

'Deope gedolgod': Wounding, Shaping and the Post-Lapsarian World in Exeter Book Riddles 53 and 73

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Exeter Book riddles 53 and 73 depict flourishing trees being cut down and shaped by 'enemies'.¹ Most of the scholarly attention given to these two riddles has been invested in finding their solutions – a task that has proved particularly difficult for the ambiguous Riddle 53. This focus means that the pathos of the riddles' narratives, which involve the trees being wounded and changed from their natural states, tends to be overlooked. I wish to draw attention to these narratives, emphasising their importance for what they reveal about early medieval attitudes towards the natural world and man's use of his materials. These attitudes resonate with the concerns of modern eco-theology about the troubled relationship between man and the rest of creation and have their roots in the Christian narrative of the fall. The tree-riddles' subjects, like a number of other subjects in the collection, are depicted in a post-lapsarian dystopia of suffering and corruption in which the relationship between man and nature is damaged.² This dystopia is the antithesis to a time when man was incorrupt and lived in harmony with the rest of creation, such as is described in Ælfric's Anglo-Saxon translation of St. Basil's *Hexameron*:

Næs he na geworht mid nanre wohnyse. ne mid nanum
synnum gesceapen to menn. ne nane leahtras on his life næron.
ac hæfde on his anwealde eall his agen gecynd. butan gewince
on gesældæ lybbende. Ne him nan gesceaft næfre ne derode ða
hwile ðe he gehyrsumode his scyppende on ryht.³

¹ All citations of the Exeter Book riddles are from *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, ed. by Craig Williamson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979). Whilst citations are from this edition, I use the ASPR numbering system of the riddles, as opposed to Williamson's, since this is the system more widely used by scholars.

² The notion that a number of the riddles reflect aspects of a post-lapsarian dystopia forms part of a larger study I am conducting into theology, eco-criticism and the natural world in the riddle collection. For some examples of these riddles, see ox-riddle 72, with its depiction of suffering and toil, as well as riddles 23, 26, 81, 83, 88 and 93.

³ 'He was not made with any wickedness, nor shaped with any sins for man, nor were there any corruptions in his life, but he had in his control all his own quality, existing without labour in happiness. He never injured a created thing, not one, while he obeyed his creator in the right manner.' Old English citation taken from *The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Hexameron of St. Basil; Or, Be Godes Six Daga Weorcum; and the Anglo-Saxon Remains of St. Basil's Admonitio ad filium spiritualem*, ed. and trans. by Henry W. Norman (London: John Russell Smith, 1849), 22-3. Unless stated otherwise, all translations into modern English are my own.

The tree riddles, in particular Riddle 53, not only depict their subjects within this dystopia but draw connections between the integrity of the tree in its natural environment and its role as an object in the hands of man. The emphasis on the trees' early life and initial wholeness, I suggest, produces a conflict in the riddles between the trees' natural integrity and their potential value as objects. The riddles' emphasis on a natural object's wholeness is strikingly at odds with the importance placed on the 'end product' in early Christian thought. A metaphor from Augustine, for example, imagining God's love of sinners to be like the carpenter's love for the potentiality of his material, suggests trees are valued for their future use as objects, just as humans must be considered for their spiritual potential.⁴ Interestingly, the riddle-solver's quest for a solution mirrors a similar anticipation for, or preoccupation with, the end product, not the natural source of the material. Yet the quest for a solution is challenged in Riddle 53 through the text's depiction of the tree's early life and its refusal to allow the solver to find a satisfying answer. This paper explores the riddles both in terms of their post-lapsarian setting and their interest in organic beginnings and moves into a consideration of the fallen man's affiliation with the natural world through his spiritual status as 'unshaped' material.

Before beginning our analysis of the tree-riddles, let us consider the concept of a post-lapsarian dystopia in more detail and its relationship with eco-theology. The Anglo-Saxon view of the post-lapsarian world that we are perhaps most familiar posits nature as a malign, destructive force. Jennifer Neville's study of the representation of the natural world in Old English poetry has provided an in-depth reading of the negative role nature played in the Anglo-Saxon imagination.⁵ When Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden, says Neville, their relationship with the created world underwent a 'complete reversal': where they were once 'granted power over the marvellous new world', they now faced 'subjection to the power of the natural world'.⁶ Less discussed in Anglo-Saxon scholarship is the contrasting notion that man could be an enemy to the natural world. Yet the riddles clearly project the notion that the fallen man, operating in a sinful world, could be seen as an enemy to the created world that he dominates and exploits through his God-given supremacy. In these enigmatic texts about non-human creations, man constrains, wounds, enslaves and exploits the other inhabitants of the natural world.

The Fall caused 'natural sovereignty to become less a cooperative partnership, a benign symbiosis, and more a relationship of power and exploitation',⁷ and it is easy to see how this notion lends itself to eco-theology, with its acknowledgement of nature as a victim of man's dominion. Says Michael S. Northcott, 'the responsibility of humans for creation is properly described as dominion, but, because of the effects of the Fall, the human dominion over nature

⁴ A full citation and discussion of this metaphor can be found later in this study.

⁵ JENNIFER NEVILLE, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 27 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See in particular chapter 3, 53-88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ GEORGE OVITT, 'The Cultural Context of Western Technology: Early Christian Attitudes toward Manual Labor', *Technology and Culture*, 27 (1986), 477-500 (489).

has been exercised in sinful and corrupt ways'.⁸ Eco-theologians look for ways in which Christian doctrine encourages an improved relationship between man and the natural world, working against the long-held belief that creation theology was one of the main causes of our modern ecological crisis; to quote from Lynn White's well-known 1967 article, 'Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects'.⁹ I refer to these two standpoints here because I aim to show that there was certainly no 'mood of indifference' in the Exeter Book riddle collection towards the natural world, but rather a recognition of man's exploitative ways and an appreciation of the integrity of living things, an appreciation that is akin to modern eco-theology.

Having discussed the theological framework of this study, let us now turn to the two tree-riddles. Riddles 53 and 73 depict a living thing growing up in its natural environment before being enslaved by man and put to use – a trope that we find throughout the riddle collection. Both depict servitude and suffering and, though they ultimately help men to accomplish deeds, the writers express concern over how they came to serve man. Like its preceding ox-riddle, Riddle 73 begins with a living thing being nurtured in its natural environment before being cut down and displaced by man. For many years, the tree has flourished and been content, until enemies come to turn it into a weapon, as the tree itself relates:

Ic on wonge aweox, wunode þær mec feddon
 hruse ond heofonwolcn, oþþæt me onhwyrfdon
 gearum frodne, þa me grome wurdon,
 of þære gecynde þe ic ær cwic beheold,
 onwendan mine wisan, wegedon mec of earde,
 gedydon þæt ic sceolde wip gesceape minum
 on bonan willan bugan hwilum.¹⁰
 (R. 73, 1a-7b)

The tree suffers at the hands of man and enters a form of enslavement. As an anthropomorphic subject, the tree defies Augustine's assertion that 'the life of a tree [is] without understanding or sentience';¹¹ it can feel pain and can, through the medium of poetry, lament its cruel shaping and removal from its *earde* 'native land'. The writer invites the reader to feel compassion for the subject's plight, for the loss of its happy existence at the hands of man. There have been a variety of suggestions as to what the tree is made into, including a lance, spear and bow and

⁸ MICHAEL S. NORTHCOTT, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 127.

⁹ LYNN WHITE, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', *Science*, 155 (1967), 1203–1207 (1205).

¹⁰ 'I grew in a field, dwelt where earth and heaven-cloud fed me, until those who were grim against me turned me, old in years, out of the quality that I previously held when living, changed my condition, bore me out of my native land, made it so that at times I must, against my nature, bend to a killer's will.'

¹¹ 'But that life [which God lives] is not the life of a tree, without understanding or sentience; not the life of a beast, which possesses sentience in its five divisions, but no understanding.'

Translation from the Latin is taken from AUGUSTINE, *Later Works*, ed. and trans. by John Burnaby (Westminster: Westminster John Knox Press, 1955), 134.

arrow,¹² but I take ‘bow’ as the most likely answer. This is primarily because the act of bending in obeisance to a master mimics the bending of a bow as the string is drawn back, but also because it is comparable to Riddle 23 whose answer, also ‘bow’, is more certain. In Riddle 23, the weapon is described as both *on gewin sceapen* ‘shaped in affliction’ and through *wite gescop* ‘torture created’ (Riddle 23, 2b and 6b), whilst in Riddle 73 men are *grome* ‘grim’ against the tree (3b). In Riddle 73 the object must bend *wiþ gesceape* ‘against [its] nature’ (6b), alluding to the drawing of the bow, whilst in Riddle 23 the object will not obey its master unless he is *unbunden* ‘unbound’; it will not *ænigum hyran* ‘serve anyone’ unless *searosæled* ‘cunningly tied’ (15a-16a). In both instances, the writer plays with the concept of servitude through the shape or handling of the bow.

The shaping of wood in Riddle 53 is equally as harrowing as that in Riddle 73. This riddle also depicts a tree being felled in the woods and then being turned into something for man’s use:

Ic seah on bearwe beam hlifian,
 tanum torhtne. Pæt treow wæs on wynne,
 wudu weaxende. Wæter hine ond eorþe
 feddan fægre, oppæt he frod dagum
 on oþrum wearð aglachade
 deope gedolgod, dumb in bendum,
 wriþen ofer wunda, wonnum hyrstum
 foran gefrætwed.

(R. 53, 1a-8a)¹³

What then follows is a depiction of its labour: it must *hildegiste oþrum rymeð* ‘clear a path for another enemy’ with his *heafdes* ‘head’ (8b-10a). Like the labouring ox in riddle 72, the tree is *dumb in bendum*; in its service, it is silent. The solution to this riddle is harder to determine than Riddle 73, although most critics take ‘battering ram’ as the answer.¹⁴ F. H. Whitman prefers ‘the Cross’ as a solution,¹⁵ since, he says, ‘all the motifs are to be found associated with this subject in the writings of the period’.¹⁶ He further argues that ‘structurally the riddle divides into two halves, the Cross in preparation and its battlework, corresponding to the two principle

¹² For ‘spear or lance’ see FREDERICK TUPPER, ed., *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston: Ginn, 1910), p. 211 and A. J. WYATT, ed., *Old English Riddles* (Boston and London: D. C. Heath, 1912), 114. For ‘bow and incendiary arrow’ see HANS PINSKER and WALTRAUD ZIEGLER, *Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exeterbuchs: Text mit deutscher Übersetzung und Kommentar*, Anglistische Forschungen, 183 (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1985), 304.

¹³ ‘I saw a tree rise high in a wood, bright in its branches. The tree was in joy, a flourishing wood. Water and earth fed it abundantly, until old in days he fell in another torment, deeply wounded, dumb in fetters, wounds fastened over, adorned at the front with dark ornaments.’

¹⁴ This is despite there being no material evidence of their use in Anglo-Saxon England, although WILLIAMSON has argued that ‘knowledge of the Roman ram was passed down through literary...and iconographic sources’, 297.

¹⁵ F. H. WHITMAN, ‘Significant Motifs in Riddle 53’, *Medium Ævum*, 46 (1977), 1-11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2. These motifs include primarily, though not exclusively, the adorned tree and the ‘clearing of a way’ into heaven – ‘the opening of the way for the righteous into heaven’ (p. 6).

movements of the crucifixion, Christ's suffering and his triumph'.¹⁷ In contrast, Jonathan Wilcox puts forward 'gallows', which he believes 'better accounts for all the details of the riddle'.¹⁸ He argues that the gallows 'clears a way for the criminal, a journey downwards to death, the grave, and hell', thus explaining the motion of the object.¹⁹ As Wilcox goes on to demonstrate, the interpretation also proves to be a striking comparison to *Rood* in which the tree, though similarly violated, provides a path to heaven. For now, the final solution is not the most important aspect of the riddle – indeed, either riddle – rather, the depiction of the cutting down and shaping of the tree. As I shall argue later, Riddle 53 refuses to offer one simple answer, asking us, the readers, to play the carpenter and choose what we turn the object into – a cross or gallows, or other objects of our imaginations.

The Old English poems *The Phoenix* and *The Dream of the Rood* provide an important point of comparison and contrast for the tree-riddles and a useful starting point for thinking about the riddles' themes of shaping and fallenness. Both poems contain flourishing trees, but they are trees that have very different fates: the tree in *The Phoenix* grows within the borders of Paradise and is protected from death and suffering, whilst the tree in *Rood* grows in the post-lapsarian world of corruption and decay and, unprotected, is cruelly cut down and injured by man (the 'enemy'). In the least discussed of the two poems, *The Phoenix*, the primary subject is the ancient bird and its resurrection from the ashes, but the poet devotes much attention to the description of the realm of Paradise and the tree in which the phoenix dwells. Paradise is a pre-lapsarian ideal, protected from the suffering and decay of the post-lapsarian world. Here there is to be found no *laðgeniðla* 'persecutors', *ne wop ne wracu* 'no weeping or cruelty', *weatacen nan* 'no sign of grief' and no *enga deað* 'no painful death' (*Phoenix*, 50a-52b).²⁰ Being *afyrred* 'removed' from *manfremmendum* 'sinners' by *meotudes meajt* 'the Lord's might' (*Phoenix*, 5b-6b), the woods flourish, as the author goes on to describe:

Smylte is se sigewong; sunbearo lixeð,
wuduholt wynlic. Wæstmas ne dreosað,
beorhte blede, ac þa beamas a
grene stondað, swa him god bibeað.
Wintres ond sumeres wudu bið gelice
bledum gehongen; næfre brosniað
leaf under lyfte, ne him lig scepeð
æfre to ealdre, ærþon edwenden
worulde geweorðe.

(*Phoenix*, 33a-41a)²¹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸ JONATHAN WILCOX, 'New Solutions to Old English Riddles: Riddles 17 and 53', *Philological Quarterly*, 69 (1990), 393-408 (398).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 400.

²⁰ The Old English citation is from GEORGE PHILIP KRAPP and ELLIOT VAN KIRK DOBBIE, eds, *The Exeter Book, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 3 (New York: Columbia University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 94-113.

²¹ 'The glorious plain is tranquil; the sunny grove glimmers, a joyful wood. Fruits do not perish, nor bright foliage, but the trees stand always in youth/green, as God commanded them. Winter

This is an enclosed place not affected by the Fall; it is a realm of ‘benign symbiosis’²² between all aspects of nature, sheltered from the corruption of the world beyond. Here, Nature has not been condemned to suffer for man’s sins but can live eternally, without suffering. Exploitative man lives on the outside, where the *Exeter Book* riddles situate themselves.

In its depiction of a flourishing, incorrupt realm, the text also offers us a model of the thriving tree. This tree is described as being given to the phoenix by God and as excelling in its growth and bloom:

Hafað þam treowe forgiefen tirmehtig cyning,
 meotud moncynnes, mine gefræge,
 þæt se ana is ealra beama
 on eorðwege uplædendra
 beorhtast geblowen; ne mæg him bitres wiht
 scyldum sceððan, ac gescylded a
 wunað ungewyrded, þenden woruld stondeð.
 (*Phoenix*, 175a-181b)²³

What is particularly notable here is the description of the tree’s protection from violence and corruption. The tree cannot be damaged or altered from its original state and this, the poet insinuates, is something to be celebrated and admired. Of particular interest is the use of the word *ungewyrded* ‘uninjured’, which gives the tree an anthropomorphic quality. The poet is vague about the *scyldum* ‘crimes’ that can be done to this tree, and about the *bitres* ‘bitter’ forces that carry them out, but the most likely implication is that they are wicked men who would cut it down, thus causing it ‘injury’. To glorify a protected tree in this way suggests that any alterations of a tree’s original state by sinful beings (the *manfremmendum* of line 6b) was seen, in this context at least, as a type of violation.

This is the type of violation carried out on the tree in *Rood*. In this much-discussed poem about the creation of the cross of Christ, the tree relates how it was *ahæwen hotes on ende* ‘hewn down at the edge of the forest’ and *astyred of stefne* removed from root’ (*Rood*, 29b-30a).²⁴ It was then *genaman* ‘seized’ by *strange feondas* ‘strong enemies’ and made into a *wæfersyne* ‘spectacle’ (30b-31a). At man’s hands, it was turned into a cross and, after suffering alongside the Lord, thrown into a *deopan seape* ‘deep pit’ (75a) – a final degradation. But it is given a new life by God and becomes the *sigebeam* victory-tree (13a), newly adorned with jewels and given a new purpose – namely, to act as a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice and to save mankind. In the poem, there is a dual focus on the tree’s natural beginning,

and summer, the wood is equally hung with leaves; a leaf never withers under the sky, nor does fire injure them, always and forevermore, before the change happens to the world.’

²² OVITT, 489.

²³ ‘I’ve heard tell that the king of glorious might, the lord of mankind, has granted to this tree that it alone, of all upward rising trees on earth, is the brightest in its blooms; never can anything bitter harm it with crimes, but it always will stand shielded, uninjured, while the world remains.’

²⁴ Old English citation is from MICHAEL SWANTON, ed. and trans., *The Dream of the Rood* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1970).

wounding and humiliation as well as on its value as an object. In the hands of wicked men, the tree is cut down and exploited as an object with which to perform a wicked deed, but God gives it a new worth; it is decorated and becomes *wædum geweorðode* ‘ennobled by [its] garments’ (15a). Now the focus is not on the tree’s intrinsic worth, but on its worth as an object – an end product. This duality will be important as we move into a more detailed consideration of the tree riddles.

In both riddles 53 and 73, the trees are depicted as thriving in their natural surroundings. There is much that is paradisaical about the descriptions, although their location is certainly not in Paradise: the various descriptions of flourishing (*weaxende*) and of abundance (*fægre*) and joy (*wynne*) are reminiscent of the wood in *The Phoenix*. The tree in Riddle 53 is particularly flourishing. Before it was cut down it was *tanum torhtne* ‘bright in branches’ and the wood was *weaxende* ‘flourishing’. But the trees are not *gescylded* ‘shielded’ like the phoenix tree and they are therefore subject to afflictions caused by the post-lapsarian world. Even their nourishment by rain and water, though idyllic, is not Paradisaical, since the trees in Paradise are not touched by rain, but bloom without the need for sustenance. Where with the phoenix tree *ne mæg him bitres wiht/scyldum sceððan* ‘never can anything bitter harm it with crimes’, the riddles’ trees are harmed (*deope gedolgod*, in the case of Riddle 53), and killed by men perceived as ‘enemies’. In Riddle 73, the men are *grome* ‘grim’ against it, whilst both trees suffer a form of violation: at the hands of man, they are turned into something that is *wip gesceape* ‘against [their] nature’ (R. 73, 6b).

Sinners or criminals in the post-lapsarian world can wound and violate, and they have a malign relationship with the natural world. Yet, turning to commentaries on Christian doctrine, we are reminded that it was considered to be God’s intention that man use trees, primarily for food, but also for construction. Says Ambrose, ‘some [trees] are created to provide fruit; others are granted for our use’.²⁵ Ambrose gives the example of the cedar which, he says, ‘is useful for constructing the roof of a house, because its material is of such a kind as to furnish both spacious length for the roof and a quality of lightness for the walls’.²⁶ Man has dominion over the living world and is entitled to the resources created by God. However, as Northcott puts it, ‘according to the Biblical idea of covenant this dominion still involves the recognition of the distinctive integrity and order of each aspect of creation, both personal and impersonal’.²⁷ This interpretation of creation – of the individual value of not only the personal (human) but impersonal (animals and plants) – is reflected in Ambrose’s commentaries: ‘there is nothing without a purpose’, he says, ‘each and every thing which is produced from the earth has its own reason for existence, which, as far as it can, fulfils the general plan of creation’.²⁸ Yet, in the following metaphor from Augustine, we find the tree’s integrity is at odds with its potential value as an object. The metaphor, using the traditional motif of God as craftsman, involves the carpenter and a fallen tree:

²⁵ Translation from the Latin taken from ST. AMBROSE, *Hexameron, Paradise, Cain and Abel*, ed. and trans. by John J. Savage, *The Fathers of the Church*, 42 (New York: CUA Press, 2003), p. 107.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 107–8.

²⁷ NORTHCOTT, 127.

²⁸ AMBROSE, 96.

Imagine the trunk of a tree lying before you: a good carpenter may see such a piece of timber, unhewn, as it was cut in the forest. He loves it at sight, but because he means to make something out of it. The reason for his love is not that it may always remain what it is: as craftsman, he has looked at what it shall be, not as lover of what it is; and his love is set upon what he will make of it, not upon its present state. Even so has God loved us sinners.²⁹

The tree, if used by a 'good carpenter' is treated personally and with recognition for its potential value; man contemplates, lovingly, the product the wood will be turned into through his skills. However, the carpenter (whether the earthly carpenter or God) does not value the tree for its own identity but for the object that it will become. The riddles, typically non-conformist in their handling of subjects, go beyond doctrine in the attention they give to the natural integrity of the tree. In a playful reversal, the tree's state prior to human intervention is as important as its final appearance after shaping.

The main theme in Augustine's allegory is love; the shaper – whether the carpenter or God – is a benign individual who contemplates with care and devotion how the end product will look. The men in riddles 53 and 73 are not the craftsmen from Augustine's metaphor; they are enemies who inflict pain and suffering on the material. The contemplative nature of the craftsmanship described by Augustine contrasts particularly strongly with the work done to the tree in Riddle 53 where the *wunda* 'wounds' (R. 53, 7a) are fastened over in a way that seems to lack the art of craftsmanship. Craftsmanship in the riddles is that which is portrayed in Riddle 26 ('Bible'), where much time and attention is given to the process and the end result is something beautiful, adorned with *golde* 'gold', *gereno* 'ornaments' and *wuldorgesteald* 'glorious possessions' (R. 26, 14a, 15a and 16a). Indeed, the ornamentation of the object in Riddle 53 is more ambiguous. Though the tree is said to be *hyrstum/foran gefrætweð* 'adorned at the front with ornaments' (Riddle 53, 7b-8a), there is the sense that these words are used ironically, since it seems unusual for ornaments to be described as *wonnum* 'dark'. Ornamentation is used variously in the riddles, *frætwe* being employed in Riddle 7 to describe the bird's feathers as ornaments (Riddle 7, 6b), but it is usually bright or shining.³⁰ What we have in Riddle 53, then, is a description of object creation that is ambiguous about the nature of craftsmanship and man's use of his materials.

Thus far we can observe a strong relationship between the fallen man, the shaping of trees and the importance of the end product. Riddle 53 takes this relationship one step further, setting out not only to reverse the emphasis on the tree's potential value as a product in certain Christian allegories, but to

²⁹ AUGUSTINE, *Later Works*, 324.

³⁰ In Riddle 14, for example, the horn is described as being *beorhtne* 'bright' in its ornaments (Riddle 14, 7b), whilst in Riddle 20 the sword's decorative wire is similarly *beorht* 'bright' (Riddle 20, 3b). In Riddle 40, Creation is said to be *fægerre frætweum goldes* 'fairer than ornaments of gold' (Riddle 40, 46a-b).

problematise the reader's ability to name the finished product. It is no accident, I suggest, that critics have produced such diverse readings and solutions; the riddle's ambiguity allows the reader to design the object his or herself. The riddle allows for more than one reading of its subject.

Riddle 53 is told from a third-person perspective and is much harder to solve than Riddle 73, being distinctly vaguer in nature. There is a lack of detail surrounding the nature of the object's use, and the ambiguity allows for more than one interpretation of the end product. The opportunity for personal interpretations is ensured by both the last few lines of the riddle, where we are unable to fathom out what the object is doing,³¹ and by the indefinite description of the ornamentation – is it ugly or is it beautiful? What is more, the word *hyrstum* can mean 'decorate' as well as 'equip', which opens the object up to various interpretations. Does the reader see the tree as degraded, as Wilcox does, or venerated, like Whitman? Readers can interpret the object as something hideous, like a gallows, or beautiful, like a cross, because the ambiguous nature of the language describing it allows them to do so. We can read the riddle, perhaps, as a mirroring, in textual form, of the process of creating objects from trees. Readers, then, have a role to play as the tree's shaper. Does the reader play the 'sinful enemy' and turn it into something degraded, or play a more virtuous individual and venerate it?

Riddle 53 leads us back to the idea presented at the start of this paper, that the riddles draw attention to man's fallen condition and his God-given supremacy over the created world. The riddle causes us to reflect back on ourselves and ask whether, as part of the fallen race, we would see the shaped tree as a chance to engage in wicked activities or rather, perhaps, in spiritual reflection. It is up to the reader to see the intrinsic worth of the tree and its potentiality as a positive symbol. In this sense, the riddle is like Riddle 12 ('ox' or 'leather'), where the reader must decide whether the drunken maidservant is engaged in a sexual act or an innocent act of cleaning or manufacture; the sinful mind might see the act as sexual, whilst the purer mind might see it as more innocent.³² Due to the provocative language in the riddle, the likeliness of the reader not seeing any sexual innuendo at all is slim and reminds us that we are all part of the fallen race and, as such, struggle to see the use and misuse of objects through anything but the eyes of sinners.

It is interesting to reflect here on the fallen nature of the dreamer in *Rood* and what this nature reveals about the nature of sin and shaping in the Anglo-Saxon imagination. The dreamer is said to be by *synnum fah* 'sins stained' and *forwunded mid wommum* 'badly wounded by faults' (13b-14a), and this description is strikingly similar to the wounding of trees in the riddles. Furthermore, when the dreamer sees the tree he is also said to be with *sorgum gedrefed* 'afflicted by sorrow'

³¹ WHITMAN, gives a brief account of how scholars, particularly those who prefer the 'battering-ram' solution, have tried and failed to interpret the action successfully. See WHITMAN, 1.

³² JOHN W. TANKE has briefly argued for a similar moral principle in Riddle 12, suggesting that 'the "original" purpose of the riddle is for the riddler to lure the solver to propose the sexual solution, in order then to expose his salacious imagination'. See TANKE, 'Wonfeax Wale: Ideology and Figuration in the Sexual Riddles of the Exeter Book', in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*, ed. by Britton J. Horwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 21–45 (28–9).

(20b), drawing further connections between dreamer and *beam*. By thinking of the dreamer as afflicted and wounded like a felled tree, we can consider him as 'material' that is in need of shaping. We might see him as the sinful man of Augustine's metaphor, who needs to be 'shaped' by God's love into something new and better. The dreamer's 'shaping' comes through the dream's revelation and the tree's desire for its story to be told. Thus, like many of the riddle's subjects that have been turned from material to object, the dreamer will assume a new task: he will *onwreoh wordum* 'reveal in words' the story of the tree. The nature of the narrator's shaping and his new task lead us to this thought-provoking realisation: in the Anglo-Saxon imagination, a man can change a material, like a fallen tree, into an object that is new and better, but an object, in the form of the message-bearing rood tree, also has the power to turn material, in the form of the un-shaped man, into something new and better, too. As 'wounded' and 'afflicted' materials that were once in need of shaping, both the narrator of *Rood* and the rood tree share an affinity and an anticipation for redemption that unites man and the natural world.

To conclude, it is clear to see how looking beyond the riddles' answers and considering their literal narratives of shaping and creating can be beneficial to our understanding of Anglo-Saxon attitudes to the natural world. Using the principles of modern eco-theology, I have endeavoured to show how there was no 'mood of indifference' towards the suffering of the natural world in these Old English riddles, but rather an appreciation of the integrity of living things. The acts of shaping and creating are important to this eco-theological reading, with the riddles demonstrating how man has the power to shape material into an object both with his hands and with his imagination. Lastly, Augustine's carpenter metaphor reveals how man, too, could be perceived as material waiting to be shaped – in this instance by the hands of a loving God. This notion, I suggest, creates an affiliation between humans and organic materials, a positive affiliation that echoes the principles of modern eco-theology and broadens our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards the created world.