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Resolving Exeter Book Riddles 74 and 33:

Stormy Allomorphs of Water

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The following article argues that the idea of the allomorph is a productive way to view two “transformation” riddles from the Old English collection of riddles in the Exeter Book. In the view of the authors, Riddles 74 and 33 should both be solved generally as “water,” and specifically as “in the form of a thunderstorm.” Both riddles dramatize the multiple forms that water may take, and meditate on the divinely-ordained grandeur of the storm and the particular paradox of a thing being both immensely violent and necessary for life on earth. Understanding how these riddles play out these truths provides students of the riddles with further examples of the happy epistemological sense to be widely found in them.

Though it arose first in the field of chemistry, the term allomorph is now perhaps used more often in the realm of linguistics, where it describes the variant shapes a particular morpheme may take as a result of its phonetic environment—for instance, the plural morpheme in English may be realized in the allomorphs /s/, /z/, or /lz/, among others. In mineralogy and chemistry, allomorphs are “alternative crystalline forms” of the same chemical compound, the different allomorphic forms of cellulose being a well-known example. In this essay, we would like to extend the term to the world of Old English
riddles, using it to refer to the alternative forms a riddle object may take in its various real and imaginative environments.

It is true that in many riddles, the riddle object does not change: it is simply presented under an obscuring cloak. However, within a pairing of cloak and object, there can be a world of shifting states of being and perception. Craig Williamson notes in his introduction to *A Feast of Creatures* that “the metaphor of riddles mirrors metamorphosis: all things shift in the body of nature and the mind of man… [A riddle] liberates us from the prison of reified perception and recalls the metamorphic flow.”¹ Williamson’s notion of the “flow” is highly evocative; however, it may obscure the way that a number of other riddles appear to recognize the metamorphosed states of the riddle objects as distinct in and of themselves. We identify these distinct states as *allomorphs* of one essential substance. Consider, for instance, the solution to Riddle 30a²:

*Ic eom legbysig, lace mid winde,*

*bewunden mid wuldre, wedre gesomnad,*

*fus forðweges, fyr gebysgad,*

*bearu blowende, byrnende gled.*

“I am busy with flame, I play with wind,

wound about with glory, summoned by storm,

ready for departure, occupied with fire,

a blooming grove, a burning ember.”

These lines strike us by the rapid transitions they make between the various states of the riddle object. John Niles suggests that the


² The following discussion employs the now conventional numbering system of Krapp and Dobbie in *The Exeter Book*, ASPR 3; however, the text for the Exeter riddles is that of Muir, *The Exeter Anthology.*
riddle can be solved with the Old English solution of *tréow*, the polysemy of which captures the object’s various manifestations as “tree,” “wood,” “grove,” “log,” and, later in the riddle, “object made of wood” (specifically “cross”). In effect, these things are all allomorphs of *tréow*. Niles envisions the riddle functioning via paronomasia, a conscious punning on a word’s multiple senses, but it is equally possible to see the riddle dwelling upon the nature of the essential substance which could be manifested both as *bearu* and as *glēd*.

Likewise, the distinct manifestations of the riddle creature in Riddle 12 may be considered as allomorphs of one essential being. The riddle begins thus:

```plaintext
Fotum ic fere,    foldan slite,
grene wongas,    þenden ic gæst bere.
Gif me feorh losad,    fæste binde
swearde Wealas,    hwilum sellan men.
```

“By my feet I travel, I tear the ground,
the green fields, whilst I bear the spirit.
If life departs me, I bind fast
swart Welshmen, [and] sometimes better men.”

Though a careful distinction is made between the creature’s behavior while it is alive and after it is dead, the riddle’s first-person narrator asserts that there is a continuity of identity, and this has posed a problem for solvers: is the solution properly “ox” or is it instead “leather”? As Niles remarks, “Debate could continue for some while concerning whether the answer to this riddle is the living beast that pulls the plough or the leather made from its hide”; Niles’ own solution is to propose an Old English alliterative doublet, *oxa ond*

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3 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, 130.
oxan-hyðd. However, Patrick Murphy argues that most of the riddles should not be considered as having double solutions, and for this reason, we should consider the leather and the living beast as allomorphs of one thing, which for want of a better term we will call the “ox” (or oxa).

In this essay, we make use of the idea of the allomorph to propose new readings of two riddles that appear to be linked both in their solutions and their general concerns. These are Riddle 74 (recently solved as “water”) and Riddle 33 (traditionally solved as “iceberg”). In our view, these riddles may plausibly be read as describing storms coming from the sea onto the land; in describing the many components of the storms, especially those that are “born” from one another, the riddles make definite use of allomorph. Indeed for ancient and medieval people, clouds, rain, hail, ice, waves, and even lightning could all be viewed as manifestations of the element known as water. In our view, the two riddles can be solved as “water,” but with the additional understanding “in the form of a thunderstorm.”

Riddle 74 and the Majesty of the Storm

Let us begin with the shorter riddle. Though brief, Exeter Riddle 74 is elegant, suggestive, and encapsulates a number of the themes and movements we will observe in Riddle 33. It has also been highly resistant to definite closure:

\[
\begin{align*}
&Ic \text{ wæs fæmne geong, feaxhar cwene}, \\
&\text{ond ænlīc rinc on ane tid;} \\
&\text{fleah mid fuglum ond on flode swom,} \\
&\text{deaf under yþe dead mid fiscum,} \\
&\text{ond on foldan stop— hæfde færð cwicu.}
\end{align*}
\]

4 Niles, Old English Enigmatic Poems, 124-125.

5 Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 59-60, n. 98; 183-184.
“I was a young girl, gray-haired woman,
and peerless man at one time;
I flew with birds and swam on flood,
dove under wave, dead with fish,
and stepped on land—I had a living spirit.”

It would take a number of pages to critique the twenty-odd answers that formally have been proposed for this riddle, ranging from “sun” to “shadow” and from “flying fish” to “figurehead.” Many of these solutions are quite ingenious and the terms of the riddle are such that they tend to require highly figurative interpretations of clues. One result is that many creatures or entities that are wide-ranging and variable in form may be offered as viable candidates. The approach taken by most would-be solvers has been to attempt to fit the solution into some larger pattern from Anglo-Saxon, early medieval, or classical literature. This is tricky, however, because Riddle 74 seems to echo many other texts, despite its brevity. It is a highly allusive, suggestive poem, resembling, among other texts, Aldhelm’s Enigma 16 (Luligo, “cuttlefish”), Exeter Riddle 7 (“swan”), Exeter Riddle 10 (“barnacle goose”), and a number of Old English and Latin writing riddles, including lines from Exeter Riddle 26 (“bible”). In recent years, Niles, supported by Murphy and Mark Griffith, argued for what is effectively an allomorphic reading: for them, the solution “is an ac, or oak tree, which has been cut down and made into a bat, or boat.” As such, the riddle would resemble evocations of boats in Old English poetry and a series of folk riddles developing this very conceit. However, Riddle 74 lacks the motif – common to the examples cited as parallels by Niles and Murphy – of the riddle-object being a once-living creature that has been fashioned into a useful servant. Furthermore, the use of gram-

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6 For summaries and critiques of a number of the most important solutions, see Niles, Old English Enigmatic Poems, 18-23, and Klein, “Of Water and the Spirit,” 5-8, 12-13.

7 Niles, Old English Enigmatic Poems, 35; see Griffith, “Exeter Book Riddle 74,” 393-396, and Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 13-17.
matical gender to solve the changing sexes of the first two lines is highly speculative, as no other Old English riddle directly identifies a riddle-object as a “woman” or “man” as the sole result of grammatical gender.8

Thomas Klein has recently argued that the best interpretation of Riddle 74 is a solution first proposed by Moritz Trautmann in 1904: the riddle encodes the mystery of “water” in its various states as snow, ice, clouds, and flowing streams; water is both “dead” as an inanimate substance yet “alive” as a life-giving and life-necessary element.9 For this, there are many parallels in the Anglo-Latin riddle tradition and elsewhere. While Trautmann imagined the “young girl,” “gray-haired woman,” and “peerless man” to be referring to water in various states (spring, ice-floe, and snow) bolstered by grammatical gender, there is in fact a very long tradition going back to late-classical riddling whereby states of water that “beget” other states of water are figured as mothers, daughters, fathers, and sons; the girl, woman, and man of Riddle 74 would then seem to be a variation on this theme. Klein argued, moreover, that the particular form that these clues take is influenced by an overlying metaphor in which water is presented in the guise of the Holy Spirit. Through this metaphor, in the riddle, water’s shape-shifting ubiquity becomes in effect an analogue for the Spirit (and indeed water is a universal Christian symbol of the Spirit). In concluding, Klein wrote, “it is not at all a stretch for forms of water to match the terms of the riddle, even if we might not be able to say for certain why or how the woman is feaxhar or the man is ænlic.”10 In other words, it might not be possible to determine precisely how all the clues match the solution – how, for instance, water is like a “young girl” – as there seems to be such a wide variety of possibilities.

Here we present an alternative solution that could serve as a corrective to the above statement, as the third co-author – himself

an ornithologist with a specialization in the reproductive biology of birds and thus particularly attuned to the sort of creatures that “fly with birds” and move with natural rhythms of the environment – has proposed a compelling reading of the riddle that retains an allomorphic understanding of the riddle-object as “water.” Again, as with Riddle 33, the riddle describes a “thunderstorm,” which (as the larger tradition makes clear) in its many components and behaviors is a manifestation of water’s many forms and powers.

Let us again explicate our solution to Riddle 74 clue-by-clue, being careful to keep in mind the plausible cultural milieu. As with Riddle 33, the concrete solution “thunderstorm” (or “ocean storm”) would be highly relevant to many Anglo-Saxons: big storms rolling in from offshore and making landfall have always been meaningful and dramatic events to coastal and seafaring people, and thereby worthy of a riddle.

To begin with the first two lines and the opening clue, “I was a young girl,” the white, but not yet raining cumulus clouds on the leading and boundary edges of a forming storm could appear as the virginal young female who has not given birth to rain but grows to that capacity with time. The “gray-haired woman” might then be collectively the gray-streaked clouds dropping sheeting rain of a storm that has matured. A gray-haired woman already has “dropped” her babies, has birthed rain. As for the “peerless man,” ænlic rinc literally means a man without peers. He is thus at the top of the social hierarchy, and may well be royalty. Perhaps the riddler was associating the deep color of the storm with the medieval color of kingship; even now, we recognize the sign of a big storm rolling in because it is cloaked in purple. This metaphor is masculinized because the peerless man may appear as a “warrior”12 who bears a flashing sword, the lightning bolts that flash underneath the cloak of purple

11 Among ænlic’s primary meanings, the Dictionary of Old English lists the senses “unique, peerless, incomparable” (DOE, s.v. ænlic, ānlic) which because of its broad application seem to work best in the context; the phrase has also been translated “handsome man,” but that may be applying too positive an attribute to the storm.

12 Another primary sense of rinc; cf. Clark Hall (s.v. rinc): “man, warrior, hero.”
clouds. The following Old English phrase on ane tid, which is just as ambiguous as its Modern English translation “at one time,” may then be taken as a double entendre and a diversion. Not only does the riddle refer to a past storm, the storm itself simultaneously has white, gray, and purple elements all at one time.

The following three lines are fairly easy to associate with the storm. With “I flew with the birds,” we should imagine the high billowing clouds on the front of the storm as it sweeps in. In fact, gulls and other seabirds often are seen airborne, circling and fleeing in front of a moving storm as it comes piling in from offshore. Then, for “[I] swam on flood,” we should picture how at sea, or from the shore looking out to sea, as a storm appears at the horizon, it is “swimming” on the surface of the water. That is to say, it appears to be moving on top of the water at the horizon during the initial phase of the approach. (For a six foot man standing on the beach and looking out to sea, the horizon is three miles away; a storm moving directly at him at 25 miles per hour will reach him in seven minutes and will certainly be “flying with the birds” by the time it gets there.) With “dove under wave,” not only does a windy storm at sea mix with the waves of the storm surge, but the phrase may also be associated with other Old English and Latin water riddles in which rain (or ice) falls into the water and disappears. Once below the surface, i.e., “with fish,” no matter how wicked the storm is above the water, under water it is as if the storm is not occurring – it is “dead,” lifeless. As for “stepped on land,” even now, we use the phrase “making landfall” for a storm. The storm is stepping onto land. And it has a “living spirit” because, as we still recognize, storms seem to have

14 The sense of flod here seems to be “(ocean) tide” or “body of flowing water” (cf. DOE, s.v. flūd; “water(s)” is possible, but it might be objected that this gives too much of the solution away.
15 See Klein, “Of Water and the Spirit,” 13-14. Lorsch Enigma 4 (De glacie “on ice”) features ice “dying” into its mother element: Tunc ego morte cadens propriam progigno parentem, / Tempore post iterum haut multo gignenda per ipsam – “Then I, falling in death, give birth to my own mother, to be born from her once again a short while after” (Glorie, Variae collectiones aenigmatum, 350, ll. 6-7).
a life and spirit of their own. However, when the storm is over, that living spirit is gone. Hence, it “had” a living spirit.

The thunderstorm of Riddle 74 is less openly hostile and aggressive than that of Riddle 33. As such, and ultimately as a representation of the allomorphic states of water, it is essentially a “force of nature” that operates as a vehicle of God’s will. In this regard, the previously proposed metaphorical overlay still holds true whereby the terms of the riddle bring to mind varied manifestations of the Deity: the storm that is in the sky, on the surface of the water, below the waves, and on land is like and calls to mind the ubiquitous Holy Spirit; by appearing as a young girl, old woman, and peerless man, the storm likewise suggests various configurations of the holy family, all infused by that same Spirit, as well as the Trinity itself.

Riddle 33: Action, Voice, and Being

Riddle 33 has been subject to surprisingly little critical examination. As Williamson notes, “Dietrich’s solution, “eisscholle,” is accepted by all editors though there is some disagreement as to whether the creature is an ice-floe (river or sea ice) or an actual iceberg (broken off from a glacier).” As we will argue, neither solution is correct.

Wiht cwom æfter wege wrathlicu līfan;
cymlic from ceole cleopode to londe,
hlinsode hlude— hleator wæs gryelic,
egesful on earde. Èce weron scarpe;
wæs hio hetegrim, hilde to sæne,
biter beadoweorca. Bordweallas grof
heardhipende. Heterune bond!
Sægde searocræftig ymb hyre sylfre geseaft:

“Is min modor mægða cynnes
þæs deorestan þæt is dohtor min
eacen uploden; swa þæt is ældum cuþ,
firum on folce, þæt seo on foldan sceal
on ealra londa gehwam lissum stondan.”

“A wondrous creature came traveling along the way; comely, it called from shipboard to land, rumbled loudly—its laughter was dreadful, terrifying on land. Its edges were sharp; the creature was hostile, slow to fight, bitter in battle-works. It carved up shield-walls, ravaging hard. It bound a hate-run!
The crafty one said, about its own origin: ‘She is my mother, the most honored of woman-kind, who is my daughter grown pregnant; so it is known to men, to folk in the nation, that she must stand gracefully on the surface of every land.’”

In the long shadow of the Titanic, the sharp edges of Riddle 33 have promoted its reflexive identification as the “Iceberg Riddle,” evoking a disaster unlikely for near-shore Anglo-Saxon shipping. In the reading we propose, the overall riddle is structured on the basis of two different aspects or experiences of “water”: one (occupying lines 1-8a) focuses generally on water’s destructive potential, while the other (occupying lines 8b-13) focuses on its creative and nurturing aspects. Further, in the first part, the riddle concentrates on our experience of the creature’s action and voice; in the second, with
a distinct ontological turn (*ymb hyre sylfri gesceaf* [8b]), on the nature of the creature’s being. Throughout, the riddle embraces a broad, allomorphic understanding of water’s many forms and behaviors.

As the riddle opens, the first action of the creature, a thunderstorm approaching the land, is relatively unthreatening: it simply comes traveling along the way, and interestingly, it is *wreetlic*, an almost exclusively poetic word that has the general sense of “curious, wondrous, rare,” but at times retains something of the sense of the noun *wreett* from it derives, “ornament, jewel.” The jewel that both reflects and refracts light is very much like many of the forms of the unnamed riddle object, and how people experience them.

In translating the opening line “An awesome beauty angled the wave,” Williamson was evidently thinking of an iceberg slicing through water, but the sense seems more like that of wind causing the small waves that precede the coming of a storm. Indeed the whole first eight lines convey the somewhat ambiguous approach of this creature that begins at a distance and then comes closer and ends up attacking and causing damage. The voice of the creature is particularly highlighted: first it calls out to us on land – *cleopode to londe* (2b) – and then it surrounds us and cruelly laughs at us – *hlinsode hlude – hleator wæs gryrelc* (3). The phrase *from ceole* (2a) is something of a crux, though our reading works with either of the proposed options: the *DOE* (s.v. *cēol*) proposes a figurative sense “from shipboard” (i.e. from out at sea) of a word which generally means “ship, sea-going vessel”; *cēol*’s apparent connection to “keel” has probably been suggestive to those who favor the iceberg.

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18 Clark Hall, s.v. *wreettic, wreett*. Cf. the use of the word in *Beowulf*: *Hyrde ic þæt he ðone healsbeah Hygd gesealde, / wraettlic wundurmaððum* – “I heard that he gave the necklace to Hygd, a marvelous bejeweled ornament” (Fulk, Bjork and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, ll. 2172-2173a).

19 Indeed, the Rune Poem reminds us that ice *glixnap glaslötter gimmun gelicust* – “glitters clear as glass, very like jewels” (Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, 88-89, 1. 30; Halsall’s translation).

interpretation, although that particular sense does not appear until
the late 14th century.21 Williamson however argues for amending the
phrase to from ceolan to connect the word to the weak noun ceole,
“throat, gullet” so that the creature is now “deep-throated”22; if so,
this indeed reflects our experience of the way that a storm, rumbling
from distance, gets louder and louder, even as it is hilde to sæne,
“slow” or even “negligent” in entering battle.23 Once it has arrived,
the storm (still ultimately just a form of water) is incredibly violent,
as it takes on the character of a warrior, carving up shield-walls (the
sides of boats?) with its cutting “edges” (bolts of lightning?). The
storm has an intentionality that is not really explicable by any kind
of literal reading,24 and in binding a heterun, literally a “hate-rune,”
it seems perhaps to even have a kind of magical character, as if the
storm were a kind of spell-casting warlock or even a sort of Viking
coastal attack, a “blitzkrieg.”25 Nonetheless, the features described
in the first eight lines are only one aspect of the riddle-object; as
Williamson points out (paraphrasing Aristotle), “metaphor begins
with deception and ends with the recognition of a deeper truth.”26
As we will see, in solving this riddle (as with some other riddles
and especially the opening sequence of the Exeter collection), we come
not just to an answer but to a deeper understanding of the nature of
this particular riddle-object.

21 Cf. OED Online, s.v. keel, n.1.

22 Williamson, The Old English Riddles, 239-240, and A Feast of Creatures, 91, l. 2; cf.
DOE, s.v. ceole.

23 Cf. Clark Hall, s.v. sæne: “slack, lazy, careless, negligent, dull, cowardly.”

24 As Murphy (Unriddling the Exeter Riddles, 48) observes, “We cannot assume that all
details of a riddle’s proposition must make literal sense in relation to a riddle’s solution.”

25 Here we must register a disagreement among the co-authors. One of the three sees
the inverse relationship between the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor: rather than a
storm being described in terms of a battle, this author believes the riddle describes a
Viking coastal attack using the metaphor of a storm surge arriving from the sea and strik-
ing the coast. This offers a challenge to Murphy’s general approach to the metaphorical
“focus” of the riddles: how does one determine what is more prominent—the thing
described, or the obscuring cloak that describes it?

26 Williamson, A Feast of Creatures, 36.
Having evoked the destructive potential of water, the riddle transitions in line eight to an entirely different experience of the element, effectively introducing a principle contrary to the hostile force hitherto described. The shift is first suggested by the equivocal adjective *searocraeftig* which, as Bosworth-Toller notes, can mean “cunning” (or “crafty”) either in a “good” or a “bad” sense.27 The lines that follow replace the metaphor of water as a ravaging giant with a new metaphor of mothers and daughters; instead of focusing on the riddle-object’s voice and action, here the riddle evokes the creature’s essence and role in the natural world. To use these two distinct approaches to describe water – thereby exploiting the allomorph potential of water to its fullest – constitutes a very striking kind of epistemological principle.

In describing its mother as its daughter *eacen uplodan* – “grown pregnant” – the riddle signals its participation in a truly long-standing riddle tradition. Presenting forms of water as mothers and daughters who give birth to one another was apparently at one point as familiar a riddle as “Why did the chicken cross the road” is now.28 Aelius Donatus and the other fourth century Roman grammarians all cite the following riddle as an example of the rhetorical mode known as *aenigma*:

\[
Aenigma est obscura sententia per occultam similitudinem rerum, ut Mater me genuit, eadem mox gignitur ex me, cum significet aquam in glaciem concrescere et ex eadem rursus effluere.29
\]

“A riddle is a statement that is disguised through the hidden similarity of things, for example, *The mother who gave birth to me is subsequently born from me*, whereby it means that water hardens into ice and in turn flows out of it.”


28 Klein, “Of Water and the Spirit,” 15-18. In the alternate view among the co-authors, this part of the riddle is the cleverest, because it deceptively evokes a known riddle tradition while actually referring to something else: in this view, the true meaning of these lines is that the mother is the longship of the invading Viking (because the longship bears him) but is also his daughter (because he built her – he produced her).

Versions of this same riddle extend from the late classical period to the early modern and beyond.\textsuperscript{30} Especially interesting here is the particular twist Riddle 33 gives the motif: suddenly the creature is among the \textit{deorestan} (10) of women, standing \textit{lissum} (13) on every land (and we recall that the storm was originally called \textit{cymlic} [2]). Still, there are parts of this formulation that do not entirely mesh with the first part of the riddle. Is the daughter that stands on every land snow or hail? If snow, thunderstorms do not typically happen in winter; if hail, is it appropriate to think of it as standing gracefully?\textsuperscript{31}

As some scholars have noted, much of the Exeter collection is characterized by paired riddles either sharing the same solutions or a similar thematic thrust.\textsuperscript{32} Niles, citing Mercedes Salvador’s approach to Riddles 77 and 78, articulates this general principle: “If a solution that is proposed for a problematic riddle can be shown to be one member of a pair of closely related items that follow one another in immediate succession, then that pairing can be counted in its favor.”\textsuperscript{33} While the \textit{solution} to the riddle that immediately follows our riddle (Riddle 34, “rake”) bears little resemblance to our “water as thunderstorm,” the plundering, harrowing creature does behave in a similar way in miniature as it tears up \textit{wyrte} ... \textit{be fæst ne biþ} “the plants that are not fixed” (5b, 6b) and \textit{læted} ... \textit{wyrtum fæste} ... \textit{beorhte blican, blowan ond growan} “leaves those fixed by their roots to shine brightly, bloom and grow” (7, 9). Just as the scratching rake becomes a support for healthy plants, gracefully standing water provides the sustenance for growing things on every land.

\textsuperscript{30} Tupper described variants of this riddle motif in \textit{Riddles of the Exeter Book}, 147-8. See also Williamson, \textit{Old English Riddles}, 238-239.

\textsuperscript{31} The Rune Poem’s description of hail does seem rather beautiful: \textit{hægl} byþ hwitust corna; hwyrft hit of heofenes lyfte, / wealcaþ hit windes scura; weorþeþ hit to wætere sydæn – “Hail is the whitest of grains; it whirls down from heaven’s height, / and gusts of wind toss it about; then it is transformed to water” (Halsall, \textit{The Old English Rune Poem}, 88-89, ll. 25-26).

\textsuperscript{32} For instance, Tupper (\textit{Riddles of the Exeter Book}, 105) notes of Riddle 18: “This riddle is certainly a companion-piece to Rid. 24, “Bow,” and forms with it one of the many pairs in our collection.” See Tupper, lxvi-lxxii, for a survey of parallels and likeness between neighboring riddles and across the collection.

\textsuperscript{33} Niles, \textit{Old English Enigmatic Poems}, 96; see Salvador, “The Oyster and the Crab,” 400-419.
At the heart of the riddle is the assertion that the things it says about water are absolutely true under the circumstances it articulates for us. The riddle goes to the core of what water is: an alloomorphic substance that is transformed in the sequence we know as the hydrologic cycle. Aristotle was perhaps the first among Western writers to fully describe this cycle in his *Meteorology*:

For the sun as it approaches or recedes, obviously causes dissipation and condensation… The moisture surrounding [the earth] is made to evaporate by the sun’s rays … and rises… Then vapour cools because its heat is gone and because of the place, and condenses again and turns from air into water. And after the water has formed it falls down again to the earth. The exhalation of water is vapour: air condensing into water is cloud… So we get a circular process that follows the course of the sun.34

Classical and patristic discussions of the hydrologic cycle might be more directly known to the Anglo-Saxons from such sources as Pliny’s *Natural History*. But we don’t really need Aristotle or Pliny to understand the hydrologic cycle: in many ways, it’s obvious, and we can observe it readily in many of our daily circumstances. The many late-classical and Anglo-Latin riddles that make use of the cycle in riddles on rain, ice, and water are not necessarily going back to a learned source.35

The contrast between the two parts of Riddle 33 – the way that the riddle requires us to reconcile them – effectively drives home the paradox of a violent thing that is good for us and for all things. Something of the same idea is captured in Riddle 6, where the “sun” announces that *Oft ic cwice / bærme unrimu cyn ... hwilum ic monigra mod arete* “Often I burn countless living kinds; at times I gladden the minds of many” (2b-3a, 6); even closer in spirit, perhaps, is Riddle 39. While the solution to the latter is still an open question, consensus has developed around Antonina Harbus’ suggestion of “True Dream.” The riddle concludes, *Soð is æghwylc / þara þe ymb þas with wordum becneð ... Gif þu mæge reselan recene gesecgan / sopum wordum, saga hwæt hio hatte* (“Everything


about this creature which is expressed in words is true. If you can
give the answer immediately with true words, say what it is called”).
Solving this riddle, as well as performing a true dream, requires two
kinds of thought (and here we may recall that the Old English noun
andgyt means both “the faculty by which one understands” and “the
capacity to perceive by the senses”36). As Harbus says, “The very
nature of the dream, its allusive suggestiveness and the absolute ne-
cessity for “telling” and interpretation, are reflected exactly in the
genre and form of this riddle… The poet of Riddle 39 demonstrates
the inherent enigma of the dream and the real elusiveness of its form
and meaning.”37

Conclusion

We will conclude by articulating a general principle. What we de-
scribe for both Riddle 74 and Riddle 33 is arguably the way most
of the Exeter Book riddles work. The riddles involve themselves in
life and the business of living. Here this is accomplished through
a consideration of the phenomenon of allomorphic forms. As we
consider particular riddles, we should look to see that they sense in
the way that other riddles make sense. In doing so, we continue to
articulate the rules by which these remarkably sophisticated verbal
constructions work. Just as Fred Robinson demonstrated in 1975
that the “artful ambiguities” of the “Book-Moth” riddle (47) “make
the poem self-referential in a complex and sophisticated way, forc-
ing the words themselves to display the simultaneous reality and
insubstantiality of language,”38 the grandeur of Riddle 74 and the
initially inexplicable contrast between the two parts of Riddle 33 go
(by slightly different routes) to heart of what water is. Using these
and other examples, students of the riddles may continue their proj-
ect of discovering how a “happy” epistemological sense character-
izes virtually all the Exeter riddles.

36  DOE, s.v. and-gyt

37  Harbus, “Exeter Book Riddle 39 Reconsidered,” 146. The translation of Riddle 39 is
Harbus’.

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Bibliography


The Exeter Book

Donated to the library of Exeter Cathedral by Bishop Leofric in 1072