5 Animal Natures

Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have considered to some extent the place of animals in *Beowulf* and the Guthlac narratives, and their functions with respect to the humans in the texts. The so-called ‘sea-beasts’ in the mere seem to enhance Grendel’s mother’s monstrosity, while Beowulf’s ability to kill while swimming serves to demonstrate his power and masculinity. In this chapter on ‘animal natures’ I dig deeper into Anglo-Saxon representations of animals, focusing on several of the *Exeter Book* riddles in the context of the formulaic ‘beasts of battle’ scenes in *Elene, Exodus*, and *Genesis A*.

Animal studies does not always overlap with broader environmental concerns. Environmentalists are concerned with issues of extinction and how animal movements and extinctions reflect climate change and other global issues, while scholars and activists concerned with animals focus on philosophical issues of rights and agency, as well as how the characteristics of animals define or limit the human (or not). Both approaches are valid, indeed necessary. This chapter focuses on how depictions of animals and humans interact in medieval texts, and attempts to locate those interactions within broader environmental questions.

The meaning of the word ‘animal’ is difficult to pin down in either modern or medieval contexts. As Susan Crane notes, the word ‘resists definition. *Animal*, synonymous with *beast* in Middle English, sometimes encompasses and other times contrasts with what is meant by *human*’ (1). Karl Steel, however, argues that in the medieval period, what it means to be human is defined in relation and in opposition to the animal. In contemporary theoretical formulations, as Sarah Kay points out, ‘it is common to distinguish two directions in animal studies: one, animal activism and the promotion of animal rights, the other, posthumanism in the sense of reconsidering human specificity in relation to (other) animals.’ She notes, however, that ‘this distinction between advocacy and ontology is far from robust’ (Kay 14). This chapter focuses neither on animal rights nor on defining humanity in contrast to or in continuity with animals. Instead, I seek to clarify the ways in which Anglo-Saxon literary texts, including several of the *Exeter Book* riddles as well as *Beowulf* and a few other epic poems discussed in less detail present conflicting ideas about animals and human relationships with them. In Chapter 2, I examined the unthinking slaughter of sea creatures and the construction of the monstrous and dangerous by
way of justification for their death. Here, I review formulaic language about ‘beasts of battle’ in contrast to the non-instrumentalizing descriptions of birds in the *Exeter Book* riddles.

There are many environmentally focused ways of thinking about animals and attempting to theorize why they should matter. They might be assumed to matter because of their impact on humans, or simply because they exist and are therefore taken to be of importance in their own right, but the important thing is that they matter. Ecocriticism and animal philosophies are often concerned primarily with present conditions, but as Bruce Holsinger has written: ‘medieval culture has much to teach the wider fields of animal studies and animal ethics about some of the fundamental questions that have defined this domain of inquiry’ (617). As chapters on wilderness, ruins, the sea, and objects also demonstrate, the past is crucial to our understanding of the present.

In the *Exeter Book* riddles, the depictions of animals are complex and unstable. Considering the riddles in comparison or contrast to other texts from the period further complicates the issues, in that animal descriptions in the riddles are very different from those in epic poems, saints’ lives, and biblical adaptations. Numerous animals are described in the riddles in some detail; many are narrated in the voice of the animal itself, sometimes even in protest against the cruelty of the human ‘enemy.’

Over the course of several days in 1997 Derrida gave a series of lectures in which he contemplated animals – the gaze of his cat, and the tendency of philosophers to treat all animals in the singular in drawing a line between ‘the human’ and ‘the animal’ as one of the bases of defining the human.

Beyond the edge of the so-called human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than ‘the Animal’ or ‘Animal Life,’ there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely... a multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead.... These relations are at once close and abyssal, and they can never be totally objectified. They do not leave room for any simple exteriority of one term with respect to another. It follows from that that one will never have the right to take animals to be the species of a kind that would be named the Animal, or animal in general (2002: 399).

He further declares that anyone who uses the term ‘the Animal’ as if it refers to a not-human totality ‘utters an asinanity’ and ‘confirm[s]... his complicit, continued and organized involvement in a veritable war of the species’ (2002: 400). But while Derrida insists on multiplicity when it comes
to characterizing animals, he still draws a clear line between animals and humans, one that many animal studies scholars would reject.

Many Anglo-Saxon texts articulate or imply such a totalizing vision of ‘the animal’ in contrast to and perhaps in construction of the human. One example is Beowulf’s treatment of the ‘sea beasts’ he slaughters during his swimming contest with his boyhood friend Breca, discussed in Chapter 2. The *Exeter Book* riddles, however, depict animals in a much more individualistic manner, although in complicated and sometimes contradictory relationships to humans. This chapter begins by considering how Anglo-Saxon texts normalize the eating of animals, and then discusses how the riddles depict killing animals as complex, with humans called ‘the enemy.’ It then moves to a discussion of animals represented in their native habitats and described in distinct detail, with the wild bird riddles in contrast to the formulaic language of the ‘beasts of battle trope.’ Taken collectively, these riddles show the instability of the categories of human and animal. The following chapter continues a discussion of the riddles concerned with objects and examines the shifting and unstable boundaries between objects, animals, and humans, particularly those at the margins of cultural power matrices.

**Eating Animals As Cultural Norm**

While the animal rights philosopher Peter Singer argued in *Animal Liberation* that humans should not eat animals, much philosophical and literary analysis avoids the issue of human consumption of animals, focusing instead on the interrelationships between humans and animals and how representations of each construct our understandings of the other. That the Anglo-Saxons ate meat of various kinds is clear from the documentary and archaeological record. The aristocracy ate meat in higher quantities and greater variety than the peasantry; the sixth-century Benedictine Rule forbade monks from eating ‘carnium vero quadrupedum omnimodo’ (‘flesh from four-footed animals’ (ch. 39, § 71), though this still leaves birds and fish as unquestionably available for human consumption. Ælfric’s *Colloquy* lists hunters and fishermen among the professions. The Master in the *Colloquy* asks one of the pupils what he has eaten today, and he replies that he still eats flesh, because he is a child, in addition to ‘Wyrra & æigra, fisc & cyse, buteran & beana & ealle clæne þingc ic ete mid micelre þancunge’ (‘Vegetables and eggs, fish and cheese, butter and beans and all clean things I ate, with great thankfulness,’ ll. 288–89). According to Felix’s
Vita, one signal of Guthlac’s saintliness is his ascetic attitude toward food: he eats once a day, after sunset, and then only ‘ordeacei panis particula et lutulene aquae pocolamento’ (‘a scrap of barley bread and a small cup of muddy water,’ Colgrave 94-95). Avoiding animal flesh as food is not, for Guthlac, undertaken in deference to any sense of the right of an animal not to be used in this way, but as an expression of his own self-denial and spirituality.

Sarah Salih notes that in contemporary culture, the eating of animals appears to be normalized to the extent that a vast majority of people never think about it (61). In Old English poetry, eating meat is a norm to the extent that it is almost never mentioned, unless to point out that someone like Saint Guthlac ate only bread – but it is the consumption of bread that is explicitly referenced, rather than abstention from animal foods. While descriptions of feasting are common enough in Old English poetry to warrant designation as a ‘type-scene,’ in the actual feast scenes, there is little discussion of eating and much more of drinking. The feast scenes in Beowulf describe Wealhtheow handing a goblet of wine to the various warriors in turn, but do not comment on what the warriors are eating. Judith likewise gives attention to Holofernes’ excessive drinking, but makes almost no mention of food, even though the biblical source for the poem lays emphasis on her bag of cheeses. Riddles 11, 27, and 28 refer to the dangers of excess when consuming mead, wine, or ale, while Riddle 63 describes a cup that could be used for drinking wine. Though there are references to plants and animals commonly eaten – hens, onions, and garlic – only one of the riddles describes a person eating an animal for food.

Riddle 77 is written from the perspective of an oyster whose peaceful life in the sea is interrupted by the incursion of a man: ‘Nu wile monna sum / min flæsc fretan, felles ne recceð, / sifpan he me of sidan seaxes orde / hyd arypeð’ (‘Now some man wants to devour my flesh, gives no care for my pelt, after he rips the hide from my side with a knife’s point,’ ll. 4b-6a). Interestingly, the word used here is ‘fretan’ (though ‘iteð’ is also used later in the riddle). ‘Etan’ and ‘fretan’ overlap in their meanings, but ‘etan’ is used in broader senses, and ‘fretan’ has more meanings referring to animals eating things, and is also used to refer to consumption by fire. In German, these senses diverge completely, with ‘essen’ referring to human consumption of food, and ‘fressen’ used only for animals; the surviving record of Old English usage suggests traces of, or anticipation of, this distinction. The description in Riddle 77 of a person eating an animal using the word ‘fretan,’ alongside the narration of the human heedlessly ripping
the ‘fell’ and ‘hyd’ (‘pelt,’ ‘hide’) from the oyster before devouring it, could have signaled to an Anglo-Saxon audience that the person was eating like an animal. The details recall Grendel ripping his victim limb from limb as he devours him, though Grendel’s consumption avoids either ‘etan’ or fretan, and is narrated instead using words that refer to the physicality of his actions, the embodied acts of consumption: ‘bat’ (‘bit,’ l. 742) and ‘swealh’ (‘swallowed,’ l. 743). The foregrounding of violence to the animal as a prelude to human consumption in Riddle 77, along with the monastic prohibition on eating mammals and the hermit Guthlac’s renunciation of animal-based foods, suggests that the Anglo-Saxons had some sense that avoiding meat consumption was spiritually superior, though from the point of view of human asceticism rather than out of any concern for the animal.

Susan Crane argues that ‘throughout their long history, the humanist traditions have tended to render nonhuman animals invisible to contemplation, unworthy of serious attention’ (4). But the ways in which the Anglo-Saxons attended to animal natures, including the representation of animals in the Exeter Book riddles, whether the killing of a sheep for its skin or the appreciation of wild bird species for their distinctiveness, suggests that they may also have had a sense of animals as possessing a life force analogous to that of humans and thus warranting some esteem.

In narrating the death of the animals in their own imagined voices, and in describing the human killers as ‘the enemy,’ the riddles resist the cultural normalization of animal slaughter. Slaughter of a domesticated animal might not be an everyday occurrence, particularly among peasant farmers, though it would certainly have been common throughout the year. Hens and cows are more valuable for the milk and eggs they provide than for their meat, and sheep would be kept alive as long as possible for their wool, but the male offspring, like male lambs, would have been eaten. But the slaughter of domestic animals does not seem to be taken for granted in the riddles to quite the same extent as the consumption of meat from those same animals.

Animals, Humans, and Reason

Some of the Exeter Book riddles follow a prominent line of medieval thought in insisting that humans are divided from animals by the faculty of reason, and in establishing a priority of the reasoning human over the non-reasoning animal. The ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood describes a line of
thinking beginning in classical texts and persisting with Descartes and Enlightenment thinkers forward through to deep ecologists – but unfortunately leaping over the Middle Ages with barely a reference – that insists on a dichotomy between reason and nature. Reason is associated with the masculine, with women being seen as less capable of reasoned thought and as tied more closely to nature through processes such as gestation and childbearing. Plumwood writes ‘The concept of reason provides the unifying and defining contrast for the concept of nature.... The continual and cumulative overcoming of the domain of nature by reason engenders the western concept of progress and development’ (1993: 3). Karl Steel has demonstrated that thinkers and creative writers in the later Middle Ages adopted this line of thinking from classical texts, and points out that it distinguishes not only between humans and animals but also between some humans and others. ‘Medieval sources tend to separate these two groups [humans and animals] through an appeal to reason, a term that encompasses those capacities purportedly possessed only by humans, or at least those humans the text favors, whether philosophers, Christians, men, or noblemen’ (2008: 11).

The same dichotomizing paradigm is articulated in Old English texts. According to the Old English Boethius, whose translation from Latin has been attributed to King Alfred, ‘...se mon ana hæfð gesceadwisnesse’ (‘the man alone has reason,’ 1:317). In his ‘Interrogationes Sigewulfi,’ Ælfric comments in greater detail on what he perceives as the distinction between animals and humans:

Hwi wolde god þæt se man Adam eallum nytenum naman gesceope? Þæt se man þurh þæt undergate hu mycele betera he wæs þurh his gesceadwisnyssa þonne ða nytenu, & þæt he þæs þe swiþor his Scyppend lufode, þe hine swylcne geworhte.

Why did God wish that that man Adam would shape names for all of the animals? So that, through that, the man should perceive how much better he was through his capacity for reason than the animals, and that he therefore would love the more his Creator, who created him in this manner. (13)

The Exeter Book, Riddle 47, typically solved as ‘Bookworm’ or ‘Bookmoth,’ works within this framework of insistence on the faculty of reason as that which establishes the boundary between animal and human and locates humans in a superior position:
A moth fed on a word. It seemed to me a wondrous thing when I heard of the wonder, that the worm chewed on some song of man, majestic tale and strong foundation, a thief in shadow. The thievish spirit was not a bit the wiser, though he swallowed those words. (ll. 1-6)

The bookworm gains nothing from having swallowed words, because it does not understand human language. The worm does not have the human capacity of reason, thus differentiating it, an animal, from humans. Though it literally eats the words, it is unable to gain any knowledge or understanding from them.

While Riddle 47 (‘Bookworm’) asserts a clear boundary between the unthinking animal that feeds uncomprehendingly on the words of the book and the reasoning, spiritual person who would otherwise read it, Riddle 26 (‘Book’) blurs that boundary. Riddle 26 gives voice to the animal killed for its skin, against its will, to make a book, and complicates the easy assertion of a reason-based boundary between human and animals. The sheep, or perhaps cow, speaks in a voice that seems constant even as it narrates its own transitions through several states of being: from live animal into disembodied skin and then rectangles of parchment, written upon with the feather of a bird inscribing tracks of human language, and finally completed book decorated with gold and jewels: a sacred text that will bring good to those who use and love it. However, the utility of the book is not in the gold-adorned materiality of the leather volume that once served as skin for an animal, but in the inky tracks that have been left on the leaves, incomprehensible to the narrator because they are inscribed in the language of the human, whose voice ultimately silences that of the animal.

The riddle opens with nature in the form of an animal given voice, given agency, given the ability to complain about its own death:
An enemy deprived me of life, robbed me of my strength, afterward wet me, dipped me in water and took me out again, set me in the sun where I quickly lost the hairs that I had. (ll. 1-5)

By the end of the riddle, the original animal narrator has become the book, and the substance of the book is not the physical materiality but the abstraction of the text it transmits. Thus, while it appears to give voice to nature, the riddle’s anthropomorphizing narrative moves the animal from independent agent to subject of human dominance to material object, the physical materiality of which is irrelevant. What ecocritics have figured as a post-industrial narrative of the human domination of nature is inscribed in the surface of the skin that enables the dissemination of scripture within this riddle a thousand years old. Simultaneously, the riddle itself is inscribed in the skin that enables its transmission.

Riddle 26 simultaneously challenges the boundaries between animals, plants, and things. Animals and plants are used together by the human to create the book, which then becomes a thing, a dead thing, but read by a living human even after the death of the human creators of the book. Sarah Kay comments ‘The act of writing comprises the touch of human skin on animal skin, goose feather pen in hand, oak gall ink in a horn inkwell close by; and reading involves renewing this contact of skin on skin, as the feather’s traces are deciphered’ (13). A ‘gall’ is a growth on a tree formed by insects living on it, so in addition to skin, feather, and horn, the book contains traces of insect and oak. As Holsinger points out, a manuscript is both ‘a handwritten book produced by and for humans’ and ‘a stack of dead animal parts produced from and at the expense of animals’ (619). The fact that the ‘Book’ riddle is voiced by an animal throughout forces attention to this.

Moreover, the animal refers to the human who kills it as ‘enemy,’ and uses the terms ‘besnyþede’ and ‘binom,’ both words capable of referring to robbery, an act of a human being against another human (or human institution): it is unusual outside of deep ecological contexts to think of it as possible to steal from nature. In conjunction with Riddle 77 (‘Oyster’), which depicts the human as aggressive and even animal-like in its violent slaughter of the animal for food, Riddle 26 positions the animal as entitled to agency and consideration.

A few lines into the riddle, the ‘excarnification of the animal’ (Treharne 2013: 471) causes the living creature to give way to a stack of blank leaves of parchment:
Heard mec síþan
snað seaxses ecg, sindrum begrunden;
bingras feoldan, ond mecc fugles wyn
geond speddropum spyrede geneahhe,
ofer brunne brerd, beamtelge swealg,
10 streams dæle, stop eft on mec,
sipade sweartlast.

Afterward the hard edge of the knife cut me, sharpened with cinders; fingers folded me, and a bird’s wing made abundant tracks of ink all over me, over the dark surface, swallowed the wood-dye, part of the stream, stepped often on me, wandered leaving black tracks. (ll. 5b-11a)

After the parchment has been prepared for writing, the feather – ‘fugles wyn’ (‘birds’ joy,’ l. 7) dances over its surface and ‘beamtelge swealg / streams dæle’ (‘drank in wood-dye, the stream’s portion,’ ll. 9b-10a). While the word ‘swealg’ can function metaphorically to mean that the feather absorbs the ink, the literal meaning is suggestive given that the parchment has so recently, within the narrative of the poem, been a living animal, and the feather makes sense as the kenning ‘bird’s joy’ only if the bird is still alive. The word ‘swealgan’ is used to refer to literal eating in Riddle 47, in which the bookworm becomes none the wiser ‘þe he þam wordum swealg’ (‘though he swallowed the words,’ l. 6). The word ‘sniðan’ has an interesting range of meanings given this context: in addition to the general meaning of ‘cut,’ it can also denote ‘amputate’ and ‘slay,’ significations that recall the fact that the skin that is being written, and written on, came from an animal that was, only a few lines ago, alive.

The antlers of both Riddles 88 and 93 are used as inkwells. In Riddle 88, the antler is set upright on a board (likely placed in a hole in a writing surface). In Riddle 93, the narrator says ‘Nu ic blace swelge / wuda ond vætre’ (‘now I swallow black wood and water,’ ll. 23b-24a). Ink, as noted above, is made using tannic acid derived from oak gall, with ferrous oxide or soot added for pigment, hence ‘black wood and water.’ The use of the antlers as inkwells adds another body-part dimension to the creation of the Book of Riddle 26 (see Chapter 5): in addition to quills and skin, fingers, oak, and insect, the preparation of the manuscript requires a hollowed-out antler to hold the ink.

Many different people are responsible for the animal’s transformation into a blank page, but the human involvement is reduced to an assemblage of disconnected body parts and tools: ‘fingers folded me,’ ‘the knife’s edge cut me,’ ‘a bird’s wing [i.e. a quill] stepped on me’: the hand holding knife
and quill, and indeed the person to whom the fingers belong, are elided. The evocation of the different creatures involved in the production of the book – insect, tree, bird, sheep, deer, human – breaches boundaries among different living beings; the phenomenon of an animal given voice, and calling a human an ‘enemy’ likewise challenges the distinction between human and animal.

In Kay’s reading of Riddle 26, ‘This impossible transition of the speaking “I” from sheep to page captures the uncanny shortcircuit between animal, text, and book’ (19). The Riddle further complicates the boundary between human and animal. As noted above, the slain animal says in line 1 that it loses ‘feore.’ When the sons of men are advised to read the words in the book, the riddle lists the advantages of doing so:

Gif min bearn wera 
  brucan willað,
hy beoð þy gesundran 
  ond þy sigfaestran,
heortum þy hwætran 
  ond þy hygeblīþan,
ferþe þy froðran, 
  habbaþ freonda þy ma,
swæsra ond gesibbra, 
  soðra ond godra,
tilra ond getreowra....

If the sons of men will make good use of me, they will be healthier and more victorious, bolder in heart and more joyful in mood, wiser in spirit; they will have more friends, loved ones and kinsmen, true and good, brave and faithful. (ll. 18-23a)

As noted above, when the animal speaks in line 1, it says that an enemy has cut off its ‘feore,’ its life or spirit. This is echoed in line 21 when the narrator – still, somehow the animal/skin/book – says that those who heed the message written on it will be the wiser in their ‘ferþe,’ their ‘soul, spirit, life’ (Bosworth-Toller, s.v.). The creature-turned-book speaks in the language of the human about the benefits of heeding the human language inscribed on it; it recommends for the souls of – human – readers the text on behalf of which its own spirit has been cut short. Holsinger finds irony in the ‘predictable disjunction between the comparative claims of dead animals and those of surviving books’ (620). The book originates from the animal, but the text of the book originates elsewhere; as Elaine Treharne points out, ‘there is more to ‘text’ than just words’ (2013: 467). Riddle 47 (‘Bookworm’) makes that point, but definitively prioritizes the words over the materiality of the page. Riddle 26, conversely, problematizes that priority. In addition to words, the book requires flesh and feather, including the (living) flesh of humans that provide sustained and attentive labor of various kinds.
Riddle 26 is typically solved not simply as a book, but a book of liturgy or scripture. Within the context of Christianity, faith based on scripture yields the potential for eternal life, which transcends all earthly existence and negates any possibility of an animal without a soul being equated to a human being. This adds an additional layer to the riddle’s interpretation, and this level of signification might be seen as the final word, moving beyond any other interpretation. Holsinger notes that ‘the Bible that is the riddle’s culminating solution, the “glorious” book that promises heaven, originates not from the words of the prophets, or from the inspiration of God, but from the flayed hide of the animal who gave its life and endured only as the ink-stained page of the book’ (622). He further points out that ‘mec’ (‘me’) is the first word in the Riddle, and is repeated several times throughout, alongside ‘me’ (‘me’) and ‘ic’ (‘I’). Riddle 26 continues to foreground the ‘I’ of the speaking animal, even as it shifts materially into something else. At the same time, auditors recognize that the animal whose skin is inscribed with the text of the book is incapable of understanding the scriptural message written on its own back. The sheep’s reference to its killer as ‘enemy’ anthropomorphizes the animal and threatens its species distinction from the human, even as it reinforces the boundary between killer and killed. Yet the first line and a half of the riddle narrate the killing in the past tense: what actually speaks is not the live sheep, but the dead animal, apparently already skinned, as the next line describes soaking the skin as the first step in the preparation of parchment. Reading the riddle in terms of the object, as hairy pelt moving to prepared parchment to stitched and bound codex, makes it seem somewhat less unstable than conceptualizing movement from live animal to abstract textual entity. Yet as Bill Brown comments, ‘however materially stable objects may seem, they are, let us say, different things in different scenes’ (9). The animal’s skin means something different on the back of the animal than it does as the leaves of the book, or wrapped around wooden panels used to bind the book and then decorated with twisted gold and jewels.

Val Plumwood challenges the classical dichotomizing of various categories, among them nature and human, arguing that instead of philosophical dualistic thinking, we need to understand nature and human as continuous, with shared features as well as differences. ‘Overcoming the dualistic dynamic requires recognition of both continuity and difference; this means acknowledging the other as neither alien to and discontinuous from self nor assimilated to or an extension of self’ (1993: 6). The ‘bookworm’ of Riddle 47 allows for dichotomous thinking, of sharp contrasts between human, animal, and object. The changing ‘I’ of Riddle 26, however, demands to
be read in terms of continuities, contradictions, potentially incoherent or incomplete transitions. Within a dualistic framework, it is difficult to think about the shifting ontology of the riddle and to encompass the distance between its start- and endpoints. Riddle 26 enacts continuity between animal and book, between living being and inanimate thing, but it also narrates discontinuity between human and animal even as it gives human voice to the animal. The sheep is simultaneously voiced and silenced.

Riddle 14, ‘Horn,’ describes an animal reduced to one part of its body, in a treatment similar to the ‘Book’ riddle’s descriptions of skin and feathers. Riddle 14 begins ‘Ic wæs wæpenwiga. Nu mec wlonc ðeceð / geong hago- stealmon golde ond sylfore, / woum wirbogum’ (I was a weaponed warrior. Now a proud one covers me with gold and silver, twisted wire,’ ll. 1-3a). Some editors and scholars would emend the word ‘wæpenwiga’ to ‘wæpen wiga,’ giving the reading ‘I was the weapon of a warrior’ (Muir 584). In this reading, the riddle’s ‘Ic’ is the horn rather than the animal from which it is taken. Williamson takes this horn, and that of Riddle 80, to be ‘great aurochs’ horns similar to the drinking horns discovered at Sutton Hoo’ (170), though previous scholars had proposed falcon, sword, or spear (Muir 688, Tupper 217).

Riddle 26 (‘Book’) is analogous in beginning with the animal which, during the course of the riddle’s narrative, becomes parchment and then book, and gives context for reading Riddle 14 as beginning as an animal from whose head a horn has been removed, and then moving to the horn, and then to the horn’s use as a war-horn or drinking vessel, carried on a horse or a ship. When not in use, the horn might hang as treasure on a wall; or ‘hwilum ic bordum sceal, / heard, heafodleas, behlyþed licgan’ (‘sometimes I must lie on a hard board, headless, deprived,’ ll. 9b-10). The horn is ‘headless’ because it has been removed from the head of an animal, though the description is unexpected; an audience might expect a body to be ‘headless,’ not something that came off the head itself. The reversal serves the trickery of the riddle while simultaneously asserting a continuity between horn and body. Riddle 80, also solved as ‘horn,’ has a harsh voice (‘heard is min tunge,’ l. 8b); it rides on a horse, and it holds within it the product of the grove, i.e. mead made from honey. As Holsinger notes of Riddle 26 (‘Book’), repetition of ‘ic’ and ‘mec’ throughout both Horn riddles ‘holds up an ethical mirror to the centuries of slaughter’ (622) that leave the richly decorated horns that still survive in museums.

Much as the sheep is reduced, yet not reduced, to its skin, the two Horn riddles recall the animal from which they were taken while simultaneously describing the horns as objects, independent items rather than parts of animals now dead. Aurochs remains can be found in Great Britain in Neolithic sites, but by the Anglo-Saxon period these animals had long been
extinct. Rare examples of aurochs horns from the Anglo-Saxon period do exist, as for example from the Sutton Hoo excavation, but these must have been imported from the Continent, where aurochs lived on for another several centuries, dying out last in eastern Europe (Banham and Faith 85). The horns, then, are doubly displaced, recalling their existence as living animals yet identifiable within the context of Anglo-Saxon England only as objects brought from afar. The fact that aurochs are wild animals also differentiates them from the domesticated sheep of the Book riddle.

Animal Aesthetics and Agency

Several of the Exeter Book riddles describe birds, and one a fish, in terms very different from those found in Beowulf and other heroic poems, which present animals and humans in a starkly hierarchical framework, with formulaic language for animals alongside direct statements of human priority over animals. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, Beowulf slaughters animals he refers to variously as ‘hronfixas’ (‘whales,’ l. 540), ‘merefixa’ (‘sea-fish,’ l. 549), ‘fah feondscada’ (‘hostile enemy,’ l. 554), ‘aglácan’ (‘monster, fighter,’ l. 556), ‘mihtig meredecor’ (‘mighty sea-animal,’ l. 558), and ‘niceras’ (‘sea-monsters,’ l. 575). A few lines later, Beowulf uses the term ‘ágláca’ (l. 592) to refer to Grendel. Nearly three dozen words for different species of fish are attested in the surviving Old English corpus. In these lines, Beowulf is not aiming for a description of a specific fish; he describes sea-monsters in language used interchangeably for the land-dwelling, humanoid monster Grendel. The monstrous sea-creatures function to show off Beowulf’s prowess simultaneously in his past contest with Breca and in his battle of word and wits with Unferth. Although the fish belong in and to the sea, and Beowulf can be said to have invaded their home with Breca and his naked sword, he justifies their killing by claiming: ‘syðþan na / ymb brontne ford brimliðende / lade ne letton’ (‘after this, about the steep ford, [they] would not hinder seafarers’ journeys,’ ll. 567b-69). This is in marked contrast to the description of fish and river, or of wild birds carefully observed in their own habitats, in the Exeter Book riddles.

From an ecocritical point of view, the ‘beasts of battle’ found in nine Old English poems bear a resemblance to the ‘sea-beasts’ that Beowulf encounters during the swimming contest, in that the animals are described in formulaic language and are subordinated to human concerns. Like the ‘sea-beasts’ slain by Beowulf, the ‘beasts of battle’ are undifferentiated and functionally equivalent to one another. Moreover, they appear within the
narratives not out of intrinsic interest in their presence but in structural and/or metaphorical relationships to human actors within the poems. As the human warriors gather and prepare to fight, the beasts of battle circle, awaiting human carrion on which to feast. In Beowulf, a messenger tells of Beowulf’s death, and predicts that neighboring tribes will now attack, and the beasts of battle will come to feast on the dead:

se wonna hrefn
fus ofer fægum fela reordian,
earne secgan hu him æt æte speow,
þenden he wið wulf wæl reafode

The dark raven, greedy for those fated [to death] will make abundant noise, tell the eagle how he fared at eating, while, with the wolf, he plunders dead bodies. (ll. 3024b-27)

Eight other poems contain very similar ‘beasts of battle’ passages. Genesis A, one of two verse adaptations of portions of the biblical Genesis, adds a ‘beasts of battle’ passage to the description of the battle between the four kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, with no analogue in the biblical text: ‘Sang se wanna fugel / under deoreðsceaf tum, deawigfeðera, / hræs on wenan’ (‘The dark bird, dewy-feathered, sang under the javelin shafts, expecting carrion,’ Genesis A, ll. 1983b-85a). A similar passage is added to the Old English verse adaptation of Exodus, at the point at which Pharaoh’s army is preparing to attack the fleeing Israelites:

Hreopon herefugolas, hilde grædige,
dea wigfeðere ofer driet heum,
wonn wælceanega Wulfas sungon
atol æfenleod ætes on wenan

Birds of prey screeched, greedy for combat, dewy-feathered over the bodies of the slain, dark carrion-pickers. Wolves howled an awful even-song in expectation of food. (ll. 162-65)

The phrase ‘beasts of battle’ does not appear in Old English poetry. In a study of the form and function of ‘beasts of battle’ passages in Old English poems, Thomas Honegger notes that the phrase was first used in 1955 by Francis Magoun, who called it ‘an ornamental rather than an essential theme’ (Honegger 83). The idea that animals are mere decoration, with no essential meaning for humans or function in the poetry, is contradicted by their obvious importance. In the formulaic collocation, these animals lack
differentiation; they are treated as a group of non-human creatures whose presence in the poem has to do not with their independent existence as eagle or hawk or wolf but with their utility in metaphorical terms to define the human, in this case the human male as warrior preparing for battle and, presumably, slaughter of other humans.

The deployment of the ‘beasts of battle’ in these poems is complicated by the multiplicities of meaning attributed to them. In that they are predators who seek live prey to kill it and eat it, they stand in metaphorically for the humans readying themselves to kill. The ‘beasts of battle’ are explicitly described as circling in anticipation of food, however, and in this sense they are not hunters, but scavengers in search of already killed meat. Eagles, hawks, and wolves do in fact scavenge for carrion, in addition to preying on dead animals, but such activity does not seem to befit the savagery that is their metaphorical force here. As scavengers who feed on the dead humans, the beasts of battle also pose a problem: the humans killing each other will ‘scavenge’ among the corpses of the dead for weapons, armor, jewelry, and other valuables, which then becomes part of the economic system of the society in question, as in Felix’s *Vita Guthlacī*, though Guthlac is instructed to return a portion of the plunder in an acknowledgement that the practice is problematic (see Chapter 4). But where humans rely on other humans for food, as in the case of the Mermedonians in *Andreas* or, possibly, of Grendel, if he can be considered human, they become cannibals, monsters. The slipperiness in the ‘beasts of battle’ metaphors between slaughter and scavenging contributes to a slippage in the line between human and animal.

Many of the poems that include ‘beasts of battle’ passages present them in implicit comparison to human warriors. *Elene* makes this comparison more direct, by intertwining references to the battle-song of the wolf and the eagle, the mustering of human warriors, and the circling raven eager for carrion, highlighting the literal and metaphorical equivalences between humans and wild animals. The passage is worth quoting at some length:

For folca gedryht.
wulf on wealde,
Urigfeðera earn
laðum on laste.
ofer burg enta
hergum to hilde,
ymbssittendra
abannan to beadwe
For fyrda mæst....

Fyrdleoð agol
wælrune ne mað.
sang ahof,
Lunre scynde
beadþpreata mæst,
swylyce Huna cyning
awer meahte
burgwigendra.
The army of the people moved forward. The wolf in the wood chanted a war-song, did not hide the coming slaughter. The dewy-feathered eagle lifted up a song on the path of the hated ones. The largest army of enemy warriors that the king of the surrounding Huns could possibly assemble quickly drove forward in battle against the ancient city. The largest army set forth.... The Romans, victory-renowned men, quickly readied their weapons to battle, although they had fewer troops to go to war than the king of the Huns; they rode around the renowned one, then the shield rang and shield clanged; the king pressed forth with his army to battle. High above the raven cried, dark and slaughter-greedy. The army was in motion. (ll. 27-35a, 46b-53)

The description of the mustering of troops is framed by references to the raven, the eagle and the wolf circling in anticipation of carrion, with both armies related metaphorically to animals. Like other ‘beasts of battle’ passages, this one describes the animals as greedy for carrion, suggesting that they are present to feast on the bodies of fallen human warriors after the battle. But the juxtaposition in this passage between carrion-greedy beasts and war-ready humans suggests also a symbolic connection between the animals and the humans. The ferocity of eagle, hawk and wolf as predators in search of live food, rather than as scavengers feeding on already slain carcasses, is set against the eagerness of human warriors for battle. As careful observers of wild animals, as can be seen from the Exeter Book riddles, Anglo-Saxon audiences would have been aware that predatory animals also scavenge for carrion, though modern city-dwellers might think of them in sharp distinction to birds such as vultures that eat only carrion and do not hunt live animals.

The metaphorical play suggested by the beasts of battle, then, is complex. The animals themselves are presented as interchangeable, the two birds and the mammal all providing figurative fodder for author or scribe in enriching the characteristics of the human warriors, suggesting through association with these animals the humans’ wildness and ferocity. Menely
and Ronda argue: ‘Rather than ritualize violence, modern societies place it at a distance’ (27). They suggest in passing that pre-modern societies create rituals of violence either through animal sacrifice or through the elaborate rules that structure the hunt such as emerge in the later Middle Ages. There are, however, no surviving Anglo-Saxon texts that depict either animal sacrifice or the ritualized hunting of later medieval texts. War is not placed at a distance. The battles of *Genesis* and *Exodus*, while distanced in place and time from Anglo-Saxon England, are linked through language and imagery to the battles described in poems about local English conflicts such as *The Battle of Maldon* (Estes 2007). Battle-gore is often described quite explicitly. The ‘beasts of battle’ scenes provide some structure for the violence of battle, described in ways at once realistic and ritualistic.

In his objection to the treatment of animals as undifferentiated, Derrida might point to the use of the ‘beasts of battle’ as an instance of the assumption that animals are singular in their distinction from humans. He insists that readers acknowledge that there is no single totality that can be designated ‘the animal,’ but rather ‘a heterogeneous multiplicity ... of organizations of relations [that] do not leave room for any simple exteriority of one term with respect to another’ (2002: 399). In contrast to the hierarchical depiction of animal-human relationships in epic and religious poems, the *Exeter Book* riddles depict birds in ways that suggest rhizomatic connections among them, more lateral than hierarchical.

Several of the riddles describe wild birds using almost completely distinctive language and descriptive details reflecting the varied qualities of the birds and the close observation humans have made of them. Riddle 7, ‘Swan,’ distinguishes between the silence of the bird when walking on earth or floating on water, and the sound the bird’s wings make when flapping:

Hrægl min swigað,  þonne ic hrusan trede,  oþþe þa wic buge,  oþþe wado drefe,  ... Frætwe mine  ond swimsiað,  torhte singað,  þonne ic getenge ne beom  flode ond foldan,  ferende gæst.

My clothes are silent when I walk on the earth, or sink into my home, or swim in the water ... My adornment rustles loudly and sounds, sings clearly, when I am not at rest, on water and earth, flying spirit. (ll. 1-2, 6b-9)
This riddle comments on the sounds made by the swan's wings in flight. In contrast, Riddle 8, ‘Jay,’ Riddle 24, ‘Magpie,’ and Riddle 57, perhaps a ‘flock of sparrows,’ also comment on the sounds made by the birds, but in each case to the birds’ song rather than the sound of their flapping wings; each of the riddles used distinct language to comment on this. The bird of Riddle 8 begins ‘Ic þurh muþ sprece mongum reordum, / wrencum singe, wrixle geneahhe / heafodwoþe, hlude cirme’ (‘I speak through my mouth with many voices, sing with deceit, switch abundantly my voice, loud cry,’ ll. 1-3). Riddle 24 also speaks in the voice of the creature whose identity is to be guessed, but rather than simply stating that it constantly changes its tune, it lists several of the other animals that it is known to imitate:

hwilum beorce swa hund,
hwilum græde swa gos,
hwilum ic onhyrge
guðfugles hleopor,
muþe gemæne,

Sometimes I bark like a dog, sometimes bleat like a goat, sometimes cry out like a goose, sometimes yell like a hawk, sometimes I imitate the dusky eagle, battle-bird’s cry, sometimes the vulture’s call, with a wicked mouth, sometimes the song of the sea-gull. (ll. 2-6)

The language here is again completely different from the language of Riddle 8. Riddle 57, solved as a flock of birds of some kind, contains a description of the birds’ sound completely different from that of the previous riddles, describing their song as something of a constant chatter: ‘Sanges rope / heapum ferað, hlude cirmað’ (‘Liberal with song, they travel in flocks, shrieking loudly,’ ll. 3b-4).

Two further Riddles, 9 and 10, have solutions having to do with birds, but make no reference to the sound or song or silence of their subjects. Like the other bird riddles, these are narrated in the voices of the birds themselves, and describe specific features particular to each individual bird. The cuckoo lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, which then incubate them and feed the resulting chicks, as described in Riddle 9: ‘Mec seo friþe mæg fedde siþþan, / oþþæt ic aweox, widdor meahte / siþas asettan’ (‘The stately woman fed me afterwards, until I grew, and could set off on wider journeys,’ ll. 9-11a). Finally, Riddle 10, commonly solved as ‘Barnacle Goose,’ describes a bird that migrates to England as an adult, so that its eggs and chicks were never seen, giving rise to legends that these birds grew to maturity in the water:
Neb wæs min on nearwe, ond ic neofan wætre,
flore underflowen, firgenstreamum
swiþe besuncen, ond on sunde awox
ufan yðum þeah

My beak was confined, and I under water, overflowed by flood, sunk under mountain streams, and grew up in the sound, concealed from above by the waves. (ll. 1-4a)

Like the other 'bird' riddles, this passage describes its subject in detail that identifies the creature not as some a generic animal or beast, but as a specific species of bird.

Notably, these riddles include no reference to humans. There is no discussion of contact with humans, no use of birds in metaphorical terms that liken them to humans, no anthropomorphizing likeness between birds and humans. They are simply birds in nature, somewhat mysterious, creatures of interest in their own terms. In Beowulf, as argued above, animals are killed as a demonstration of the hero's physical, perhaps superhuman, strength and his martial prowess. In the Vita Guthlaci, the prose Guthlac, and Guthlac A, animals demonstrate Guthlac's devotion, his dominion over them as both symptom and proof of his spiritual elevation over landscape and animals as well as Britons and other humans. In these riddles, however, the birds serve no instrumental connection to humans. The riddles are told as entertainment; the birds are described in tricky detail so as to be identifiable, but not too easily so.

Importantly, the birds of these riddles are all wild animals, not domesticated ones; they pose no danger to humans or livestock, though they might need to be kept away from recently sown fields; they are of limited potential use to humans for food or other purposes. The close descriptions of them reflect careful observation and detailed knowledge in the complete absence of any utility to humans. Ecocritics who assume that appreciation for the landscape is post-medieval, or requires an urban sensibility, as discussed in Chapter 3 on ruins, might be surprised that the ‘other’ people who occupy those pastoral landscapes can also perceive them, can appreciate them for their own sake and on their own terms. They might be even more surprised to discover that even in the ‘dark’ ages, people could perceive nature around them, even when it was not of use to them, and describe its beauty and its particularity.

Perhaps even more remarkable is Riddle 85, in which a fish describes its life in a river and tells the audience, ‘unc dryhten scop’ (‘God created the two of us,’ l. 2). The fish adds: ‘Ic him in wunige a þenden ic lifge; / gif
wit unc gedælað, me bið deað witod’ (‘I always dwell in it, as long as I live; if we separate, death is certain for me,’ ll. 6–7). The fact that Old English had grammatical as well as natural gender complicates the line, because the fish literally says, ‘I live in him,’ using a pronoun that can refer to an object or in a human being. (The Old English words for ‘river’ include ‘ea’ and ‘lacu,’ both feminine in gender, as well as ‘flod,’ ‘stream’ and several ‘-stream’ compounds, which are masculine.) Writing about the bird riddles and *The Phoenix*, Donna Beth Ellard argues that they ‘characterize ecosystemic partnerships between Anglo-Saxons and domestic and wild birds not as thought-acts but as intentional and creative encounters that make it difficult to distinguish between subject and object or among gamer, riddler, and bird’ (Ellard 274). Likewise, in the fish/river riddle, the fish, an animate creature, does not give itself priority over the non-living river, but presents itself in equivalence with the river. The word ‘gedælað’ has the general meaning of separating, dividing, or distributing separate objects, but also refers to the division of a whole into parts. The fish and the river are distinct from one another, but are simultaneously two parts of a whole. If separated from the river, the fish will die; if separated from the earth, humans cannot live. The riddle imparts a sense of wholeness in creation, a sense that all of the world, the planet and the plants and animals and humans that live in and on it, are a single entity as God’s creation. It simultaneously suggests a non-theological lived reality that anticipates modern environmental understanding of the interconnections among animals, humans, and landscapes.

Ellard argues that ‘Isidore’s avian etymology resonates as Deleuzoguattarian refrains that take birds across and beyond places that can be accessed by humans or identified by human semiotics’ (275). Deleuze and Guattari argued that we need to develop non-hierarchical relationships among people and others, suggesting instead as a metaphor the rhizome, a root system that grows and branches continuously, and not insignificantly, below the ground (5). The *Exeter Book* riddles suggest rhizomatic or Quinean web-like relationships among their subjects and objects, rather than ones characterized by ranking, stratification, or dichotomies, not least because birds and fish can go places that humans cannot go: we can neither fly nor live under water. Birds and fish provide a reminder that much of the planet is uninhabitable for humans. This is a source of anxiety for Beowulf, who swims through the sea slaughtering the animals he encounters, later protesting that he has made the seas safe for travelers. But for the scribes and audience of the *Exeter Book* riddles, the voices of fish and birds provide a reminder that humans are part of a complex world with multiple perspectives, potentially in harmony,
though also potentially in competition, as when humans are threatened by storms or animals, or when animals refer to humans as ‘the enemy.’

In the riddles, animals are depicted in detail specific to their species; these include bivalves, birds, and mammals, wild as well as domesticated animals, dwellers on land and sea. There is no such thing in the riddles as ‘an animal,’ and certainly no ‘the animal;’ particular species of animal are described using specific details that simultaneously confound the listener and subtly reveal the answer. In contrast, the ‘beasts of battle’ passages obscure differences among eagle, raven, hawk, and wolf, using interchangeable language to describe their sounds and their greed for carrion, subordinating them in symbolic language to human concerns.

Two riddles describe objects made from antlers, figuring them as having lost their homeland, which is, broadly speaking, in the forest, but also on the heads of deer, from which they have been disenfranchised by cyclical, annual cycles of loss and regrowth. The transformation of antler into inkwell or drinking cup is interestingly distinct from the use of skin to make a book or horn to make a drinking vessel or a musical instrument, because the animal does not need to be killed to acquire the raw material; deer shed their antlers each year in late winter or early spring and then grow new, larger ones. While casual hikers are unlikely to stumble over them, a dedicated search in areas where animals are known to feed or sleep is reasonably likely to yield the discovery of a rack of shed antlers. Unlike sheep, deer are wild animals; unlike the beasts of battle, deer are not predators; they eat grass and leaves. Yet the males fight among themselves to establish territorial dominance or for the attentions of a female, and the large antlers of older animals suggest masculinity, prowess, martial success – hence Hrothgar’s name for his high hall, ‘Heorot,’ i.e. ‘hart’ or ‘stag.’ Antlers can be taken from a deer that has been hunted and killed. However, the ‘Antler’ riddles do not refer to killing deer to take their antlers; rather, they recall their time living on the heads of live deer. Riddle 93 refers to the new growth that replaces it after it falls off the stag’s head after the annual shedding of antlers as ‘younger brother’: ‘Nu unc mæran twam magas uncre / sculon æfter cuman, eard oðþringan / gingran broþor’ (‘now two more kinsmen of ours shall come after us, deprive us of our dwelling-place, younger brothers,’ ll. 14–16b). Riddle 93 thus spells out clearly that the antler has not been taken from an animal that has been killed, but has fallen in the normal course of the year from the animal’s head to be replaced by another.

The opening lines of Riddle 88 are badly damaged. The first line begins, ‘Ic weox þær ic s….’ (‘I grew where I ...’, l. 1), and of the subsequent lines only a few words survive, so it is impossible to know if the speaker begins as the animal, as with Riddles 26 (‘Book’) and 14 (‘Horn’), or if it begins as
one of a pair of antlers already separated from the animal, as it describes itself in line 12 and following. As antler, the speaker describes itself along with ‘broþor min’ (‘my brother’), as protected by the forest: ‘Ful oft unc holt wrugon, / wudubearma helm wonnum nihtum, / scildon wið scurum’ (‘Very often the woods shielded us, beams of wood shielded us against showers, our helmet in the dark night,’ ll. 11b-13a). As the riddle-narrative progresses, the antler soon becomes a solitary being: ‘Nu… eom ic gumcynnes / anga ofer eorþan’ (‘Now, I am alone on earth among men,’ ll. 14a, 16b-17a). The Antler repeats the idea of having been twinned with a ‘broþor’ and also uses the dual pronouns ‘wit’ and ‘unc’ several times. More than its utility as a human object, the riddle focuses on the antler’s lost relationship with its twin, evoking relationships among humans and making porous the border between human and animal, and between animal and object.

Riddle 93 also describes one antler from a pair that once lived on the head of a stag, but rather than focusing on the ‘brother,’ the riddle describes the life of the animal in the forest. As in Riddle 88, the speaker of Riddle 93 states explicitly that it has fallen off the head of the stag and been replaced by new growth: ‘Ic on fusum rad / òþþæt him þone gleawstol gingra broþor / min agnade ond mec of earde adraf’ (‘I rode eagerly, until my younger brother possessed the seat of joy and drove me from my home,’ ll. 13b-15). ‘Eard’ (‘home,’ l. 15) also has meanings of native country, land, province (Bosworth-Toller, s.v.), suggesting the antler’s unwilling dispossession and movement to a place it has not chosen, displaced by another being. In suggesting that the antlers are alienated from a lost home, these riddles suggest that people might nostalgically recall a lost past, such as is evoked more directly in poems such as *Beowulf* and *The Ruin*, discussed in Chapter 4. The idea that the deer (or its antlers) belong to a particular ‘earth’ is an interesting concept for a people that defined itself around the idea of migration, registering the idea that a given population might have a legitimate claim to a particular territory simultaneously with the notion that, as animals, the claim of the deer would be less legitimate than the use made by humans, in an erasure of legitimacy analogous to that made through the slippage between Britons and demons in the narratives of Guthlac (see Chapter 4). The chapter that follows details other things taken from their ‘home’ in the earth, including trees and ore.

**Conclusion**

Old English theological texts insist on a clear distinction between human and animal; the depiction of the sea-beasts in *Beowulf* and the variety of
small wild animals in the Guthlac narratives also points to the idea of a firm line between humans and animals. The metaphorical use of animals in the 'beasts of battle' type-scenes depends upon an understanding of human and animal as fundamentally distinct, because otherwise they open uncomfortable possibilities for interpretation. Yet at the same time the intertwined description of ‘beasts of battle’ and human warriors preparing for battle in Elene suggests an awareness of analogues and similarities between humans and animals. In the Exeter Book riddles, the depiction of the fish that cannot live except in the environment of the river suggests awareness of human dependence upon the natural environment. The observant, detailed descriptions of wild birds in the riddles, used in playful appreciation, notably contrast with the appropriation of animals in Beowulf, Elene, Exodus, and other heroic poems to articulate human desires and needs, whether metaphorically or directly.

 Scholars of environmental issues have noted the problems that arise from privileging human perspectives in literary and other texts. Even some environmental writing has seen animals as worthy of attention only insofar as they can be understood to resemble humans, or their extinction as an index of human loss. Karl Steel argues that animal liberation efforts have foregrounded human concerns so that they ‘undermine their own goals by measuring animals against idealized human capabilities to determine which creatures merit consideration as ethical subjects’ (Steel 2011: 3). Object-oriented ontology and its materially-focused cousins, as well as critical animal theory, instead see humans as interconnected with animals, with plants, and with objects in ways that allow for, even insist upon, an ethics of difference, as discussed in more detail in the following chapter. The Exeter Book riddles do important work in challenging anthropomorphizing readings about environments, about the plants and animals and objects, man-made and otherwise, that constitute those environments. In discussing wild birds with careful attention to details about plumage, habits, and sounds, but without reference to human concerns, these riddles suggest that such birds are worthy of attention simply because they exist. In giving voice to bird and fish, to sheep and book, the riddles open the possibility for a recognition that human perspectives are limited and limiting.

 Riddle 26 (‘Book’) speaks for the dead animal in the voice of the human. It subsumes the dead animal’s skin into a codex, an object to be venerated for its textual contents, yet the opening cry, ‘Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede’ (‘an enemy robbed me of my life’) projects the human as enemy and resonates through to the end of the riddle, forcing a recognition of the agency of the animal even as it has been silenced under the metaphorical weight/
freight of the scripture with which it has been inscribed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that though humans possess the capacity for reason, we often nevertheless act unreasonably. ‘What is at stake in limiting agency to an origin in human volition – as if we intend much of what we accomplish? The profundity of climate change in the anthropocene argues against such easy alignment’ (2013a: xxiv).

Derrida notes that the notion of a boundary between human and animal, and the ways in which humans have imagined that boundary, ‘has a history’ (399). This chapter attempts to limn a moment in that history, a moment with traces left behind in a series of poems written in an ancestor of today’s English language, with words the connotations and denotations of which are at least partially lost to us. Ecological thinking also has a history, and as Susan Fraiman has noted, ecofeminist activist-philosophers from the 1970s have sometimes been ignored in that history in favor of ‘posthumanist’ philosophers who trace their roots to Derrida instead. ‘Those mobilizing Derrida typically distinguish their project not only from animal advocacy but also from gender studies and other areas animated by specific political commitments’ (90). A commitment to advocacy lies behind this book, however, and in the chapters that precede and follow this one, I make the effort to connect environmental issues with political ones of colonization and gender.

While the riddles enact the subjugation of animals through violence and through the claim of lack of reason, they also provide an alternative vision whereby animals protest the violence that is done to them, using human language to protest and to designate humans as ‘the enemy.’ Yet this occurs in the context of the riddles, designed to mislead the hearer into thinking about something other than the solution. It could be quite cogently argued that any riddle that appears to give reason or thought to an animal does so precisely because animals do not have these qualities and therefore they underline this lack rather than arguing against it. Yet as Freud argued in Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, there is serious meaning to all foolery, including that of the riddles. The riddles were composed and written down by humans, using the skins of mammals, the feathers of birds, tannins derived from insects nesting in the bark of trees, and pigment from the ashes of wood or from rusted ore: the possible message that there are limitations in the possibilities of human voice are transmitted by humans, using materials derived from the deaths of animals, and to indulge human wit. The message is fraught with conflict.

The following chapter continues to engage with the Exeter Book riddles, discussing once again Riddle 26 (‘Book’) because it moves from living animal
to object to leaves in a book. Numerous other riddles concern things, some made from living plants, some from ore drawn from the earth, but speak in voices that protest human treatment. Other riddles place humans in the position of objects. The chapter draws on philosophical meditations on the status of things: thing theory, object-oriented ontology, and hyperobjects. Things are parts of landscapes, are excavated or cut from landscapes, and form an essential part of the ecological world, though they do not seem ‘environmental’ in the same way as do sublime mountain peaks, beautiful flowers, or malodorous marshlands.