual letters provides understanding of the nature of the words that they form [or] that the value of an object can be explored through the very letters that comprise the spelling of its name."¹⁰⁴ Such a belief proved an especially effective and resourceful tool in the hands of the early English riddle authors, for whom an Isidorean background can therefore be detected not just in their entrenched grammatical *Weltanschauung*, but also in the logographic streak with which they explored the rich symbolism of letters, their iconicity, their combinatory ability, and their duality as both aural/oral and written/visual objects.¹⁰⁵

The significance of letters also inspired both playful and highly sophisticated formats of *aenigmata* and other early English verse in general. Acrostics were a constant favourite with early English poets, both in Latin and the vernacular, throughout the pre-Conquest period,¹⁰⁶ from Aldhelm to Cynewulf,¹⁰⁷ from Boniface to Dunstan of Glastonbury († 988),¹⁰⁸ from the debated author of the ninth-century acrostics verses in praise of King Alfred¹⁰⁹ to Wulfstan Cantor (fl. 996).¹¹⁰ Indeed, early English *literati* also contributed to the popularization of acrostic verse on the other side of the Channel: Boniface may have introduced cryptography on the Continent,¹¹¹ and he and Alcuin likely triggered the Carolingian vogue of *carmina figurata*, the ultimate form of acrostic verse, the most accomplished practitioner of which was Hrabanus Maurus, a monk at the Bonifatian foundation of

103 See *Etymologiae* 1.29.2–3: Isidore, *De grammatica*, 124–25 and 318–19, and Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 55.

104 Gallagher, "Latin Acrostic Poetry," 266. See also *The Old English Dialogues*, 30 and 52.

105 Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called*, 114–31 and Rudolf, "Riddling and Reading."

106 Lapidge, "Acrostics," and Burns, "The Visual Craft," 110–15 and 122–24.

107 Roberts, "Cynewulf," and Orchard, "Alcuin and Cynewulf," 324–45.

108 Lapidge, "The Hermeneutic Style," 133–35 and 146–49, and Lapidge, "St Dunstan's Latin Poetry."

109 Gallagher, "Latin Acrostic Poetry" and Gallagher, "King Alfred and the Sibyl."

110 Lapidge, "Wulfstan Cantor," and Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 209–23.

111 Levison, *England and the Continent*, 290–94.

Fulda, disciple of Alcuin, and eventually successor of Boniface as the Archbishop of Mainz.¹¹² As “potent statements of the power of etymology and orthography,”¹¹³ acrostics, like *aenigmata*, are conceived and thrive at the intersection of grammatical, logographic, and etymological lore. Hence the penchant that early English poets, in general, and riddle authors, in particular, consistently nurtured for acrostics clearly strikes a very pertinent chord.

The fascination with the symbolism of letters and the metalinguistic engagement with them also shows in the use of runes.¹¹⁴ Because of their graphic alterity, runes served well cryptographic and/or riddling aims, and because of their multivalence, they required that kind of metalinguistic reasoning and decoding exercise which was key to the early English riddle authors and poets in general.¹¹⁵ Indeed, “creative runography”¹¹⁶ has been detected in a wide range of Old English poems, from the *Rune Poem*¹¹⁷ to *The Husband’s Message*,¹¹⁸ from Cynewulf’s acrostic signatures¹¹⁹ to a few vernacular riddles,¹²⁰ and also in one of the most sophisticated and intriguing artefacts of pre-Conquest England, the Franks Casket.¹²¹

Similarly, the logographic penchant of the early English is evident in their interest for other alphabetic systems besides the Latin and runic ones, that is the Greek and Hebrew alphabets,¹²² in the use of gibberish and pho-

112 On the *carmina figurata* and Hrabanus Maurus’s figured poems on the cross, see Hewett, “The Encounter of Art and Language.” The current edition of Hrabanus Maurus’s figured poems is *In honorem sanctae Crucis* by Perrin.

113 Gallagher, “Latin Acrostic Poetry,” 266.

114 Page, “Runes.”

115 Birkett, *Reading the Runes*, 82–83; Symons, *Runes and Roman Letters*, 193–98; and Burns, “The Visual Craft,” 323–26.

116 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 262; see also 234–47.

117 *OEALRT*, 420–35 with notes at 632–33, 788–95, and *COEALRT*, 489–501. See also Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 251–79.

118 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 213–50.

119 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 285–306; Burns, “The Visual Craft,” 122–24; and Birkett, “Runes and *Revelatio*.”

120 See, for example, the Exeter Book Riddles 17, 22, 40, 73, and 74: *OEALRT*, 322–23, 330–31, 360–61, and 394–97 with notes at 626, 628, 630, 751–52, 754–55, 763, and 779–80; and *COEALRT*, 367–70, 377–78, 412–14, and 460–62. See also Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 85–100 and Dewa, “The Runic Riddles of the Exeter Book.”

121 *OEALRT*, 294–95 with notes at 741, and *COEALRT*, 315–17. See also Webster, “Franks Casket” and Burns, “The Visual Craft,” 241–42.

122 On the knowledge and use of Greek letters in pre-Conquest England, see at least

netic spellings of exotic words made in charms,¹²³ or in the personification of the letters of the *Pater Noster* in the Old English wisdom poem *Solomon and Saturn I* and the subtle and varied management of script in the fellow poem *Solomon and Saturn II*.¹²⁴

Sapientia and Grammatica in Solomon and Saturn I and II

In *Solomon and Saturn I*, Saturn, the champion of pagan learning, challenges Solomon, representative of Judaeo-Christian wisdom, to impress him with the virtues of the key Christian prayer, the *Pater Noster*, and Solomon responds by describing how the anthropomorphized letters of the first two words of the prayer make their assault on the devil.¹²⁵ The technique of personification and the figure of prosopopoeia were favourite rhetorical devices among the early English, from epigraphy to poetry in general, but especially in riddles.¹²⁶ And with the riddle tradition *Solomon and Saturn I* also shares a logographic twist, in that the letters of the prayer are written out in pairs of Latin and runic graphs.¹²⁷ Each letter is then described analytically, argu-

Burns, "The Visual Craft," 307–22 and Griffiths, "Some Curious Glosses on Letters of the Greek Alphabet." On the knowledge and use of Hebrew letters in pre-Conquest England, see at least Fleming, "Christian Hebrew in England" and Griffiths, "The Canterbury Psalter's Alphabet Glosses." On the genealogical relationship between the three sacred languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, as outlined by Isidore, see above, and on their interdependence see *Etymologiae*, 9.1.3: Isidore, *De linguis*, 32–33 and Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 191.

123 Arthur, 'Charms,' *Liturgies and Secret Rites*, 169–214 and Olsan, "Latin Charms of Medieval England."

124 For an overview of the Old English Solomon and Saturn texts, see O'Neill, "On the Date, Provenance, and Relationship of the 'Solomon and Saturn' Dialogues" and *The Old English Dialogues*, 41–49. Editions and translations of *Solomon and Saturn I* and *II* can be found in *The Old English Dialogues* at 60–71 and 78–95, respectively. For a reassessment of the boundaries between the Solomon and Saturn texts, see Burns, "The Visual Craft," 294–98.

125 Cf. the *Prose Solomon and Saturn Pater Noster Dialogue*, lines 9–33, where the prayer as a whole creature experiences a series of transformations to counter the opposite transformations of the devil; *The Old English Dialogues*, 72–73.

126 Orton, "The Technique of Object-Personification"; Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 53–54 on personification, and 211, esp. n6, on prosopopoeia in both Old English poetry, particularly riddles, and epigraphy; Schlauch, "The 'Dream of the Rood'"; and Edlich-Muth, "Prosopopoeia."

127 The runes are attested, alongside their Latin counterparts, in one of the two manuscript witnesses of the poem, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 422, while they are absent in the other witness, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 41. For a

ably trying to touch upon the four characteristics (*accidentia*) that Isidore had attributed to letters, namely their name (*nomen*), shape (*figura*), function (*potestas*), and order (*ordo*).¹²⁸ This detailed description of the Latin letters and the metalinguistic exercise it triggers are in turn further developed by the presence of the runic letters pairing the Latin ones, since runes, as polysemic graphemes, were “particularly adept at...expressing ideas about signification, interpretation, and the ability of written language to convey meaning.”¹²⁹

As Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe has pointed out, the combat that the letters take up against the devil echoes Isidore’s conception of letters as signs retaining the power of speech of those absent: if this is applied to the *Pater Noster*, originally uttered by Christ Himself and addressed to God the Father, the individual letters obviously acquire a divine power.¹³⁰ Moreover, the apparent Isidorean paradox of letters as entities that, though being voiceless themselves, speak the speech of those absent, repeatedly plays out in *Solomon and Saturn I*, in that the *Pater Noster* is alternatively presented in both its verbal, voiced expression and in its written, voiceless one. Indeed, *Solomon and Saturn I* itself is presented as a dialogical exchange, yet it is conveyed silently, in written form.¹³¹ The tension between the oral and the written word permeates the early English riddle tradition,¹³² as well as marking much of the pre-Conquest textual culture at large as the product of a “transitional literacy,”¹³³ and I would argue that this tension finds a theoretical foundation in Isidore’s *grammatica*.

Solomon and Saturn II, the twin poem of *Solomon and Saturn I*, is a wisdom contest, where the two opponents debate a wide range of topics, with a distinctive focus on Middle Eastern culture and setting.¹³⁴ Saturn shows off

comparison between the two codices and a reassessment of the possibility of the use of runes in the original *Solomon and Saturn I*, see Burns, “The Visual Craft,” 291–94.

128 Isidore, *De grammatica*, 4.16, 24–25 and 241 n2; translation in Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 41. See also Burns, “The Visual Craft,” 331–39.

129 Symons, *Runes and Roman Letters*, 195.

130 O’Brien O’Keeffe, *Visible Song*, 50–51.

131 O’Brien O’Keeffe, *Visible Song*, 48, and Burns, “The Visual Craft,” 328–30.

132 See, e.g. Aldhelm’s *Aenigma* 30 (esp. lines 1 and 5–6), an *aenigma* indebted to *Etymologiae* 1.4.10; here, the letters of the alphabet introduce themselves as voiceless creatures, yet ready to offer words, though in silence, to those eager to listen: *OEALRT*, 24–25 with notes at 619 and 651, and *COEALRT*, 39–40. See also Orchard, “Performing Writing and Singing Silence.”

133 O’Brien O’Keeffe, *Visible Song* and Orchard, “Oral Tradition.”

134 Burns, “The Visual Craft,” 300–6.

his learning by listing a long sequence of east European, Asian, and North African places he has visited, thereby charting a virtual map of the learned context of composition of the poem.¹³⁵ Notably, the scribe manipulates the letters to create exotic-looking graphemes that match the exotic contents and contexts evoked, resorting to that evocative and iconic use of letters so frequently attested in the riddle tradition.¹³⁶ Also, the upper-hand in the debate and ultimate victory of Solomon, the champion of Biblical learning, is also signalled graphically by the scribe about half-way through the dialogue by writing Solomon's name in ornamented capitals, while Saturn's name is spelled in plain small capitals instead.¹³⁷

Finally, at least two of the exchanges between the two contestants in *Solomon and Saturn II* are formulated as two riddles proper, about books and old age, for which "many parallels in sense or style or solution" have been pointed out within both the early English riddle tradition and the Old Norse wisdom contests.¹³⁸

Conclusions

Early English *aenigmata* and related texts convey a "profoundly logocentric view of the world,"¹³⁹ which ultimately runs through all early English literary culture. From Aldhelm's *Aenigma* 30 to Ælfric's *Grammar* to Byrhtferth's *Enchiridion*, language, even in its most basic components—letters—is the medium that conveys knowledge of the natural world and encodes the mysteries of the supernatural one. This logocentric view arguably owes much to Isidore's pan-grammatical system and to the distinctively Isidorean "fascination with linguistic [detail, which] became 'a whole climate of opinion,' surrounding and touching even those without access to his books."¹⁴⁰ The four grammatical categories at the core of Isidore's encyclopaedia—difference, analogy, gloss, and, above all, etymology—functioned as linguistic categories but also as categories of thought. Furthermore, a figure of speech much cherished by Isidore, synonymy, artfully interplayed with native

135 O'Brien O'Keeffe, "The Geographic List."

136 Rudolf, "Riddling and Reading," 505–8.

137 O'Brien O'Keeffe, "The Geographic List," 126. See also see Powell, "Orientalist Fantasy," 119 and 143.

138 The two riddles are ed. and trans. in *OEALRT*, 436–39, with notes at 633 and 795; commentary in *COEALRT*, 501–5, quotation at 503.

139 Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 55.

140 Frank, "Reading *Beowulf*," 258.

stylistic devices to craft what has long been acknowledged as the most distinctive tenet of early English poetry, “repetition of thought with variation of expression,”¹⁴¹ a tenet which shows its virtually endless possibilities in the vast range of subtle permutations of the *ubi sunt* motif.

The Isidorean import on early English *grammatica* could easily be dismissed by pointing out the undeniably derivative nature of anything Isidore wrote. But in this case a *reditus ad originem* focusing on the ultimate *auctoritates* would risk missing the point: because it was the *compiler*’s distinctive synthesis and his categorization of knowledge and of the language expressing it that contributed to the definition and subsequent development of the English textual culture.

141 Tolman, “The Style of Anglo-Saxon Poetry,” 23–33. For a more recent discussion of “the art and craft” of early English poets, see Orchard, “Alcuin and Cynewulf.”

Appendix A

Aenigmata About the Objects and/or Activity of the Scriptorium

(based on the "Index of Solutions," *OEALRT*, 877–93)

Aldhelm § 32 (*pugillares* "writing tablets")
§ 59 (*penna* "pen")
§ 89 (*arca libraria* "book chest")

Tatwine § 5 (*membranum* "parchment")
§ 6 (*penna* "pen")
§ 10 (*recitabulum* "lectern")

Bern Riddles § 24 (*membranum* "parchment")
§ 27 (*papyrus*)

Lorsch Riddles § 9 (*penna* "quill pen")
§ 12 (*atramentum* "ink")

Ps-Bede § 11 (*penna* "quill pen")

Eusebius § 30 (*atramentorium* "ink horn")
§ 32 (*membranum* "parchment")
§ 33 (*scetha* "book satchel")
§ 35 (*penna* "pen")

Exeter Book Riddles (OE) §§ 15†, 16† (inkwell)
§§ 17†, 29†, 49 (pen and fingers)
§§ 24, 46†, 65 (Gospel book)
§ 19† (feather pen)
§§ 2†, 49†, 91† (quill pen)
§ 45 (book-moth)
§ 47† (book-chest)
§ 58† (reed pen)
§§ 71†, 72† (pen)
§§ 84, 89 (ink horn)
§ 88 (book and/or beech-tree)
§ 91† (book or riddle or riddle-book)

Appendix B

Aenigmata About the Letters of the Alphabet

(based on the “Index of Solutions,” *OEALRT*, 877–93)

Aldhelm

§ 30

Tatwine

§ 4

Eusebius

§§ 7, 9, 14, 19, and 39

Bede

§§ 2 (*f*), 7 (*a*), 8 (*i*), 9 (*o*), 10 (*u/w*)

Alcuin

Disputatio regalis et nobilissimi Pippini cum Albino scholastico § 1

Bern Riddles

§ 25

Versus cuiusdam Scotti de alphabeto

Exeter Book Riddles (OE)

§ 11 †

§ 55

The Rune Poem (OE)

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 London, British Library, MS Royal 2. A. xx
 London, British Library, MS Royal 12. C. xxiii
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