

## Aldhelm's Fandom

Cavell, Megan; Neville, Jennifer

DOI:

[10.1093/res/hgad077](https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgad077)

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Cavell, M & Neville, J 2023, 'Aldhelm's Fandom: The Humble Virtues of Boniface's Riddles', *The Review of English Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgad077>

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# Aldhelm's Fandom: The Humble Virtues of Boniface's Riddles

Megan Cavell and Jennifer Neville 

St Boniface, the eighth-century scholar, missionary, and eventual martyr, is generally characterized as an important historical figure but a bad poet. In part it is because his verse is so strongly marked by direct borrowings from Aldhelm that it is easy to assume he did not possess the creativity or ability to write for himself. Here, we seek to rehabilitate Boniface's collection of Latin riddles about the personified Virtues and Vices, engaging especially with *Humilitas Cristiana* ('Christian Humility'), *Virginitas ... humilium* ('Virginity of the Humble'), *Superbia* ('Pride'), and *Vana gloria iactantia* ('Vainglorious Boasting'). We examine Boniface's riddles through the lens of fan studies, arguing that fandom and fan fiction provide insights into group-identity formation and gift-giving that reframe Boniface's debt to Aldhelm, as well as his entire creative project. Like a writer of fan fiction, Boniface creates new characters based on his reading of Aldhelm's *De virginitate* ('Concerning Virginity') and, through them, he develops Aldhelm's warning against taking pride in virtue. However, Boniface's riddle-subjects speak an encoded message that only a true fan of Aldhelm could appreciate. Distance from this fandom has led to scholarly neglect of a fascinating poetic collection, but we hope to bridge the gap.

The man born as Wynfrith (c.675) was already a successful teacher and scholar when he reinvented himself as missionary to and bishop of the Frankish Empire, under a new name, Boniface. This West Saxon churchman was an ambitious man, operating in a network of powerful men that included both spiritual and secular leaders.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Boniface also maintained connections with a tight-knit community of correspondents in both early medieval England and Francia, and many of their letters survive today, forming part of what is now often referred to as the 'Bonifatian correspondence'.<sup>2</sup> The written correspondence associated with both Boniface and Lull, who succeeded him and became archbishop of Mainz, is rich in details of his life and work and gives us insights into Boniface's broader missionary circle between the year he left England for the

This work was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK.

<sup>1</sup> A brief overview of his activities can be found in William Patrick Hyland, 'Missionary Nuns and the Monastic Vocation in Anglo-Saxon England', *American Benedictine Review*, 47 (1996), 143–5. For the foundations of his work, based on his life before he went to the Continent, see Barbara Yorke, 'Boniface's West Saxon Background', in Michel Aaij and Shannon Godlove (eds), *A Companion to Boniface* (Leiden, 2020), 27–45.

<sup>2</sup> The term is problematic, since the letters to and from Boniface form only part of the collection; see Christine Fell, 'Some Implications of the Boniface Correspondence', in Helen Damico and Alexandra H. Olsen (eds), *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington, IN, 1990), 29–43, at 30. For an edition of the collection, see *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, ed. Michael Tangl, MGH Epistolae Selectae, 1 (Berlin, 1916); items from this collection are referred to here by Tangl's numbers. For a translation of most of this work, see *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, ed. and tr. Ephraim Emerton (New York, NY, 1976).

Continent (716) and his death in 754. From these letters, we know that Boniface recruited missionaries from networks of his kin and close friends in Wessex to help convert parts of eastern Francia to Christianity;<sup>3</sup> that he considered women to be intellectual equals, writing to them to commission deluxe manuscripts, to confess his fears, and to request their prayers, and promoting others to positions of monastic power;<sup>4</sup> and that he and his correspondents revelled in literary and linguistic puzzles, exchanged poetry heavily influenced by their poetic model, Aldhelm (d.709/710), and made use of an epistolary and verse style that has been described as a 'private language' or 'literary dialect', forged in this group's isolation.<sup>5</sup> Previous scholars have written about the literary workings, formulaic style, and intertextuality of Boniface and his correspondents, and especially their engagement with Aldhelm.<sup>6</sup> To their work, we wish to add insights into group identity that will deepen our understanding of a neglected body of texts: Boniface's Latin riddle collection, with its verse prologue and individual poems on ten Virtues and ten Vices.<sup>7</sup>

We argue that a different perspective on Boniface's collection can help us to understand and appreciate it better. While his riddles arise in a universe rather different from the one that spawned *Spockanalia*, *My Immortal*, and *Mr Darcy, Vampire*,<sup>8</sup> recent scholarship has identified characteristics of fan fiction that can illuminate Boniface's under-valued collection. There are differences, of course. These texts do not display contemporary fan fiction's sense of unauthorized poaching or resistive reading, and yet Boniface's riddles share with the fan phenomenon their circulation as gifts exchanged within an exclusive, self-fashioned community.<sup>9</sup> Both the riddles' role as tokens of exchange between desiring readers and the disdain that they have inspired for their perceived lack of originality and quality remind us of how fan fiction is viewed by those outside fandom. In this article, therefore, we examine Boniface's riddles on *Humilitas Cristiana* ('Christian Humility'), *Virginitas ... humilium* ('Virginity of the Humble'), *Superbia* ('Pride'), and *Vana gloria iactantia* ('Vainglorious Boasting')<sup>10</sup> and argue that their complex network of

<sup>3</sup> Yorke, 'Boniface's West Saxon Background', 27–45.

<sup>4</sup> Felice Lifshitz, 'Women in the Anglo-Saxon Missionary Circles', in Aaij and Godlove (eds), *A Companion to Boniface* (Leiden, 2020), 68–96. Lifshitz goes as far as to argue that 'the Christian culture of the Anglo-Saxon cultural province in Francia was gender-egalitarian and even feminist' (69).

<sup>5</sup> Andy Orchard, 'Old Sources, New Resources: Finding the Right Formula for Boniface', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 30 (2001), 15–28, at 20; Emily V. Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 2014), who refers to this phenomenon as a 'sub-language' and 'isolated dialect' (202); 'literary dialect' (205); and 'private dialect' (208).

<sup>6</sup> Orchard, 'Old Sources'; Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 200–9; Shannon Godlove, "'In the Words of the Apostle": Pauline Apostolic Discourse in the Letters of Boniface and his Circle', *Early Medieval Europe*, 25 (2017), 320–58; Diane Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond, 650–1100* (London, 2019), 69–90; and Amy Clark, 'Familiar Distances: Beating the Bounds of Early English Identity' (PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 2020), 43–50.

<sup>7</sup> Quotations of Boniface's riddles are taken from *Variae collectiones aenigmatum Merovingicae aetatis*, ed. Fr. Glorie, CCSL, 133 (Turnhout, 1968), 273–343; consonantal 'u' has been silently emended to 'v', and we have occasionally altered the edition's punctuation in our translations. We have consulted electronic facsimiles of six of the seven manuscripts that most fully represent the collection: Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Reg. lat. 1553 (early ninth century); Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 302 (450) (middle of the tenth century); Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg. 5. 35 (middle of the eleventh century); London, British Library, MS Royal 15. B. xix (tenth to eleventh century); Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS 735C (early eleventh century); Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Pal. Lat. 591 (fifteenth century); we have not been able to view St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, MS lat. F. v. XIV. 1 (early ninth century). We have also consulted the editions in *Aenigmata Anglicana*, ed. Ernst Dümmler, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini, 1 (Berlin, 1881), 3–15; *The Old English and Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition*, ed. and tr. Andy Orchard (Washington, DC, 2021), 182–221, and the notes in Andy Orchard, *A Commentary on The Old English and Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition* (Washington, DC, 2021), 230–57. All translations are our own.

<sup>8</sup> *Spockanalia*, a short-lived magazine published from 1967 to 1975, contains some of the earliest fan fiction based on *Star Trek*; digitized issues can be found here: <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=spockanalia>. *My Immortal*, based on J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, has been hailed as the worst ever example of fan fiction; although its original 2006–2007 posting has been taken down from the internet, it has been re-posted in several places (e.g., <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6829556/1/My-Immortal>) and has inspired a video series on YouTube ([https://youtu.be/Zpx\\_Cf0KCrM](https://youtu.be/Zpx_Cf0KCrM)). Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has inspired many fan fiction novels, including Amanda Grange, *Mr Darcy, Vampire* (Naperville, IL, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> For characteristics of fan communities, see Anna Wilson, 'Fan Fiction and Premodern Literature: Methods and Definitions', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 36 (2021), paragraphs 2.1, 3.9 and 4.3, <<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.2037>>.

<sup>10</sup> We translate this title as an adjective and a noun even though *Vana gloria iactantia* looks like two nouns in apposition to each other: 'Vainglory, Boasting'. Scribes shorten this solution to *Vana gloria* for their titles. See Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Reg. lat. 1553, f. 7<sup>v</sup>; Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 302 (450), p. 131; Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg. 5.

references to Aldhelm represents something more than a collection of borrowed phrases or verse units.<sup>11</sup> Like a fan fiction writer creating narratives for the background characters of canonical texts, Boniface builds on the warning against taking pride in virtue that Aldhelm explores in his twinned work, *De virginitate* ('Concerning Virginity').<sup>12</sup> That is, he writes speeches for fully fledged characters, a community of inter-related women who speak an encoded message that only a true fan of Aldhelm could appreciate. Although we necessarily read Boniface's riddles as outsiders excluded from his affective community and thus may never fully appreciate them ourselves, considering his collection through the lens of fan fiction may allow us to understand them better as key tools in the creation of group identity.

## RIDDLES AND GROUP IDENTITY

That the Bonifatian correspondence and associated poetry served to bind together a close-knit but far-flung group is well established in scholarship.<sup>13</sup> However, we maintain that Boniface's riddles, in particular, raise intriguing questions about group identity, given the importance of in- and out-groups ('us' and 'them') to the theorization of identity by social psychologists.<sup>14</sup> The act of composing and sending a collection of riddles is a statement of 'us and them' that defines 'us' as a community capable of surmounting a particular kind of intellectual challenge. Indeed, while all texts require some kind of engagement from their audiences, a key aspect of the riddle-genre is its implicit or explicit demand for a reply.<sup>15</sup> Patrick J. Murphy sees this active quality in terms of structure: a riddle is a binary that comprises a proposition and a solution and is incomplete without the latter.<sup>16</sup> Solutions may or may not be supplied in the manuscript,<sup>17</sup> but the individual texts themselves are designed to elicit an answer from their audiences; they are the opening of a dialogue that requires their audiences not simply to listen but to speak back. Almost by definition, therefore, riddles create communities, whether real (a riddler posing a question face-to-face with one or more recipients) or imagined (a text speaking across time and space to unknown generations of readers). It is thus unsurprising that riddles as a genre have been examined by scholars looking for insights into group identity before. For example, riddles have been investigated as markers of boundaries for those entering communities, for people moving from one stage of life into another, or as a leisure activity that defines certain types of people.<sup>18</sup>

35, f. 387<sup>v</sup>; Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS 735C, f. 2<sup>v</sup>; Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Pal. Lat. 591, f. 136<sup>r</sup>. London, British Library, MS Royal 15. B. xix does not include the vices and so lacks this riddle.

<sup>11</sup> Boniface's riddles are often referred to by number, but, since the order varies across manuscripts and editions, we refer to them by their acrostic solutions. For tables documenting the variation in order, see Emily V. Thornbury, 'Boniface as Poet and Teacher', in Aaij and Godlove (eds), *A Companion to Boniface* (Leiden, 2020), 117–18.

<sup>12</sup> For the *Prosa de virginitate* (Pdv), see Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis *Prosa de virginitate cum glosa Latina atque Anglosaxonica*, ed. Scott Gwara, CCSL 124<sup>a</sup> (Turnhout, 2001). For the *Carmen de virginitate* (Cdv), see *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Rudolf Ehwald, MGH AA, 15 (Berlin, 1919), 350–471. As with Boniface, we have silently emended consonantal 'u' to 'v'.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 202–6, and Godlove, "In the Words of the Apostle", 323–5, see, for example, Hannah Urbahn, "Ich umfasse Dich mit höchster Liebe": Der heilige Bonifatius und seine spirituellen Schwestern, in Gabriela Signori (ed.), *Meine in Gott geliebte Freundin: Freundschaftsdokumente aus klösterlichen und humanistischen Schreibstuben* (Bielefeld, 1995), 40–49; Stefan Schipperges, *Bonifatius ac socii eius: Eine Sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung des Winfrid-Bonifatius und seines Umfeldes* (Mainz, 1996); and Lisa M. C. Weston, 'Where Textual Bodies Meet: Anglo-Saxon Women's Epistolary Friendships', in Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (eds), *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse* (Berlin, 2011), 231–46.

<sup>14</sup> Overviews are available in Donelson R. Forsyth, 'Group Dynamics', in Harry T. Reis and Susan Sprecher (eds), *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2009), 778–80; and Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford, 2009), 112–29.

<sup>15</sup> W. J. Pepicello and T. A. Green, *The Language of Riddles: New Perspectives* (Columbus, OH, 1984), 84–5; see also Patricia Dailey, 'Riddles, Wonder and Responsiveness in Anglo-Saxon Literature', in Clare A. Lees (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 2012), 451–72.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, PA, 2011), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Andy Orchard, 'Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Tradition', in Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Andy Orchard (eds), *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, vol. 1 (Toronto, 2005), 284–304, at 285–6.

<sup>18</sup> Don Handleman, 'Traps of Trans-formation: Theoretical Convergences between Riddle and Ritual', in Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman (eds), *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes* (Oxford, 1996), 37–61. For the use of double entendre riddles as an initiation rite in 1960s America, for example, see Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles: Perspectives on the*

In the context of group identity, posing a riddle is a double-sided act. On the one hand, it is a barrier that excludes certain people from a group; on the other, it is an invitation to attempt to join that group. That is, riddles do not simply draw a line between 'us' and 'them', or between an in-group and an out-group; rather, they provide an opportunity for members of the out-group to demonstrate their worthiness to enter into the in-group. The identity of that in-group is thus defined (in part, at least) by the ability to supply acceptable responses to riddles. This use of riddles for defining group identity shares qualities with the use of riddles in educational settings; whether its answer is to be learned by memory or discovered by deduction, a riddle posed to students is a demand to demonstrate their position in relation to the learning community.

There were several riddle collections circulating in early medieval Europe, and the group dynamics of networks of poets sending and receiving riddles in this period invite further analysis. Here, we focus on Boniface, in order to explore the workings of group identity in his epistolary community. Although the community of poets surrounding Alcuin in Charlemagne's court also makes use of learned allusions to create a sense of group identity,<sup>19</sup> Boniface's riddles and correspondence reveal the creation and maintenance of a group identity that is very unusual in comparison to communities typically seen within texts of this time. Perhaps its most distinctive feature is that it is a community created and experienced at a distance, spanning over 1000 kilometres from what is now Dorset in the south of England to present-day Bavaria in Germany, and enduring long periods of separation. It was a community, that is, that required special efforts simply to exist.<sup>20</sup> But it has other unique characteristics, too. It is not based on hierarchical male relationships (lord-retainer, father-son, etc.), competitive struggle, or military obligations. Nor is it based on royal power or marriage alliances. Instead, it is built on the foundational idea of the Christian family and further on the model of the monastic community.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike monastic communities, however, which were created, developed, and sustained by means of daily, shared activities undertaken in close proximity within physical enclosures,<sup>22</sup> Boniface's community is remarkable for the creative ways it sought to bridge its physical separation, as Emily V. Thornbury and Andy Orchard have discussed.<sup>23</sup> This was a community that relied on written gifts exchanged between metaphorical siblings (though often with *real* bonds of kinship) who shared a debt to the same poetic model, Aldhelm.<sup>24</sup> The acts of reading Aldhelm's texts and enthusiastically repurposing their vocabulary, metaphors, and ideas allowed the members of this community to identify themselves as part of 'Aldhelm's fandom', a phrase we have coined for this community and will discuss in more detail below. Indeed, notable here is Leoba's plucky (and successful) attempt to join this group, through a letter of introduction to Boniface that is appended with a 'parvum munusculum' ('trifling little gift') in the form of a short Aldhelmian poem.<sup>25</sup> Much attention has rightly been paid to this short text because it represents

*Use, Function and Change in a Folklore Genre*, tr. Susan Sinisalo (Helsinki, 2001), 83–4. For riddles associated with life stages, see, for example, Lyndon Harries, 'Makua Song-Riddles from the Initiation Rites', *African Studies*, 1 (1942), 27–46. For an example of riddles as a defining pastime, see, for example, the discussion in Mary Chadwick, "'The Most Dangerous Talent': Riddles as Feminine Pastime", in Tiffany Potter (ed.), *Women, Popular Culture, and the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto, 2012), 185–201.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance* (London, 1985), 38–92; Mary Garrison, 'The Emergence of Carolingian Latin Literature and the Court of Charlemagne (780–814)', in Rosamond McKitterick (ed.), *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation* (Cambridge, 1994), 119–23.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Cordula Nolte, 'Peregrinatio–Freundschaft–Verwandschaft: Bonifatius im Austausch mit angelsächsischen Frauen', in Franz J. Felten, Jörg Jarnut, and Lutz E. von Padberg (eds), *Bonifatius: Leben und Nachwirken: Die Gestaltung des christlichen Europa im Frühmittelalter* (Mainz, 2007), 149–60; Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, CT, 1989), 141; Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> See also the discussion in Urbahn, "'Ich umfasse Dich mit höchster Liebe'". As Katharine Sykes notes, however, the idea of the monastic family was not monolithic and changed over time; see *Monasteries and Families in Early Medieval England*, chapter 2 (we are grateful for the opportunity to consult this book in pre-publication form).

<sup>22</sup> On monastic identity, see, for example, Catherine Cubitt, 'Monastic Memory and Identity in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in William O. Frazer and Andrew Tyrrell (eds), *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain* (London, 2000), 253–76.

<sup>23</sup> Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 200–9; Orchard, 'Old Sources', 20.

<sup>24</sup> Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 203.

<sup>25</sup> Tangl no. 29.



one of the earliest pieces of poetry by a woman in early medieval England.<sup>26</sup> While Leoba certainly merits a prominent place within Aldhelm's fandom, we leave her work to one side here and focus instead on Boniface's riddles—because they are a neglected collection of not one but twenty poems, because riddles are an important genre for the negotiation of group identity (as discussed above), and because Boniface is doing something truly unique in his engagement with Aldhelm.

We do not know which member of Aldhelm's fandom Boniface was writing to when he sent off his riddle collection.<sup>27</sup> We do know, however, that Boniface considers her to be a 'soror' ('sister') worthy of the gift of ten 'aurea ... poma' ('golden apples') (*Prologus* 1), ten riddles about the Virtues. Boniface invites her to play with (l. 5, 'ludens'), chew (l. 7, 'manducans'), and inhale (l. 8, 'spirantes') the healthful subjects of his first ten riddles while avoiding the accompanying 'acervissima mala' (l. 11, 'very sour apples')—the Vices represented by the following ten riddles. That is, Boniface presents his poems as texts to be ruminated upon,<sup>28</sup> and promises that concentrated reading of them will lead to deeper understanding and to salvation, the 'dulcia ... gaudia caeli' (l. 10, 'sweet joys of heaven').<sup>29</sup> Such thoughtful rumination is something that, arguably, all the poetic riddles in the early medieval tradition solicit.<sup>30</sup> Boniface's, however, differ from other riddle collections in a particular way. His riddles do not ask to be solved, either explicitly with a closing formula or implicitly with their challenging ambiguity. Instead, they spell out their solutions as an essential component of their content, in the form of acrostics.<sup>31</sup> An example can be seen in this excerpt from Boniface's riddle on *Superbia* ('Pride'):

Serpens angelicus genuit me in culmine caeli,  
 Viperea spirans et crimina noxia cordi;  
 Pellexi et populi insidiando milia multa,  
 E superis regnis trudens in Tartara nigra.  
 5 'Regina et mater peccati et praevia' dicor,  
 Bella movens animis, caste qui vivere malunt;  
 Irasque insidiasque et mille crimina trado;  
 Altera in terris non est crudelior ulla. (1–8)

(The angelic snake gave birth to me in the heights of the heavens, emitting viperous crimes, harmful to the heart, and I have enticed many thousands of people by lying in wait [for them], thrusting them out of the celestial realms into black hell. I am called 'the queen, mother, and precursor of sin,' provoking battles in souls who would rather live chastely. I provoke rages and ambush and a thousand crimes. There is no other on earth more cruel.)

<sup>26</sup> See especially Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, 'Women and the Origins of English Literature', in Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (eds), *The History of British Women's Writing 700–1500*, vol. 1 (Basingstoke, 2011), 31–40, at 35–6; Watt, *Women, Writing and Religion*, 67–73; and Weston, 'Where Textual Bodies Meet'.

<sup>27</sup> See discussion in Thornbury, 'Boniface as Poet and Teacher', 118. Earlier scholars are less wary of guessing and suggest Leoba; see, for example, M. Manitius, *Geschichte der christlich-lateinischen Poesie bis zur Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1891), 507; Frederick Tupper, Jr, (ed.), *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (London, 1910), xlv. The date of composition of Boniface's riddles is generally considered to be early in his career, though he may well have circulated them later too. On the date, see Hermann Schüling, 'Die Handbibliothek des Bonifatius: Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte der ersten Hälfte des 8. Jahrhunderts', *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens*, 4 (1961), 286–348, at 290–91, n. 39; Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2005), 38; Thornbury, 'Boniface as Poet and Teacher', 113, n. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Thornbury, 'Boniface as Poet and Teacher', 118–19.

<sup>29</sup> For discussion of the theme of sweetness exchanged in letters to and from Boniface, see Lisa M. C. Weston, 'Honeyed Words and Waxen Tablets: Aldhelm's Bees and the Materiality of Anglo-Saxon Literacy', *Mediaevalia*, 41 (2020), 43–69, at 44–6.

<sup>30</sup> Erica Weaver, 'Premodern and Postcritical: Medieval *Enigmata* and the Hermeneutic Style', *New Literary History*, 50 (2019), 43–64, at 46–8.

<sup>31</sup> The acrostic form has deep roots in classical Greek and Latin poetry. A key model for medieval writers was the sixth-century poet, Venantius Fortunatus; see, for example, discussion in Brian Brennan, 'Weaving with Words: Venantius Fortunatus's Figurative Acrostics on the Holy Cross', *Traditio*, 74 (2019), 27–53. Boniface's immediate model was, of course, Aldhelm's preface to his own *Enigmata*.

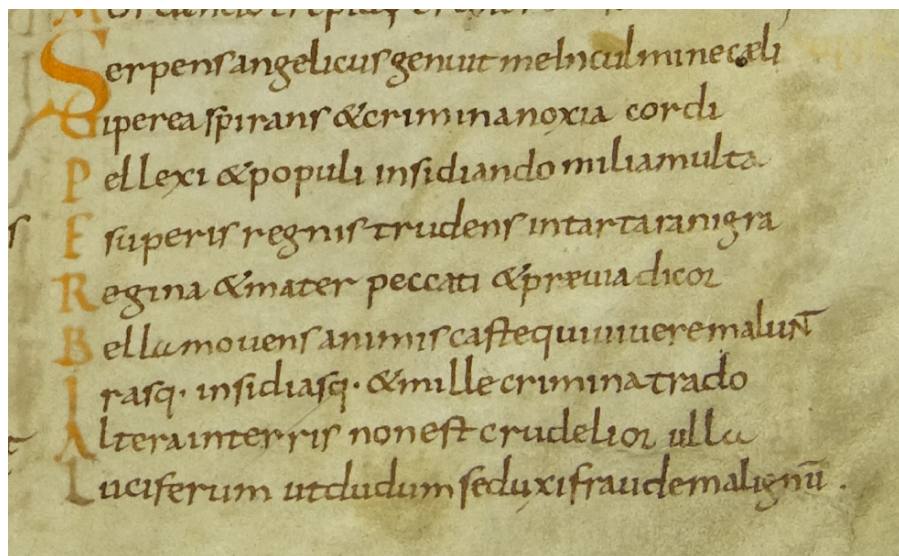


FIG. 1. Superbia in Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 302 (450), f. 129; reproduced by kind permission of Kloster Einsiedeln, Einsiedeln, Switzerland.

We mark the acrostic here in bold, but the scribes who copied Boniface's poems make the presence of the acrostics even more noticeable with, for example, large, spaced, or rubricated capitals, as can be seen, for example, in the tenth-century Einsiedeln manuscript (Fig. 1). Boniface's original reader needed only to take the first letter of each line and put them together to discover the solution—even before reading the riddle itself. Interestingly, even such clear signalling might not have been considered obvious enough: some scribes also inserted the solution as a title.<sup>32</sup>

Boniface's acrostics perplexed us initially, because we are used to seeing acrostics in the prefaces of riddle collections, like that of Aldhelm, or as a technique to link together the individual members in sequence, as in Tatwine's collection,<sup>33</sup> and because we are used to thinking about riddles as demanding a reply from their audience. Indeed, as discussed above, whether or not solutions are supplied in any given manuscript, individual riddles themselves are designed to elicit an answer from their audiences or readers. The presence of solutions written into these texts changes the nature of that dialogue. Riddles that require solutions can be gatekeepers of communities that both exclude and invite outsiders to the group, but in Boniface's case that community gatekeeping must be working differently. His addressee is not required to solve the riddles to prove herself worthy of belonging to his community. If the riddle answers itself, what is expected of the audience?

### ALDHELM'S FANDOM

Boniface's collection has been undervalued in riddle scholarship, which generally characterizes these texts as inferior riddles that are unimaginative, derivative, overly moralistic, and grammatically and metrically faulty. In short, they have been seen as bad poetry. Frederick Tupper, Jr, for example, claims that 'these enigmas have but small literary merit. Their vocabulary is

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the previously mentioned ninth-century Vatican and early eleventh-century Aberystwyth manuscripts; in the mid-eleventh-century Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg. 5. 35, solutions were added in the margin. F. 386' can be viewed here: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-GG-00005-00035/775>.

<sup>33</sup> For Aldhelm's preface, see *Variae collectiones aenigmatum*, ed. Glorie, CCSL, 133, 377–82; for Tatwine's sequence, see 167–208.

small, their meter halting, the treatment stiff and awkward ... in the main they seem dull and uninspired'.<sup>34</sup> Andy Orchard extends this criticism further, considering the poetry of Boniface and the rest of his circle—especially that of Lull, Beorhtgyth, and Leoba—to be derivative, imitative, and even shameless in its lifting of Aldhelmian material.<sup>35</sup> More often, however, Boniface is rejected less with scorn than with silence. Thus, Dieter Bitterli's excellent book on the Old English and Anglo-Latin riddle tradition does essential work in redirecting scholarly attention to the multilingual environment of riddling but nevertheless mentions Boniface's riddles only three times among other Latin collections and offers no analysis of any of his texts.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Peter Ramey's convincing study of wonder terminology in the Old English and Anglo-Latin riddle tradition mentions Boniface's riddles only to argue that they do not feature the language of wonder prominently, despite the fact that terms for wonder appear just as often in Boniface's short collection as they do in the longer collections that Ramey scrutinizes.<sup>37</sup> In sum, scholars of early medieval riddles have given Boniface short shrift.

While we are slinging mud, we should confess that we ourselves have not appreciated Boniface's riddles in the past, because we had not fully understood what they are and what they seek to do. We credit Amy Clark's recent work on unnoticed stylistic features—particularly the way Boniface uses Aldhelmian phrases to invite intertextual readings between his poems and build up 'cumulative meaning' across the collection—with our desire to look again.<sup>38</sup> At this point, it is worth reminding ourselves that *we* are not members of Boniface's community, and that these poems were not written for us. While we can understand the text and solutions of Boniface's riddles simply by reading them, that understanding is superficial—and, indeed, not very exciting, as the general lack of interest in these texts indicates. To truly understand them, we need to read them as the recipient of Boniface's collection would have done, because, as Thornbury argues, his 'allusive, metonymic method depends on author and reader [of his riddle collection] having absorbed the same books'.<sup>39</sup> To truly appreciate these riddles, we need to go further and not only identify echoes of Aldhelm, but also understand their significance.

So, how should we interpret these echoes? One possibility is to read Boniface and his correspondents' works as branding themselves with formulae—a reading supported by the composition method Aldhelm expounded and Boniface's community used, which saw the hexameter line as a grid to be populated by words fitting the required metrical patterns.<sup>40</sup> We might even label their writing as something like cento poetry—a patchwork or collage of other poems—following in a long tradition that stretches back to the poets in the third and fourth century who cut and pasted from Homer and Virgil to create new works (as Aldhelm himself did).<sup>41</sup> From both these perspectives, the aesthetic qualities of the poems derive from the visibility of their sources. Thus, for the right audience, the poems' derivative nature is a marker of their quality, and being the right audience defines Boniface's community. But Boniface is, we think, going

<sup>34</sup> *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, xlv. Similar judgements are expressed by Manitius, *Geschichte der christlich-lateinischen Poesie*, 507; M. Charlotte, 'The Latin Riddle Poets of the Middle Ages', *The Classical Journal*, 42 (1947), 357–60, at 359; Aldhelm: *The Poetic Works*, tr. Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier (Cambridge, 1985), 67; and Zoja Pavlovskis, 'The Riddler's Microcosm: From Symphosius to St. Boniface', *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 39 (1988), 219–51, at 249.

<sup>35</sup> See Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge, 1994), 63, 65, 67 and 251–2; and Orchard, 'Old Sources', 32.

<sup>36</sup> Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition* (Toronto, 2009), 24, 75, and 78.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Ramey, 'Crafting Strangeness: Wonder Terminology in the Exeter Book Riddles and the Anglo-Latin *Enigmata*', *Review of English Studies*, 69 (2017), 201–15, at 208. For example, Boniface has five references to wonder in twenty riddles, while Tatwine has five in forty.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, 'Familiar Distances', 41–50, at 50.

<sup>39</sup> Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 203.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899* (London, 1996), 251; Orchard, *Aldhelm's Poetic Art*, 73–125; Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 44. Orchard also discusses prose formulae in the Bonifatian correspondence; see 'Old Sources'.

<sup>41</sup> For a brief introduction to the cento form, see Scott McGill, *Virgil Recomposed: The Mythological and Secular Centos in Antiquity* (Oxford, 2005), xv–xxv. For the use of the cento as training for young poets, see Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature*, 269. For the association of the cento specifically with female communities, see Felice Lifshitz, *Religious Women in Early Carolingian Francia: A Study of Manuscript Transmission and Monastic Culture* (New York, NY, 2014), 198–9.



even further than formulae and the cento genre, and, ultimately, he challenges his reader to play a different kind of game. We argue that the game is neither to answer the riddle nor simply to bathe in a warm sea of Aldhelmian echoes. Rather, Boniface makes use of Aldhelm in his riddles in a way that is more akin to fan fiction than to formulaic composition.

We thus position Boniface's eighth-century collection alongside fan fiction, another type of literature that is frequently rejected as derivative or bad, despite its ability to co-opt and subvert the authorial voice in fascinating ways. We are conscious of the pitfalls of this transhistorical approach and take seriously Anna Wilson's reminder that fan fiction is 'an historically situated literary form, shaped by a postcopyright, postprint, post-age-of-reproduction cultural landscape', and now explicitly digital in nature.<sup>42</sup> These qualities are, obviously, not characteristic of Boniface's riddles. Even so, there are key ideas from fan fiction that can shine a light on his work, namely: an aesthetic of derivativeness, an economy of gift-giving, and a reading community defined by distance, desire, and gender.

Fan fiction can be defined as fan-created works that draw upon characters or stories from another text/series or from a broader canon of official, authorized information associated with a text/series.<sup>43</sup> More generally, it is literature consciously, overtly, and unashamedly made out of preceding literature, a type of work for which 'originality is not the be-all and end-all of artistic practice'.<sup>44</sup> This deprioritizing of originality is, of course, a feature of pre-modern literature in general, but the works of Boniface and his community have been singled out as being even more derivative, even less original, than, for example, Aldhelm, who himself has long been recognized as being deeply indebted to, even derivative of, his predecessor, Virgil.<sup>45</sup> Instead of striving for clever variation in his references to Aldhelm, Boniface quotes his source, often verbatim; instead of adorning his work occasionally with gems from his predecessor, Boniface uses Aldhelm's words and metrical units as the basic fabric of his verse.<sup>46</sup> His riddles are, in Thornbury's memorable phrase, 'a salad of ... Aldhelmian discourse'.<sup>47</sup> On its own, such incessant quotation might suggest an author who cannot think up his own words, an author who is, as previous readers have judged him, simply not very good. In the context of the letters written to and from Boniface, many of which insistently quote Aldhelm, however, we agree with Thornbury that such quotation is not a failure of imagination but rather a deliberate choice that Boniface makes to fashion a shared identity for his community.<sup>48</sup>

Community is equally essential to how fandoms function, and the gift economy's ability to bond fan communities has been explored in depth. For example, Karen Hellekson demonstrates how community-specific jargon—like the Aldhelmian vocabulary of Boniface's circle—acts as 'the initiation, the *us* versus *them*', and discusses fan gifts in relation to Marcel Mauss's famous theory of the gift and the reciprocal obligations that come with it.<sup>49</sup> The reciprocal nature of

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, 'Fan Fiction', paragraph 1.5.

<sup>43</sup> Bronwen Thomas, 'What is Fanfiction and Why are People Saying Such Nice Things about It?', *Storyworlds*, 3 (2011), 1–24, at 1.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, 'Fan Fiction', paragraph 3.4.

<sup>45</sup> As far back as 1886, Manitius published a long list of references to Virgil in Aldhelm's work; see M. Manitius, 'Zu Aldhelm und Baeda', *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historischen Classe der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Wien*, 112 (1886), 547–59. An updated discussion and expanded list can be found in Orchard, *Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 132–5, with lists of parallel diction at 225–8.

<sup>46</sup> See Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature*, 268–9; Orchard, *Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 252; Thornbury, 'Boniface as Poet and Teacher', 114–15.

<sup>47</sup> Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 204.

<sup>48</sup> Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 205. Note also that Boniface mentions Aldhelm less frequently in letters to non-English recipients, which suggests he was conscious of different audiences and martialled Aldhelm deliberately for community-building purposes; see Michael W. Herren, 'Boniface's Epistolary Prose Style: The Letters to the English', in Rebecca Stephenson and Emily V. Thornbury (eds), *Latinity and Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Toronto, 2016), 18–37, at 21–5.

<sup>49</sup> Karen Hellekson, 'A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture', *Cinema Journal*, 48 (2009), 113–18, at 114.

gift-giving as an economy and its relevance to the early medieval world has also long been established.<sup>50</sup> Most recently, Stephanie Clark links the exchange of gifts to identity-formation, noting that '[g]ifts participate in human identities, and are exchanged—between humans, between humans and God—forming those identities in complex (and symbolic) ways'.<sup>51</sup> This identity construction is rooted in relationships, as Clark goes on to discuss, because the 'openness' of gift exchange relies upon a recognition of social obligations.<sup>52</sup> The social obligations that are best known in early medieval contexts relate to the lord-retainer bond: a lord gives gifts to his retainers who repay his generosity through service.<sup>53</sup> Yet, this was not the type of gift-giving that held Boniface's community together. Rather, scholars have found in the Bonifatian correspondence's references to the exchange of books, objects, and prayers an inversion of hierarchical expectations.<sup>54</sup> As John-Henry Wilson Clay shows, the surviving letters point to very few superiors giving gifts to inferiors, as well as a lack of reciprocation on almost all occasions.<sup>55</sup> However, it was not necessarily a material reward that these letter-writers sought in exchange for their own gifts. Clay notes that Boniface repaid his correspondents not with physical gifts but rather through the medium of prayer, making the missionaries' gift-giving conventions distinct from the secular contexts they otherwise resemble.<sup>56</sup>

These unusual gifting practices provide another link to fandom, for the world of fan fiction is also marked by gifts whose value lies outside ordinary economic structures. Drawing on Erika Pearson's differentiation between 'effort gifts' (i.e., gifts that require skill, knowledge, and time to make) and 'object gifts' (i.e., money or material objects), Hellekson emphasizes that in a fan community, even in more commercial exchanges, 'gifting is the goal'.<sup>57</sup> Tisha Turk further notes that the time and skill involved in creating a gift may contribute more to its worth than its economic value or even the act of giving.<sup>58</sup> We might view Boniface's prayers as effort gifts reciprocating object gifts, all the more meaningful because of the aspiring saint's high status within his community and the many intense pressures on his time. Likewise, as poems attached to a letter, Boniface's riddles themselves may be viewed as effort gifts, as indeed may the very letters that Boniface and his community exchanged.<sup>59</sup> The act of sending a letter solicits a response, and so it creates an open obligation like the one created through gift-giving. The bond that an exchange of letters can foster is, therefore, as implicated in identity formation and maintenance as the gift is. Hence, we understand the letters exchanged by Boniface and his circle to be as much effort gifts as the poems and promises of prayers that they accompanied.

A final aspect of the gift economy in modern fan communities that is worth noting is that gifts are rarely exchanged directly but are instead generally made to the whole community. In

<sup>50</sup> See discussion in Peter S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange, and Violence in Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2013), 54–62, which also surveys important preceding studies. This discussion has also been extended to the wider early medieval world; see Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (eds), *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Stephanie Clark, *Compelling God: Theories of Prayer in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto, 2018), 25.

<sup>52</sup> Clark, *Compelling God*, 44.

<sup>53</sup> For a complex re-evaluation of this well-studied commonplace, see Rory Naismith, 'The Economy of *Beowulf*', in Leonard Neidorf, Rafael J. Pascual, and Tom Shippey (eds), *Old English Philology: Studies in Honour of R. D. Fulk* (Cambridge, 2016), 371–91.

<sup>54</sup> John-Henry Wilson Clay, 'Gift-giving and Books in the Letters of St Boniface and Lul', *Journal of Medieval History*, 35 (2009), 313–25.

<sup>55</sup> Clay, 'Gift-giving and Books', 319.

<sup>56</sup> Clay, 'Gift-giving and Books', 320. In *Compelling God*, Clark, too, links prayer to gift-giving, though her interest is in theorizing the impact of prayer upon God, at the top of the ultimate hierarchy.

<sup>57</sup> Erika Pearson, 'Digital Gifts: Participation and Gift Exchange in LiveJournal Communities', *First Monday*, 12 (2007),

<<https://firstmonday.org/article/view/1835/1719>> accessed 9 Sep 2022; Hellekson, 'A Fannish Field', 115.

<sup>58</sup> Tisha Turk, 'Fan Work: Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom's Gift Economy', in Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis (eds), 'Fandom and/as Labor', special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 15 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0518>, paragraph 2.1. The issue of status and the expenditure of effort in fan communities is also suggestive for Boniface and his community; see Rachael Sabotini, 'The Fannish Potlatch: Creation of Status within the Fan Community' *The Fanfic Symposium* (1999), <<http://www.trickster.org/symposium/symp41.htm>> accessed 9 Sep 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Thornbury refers briefly to poems as gifts that strengthen the bonds of Boniface's community; see *Becoming a Poet*, 203.

Michel Aaij has also made the point in passing that '[l]etters are themselves gifts participating in an economy'; see 'The Boniface Correspondence', in Aaij and Godlove (eds), *A Companion to Boniface*, 123–51, at 145. For the idea itself, he cites Amanda Wilcox, *The Gift of Correspondence in Classical Rome: Friendship in Cicero's Ad Familiares and Seneca's Moral Epistles* (Madison, WI, 2012), 3.

fandoms, 'gifting is not just one-to-one but one-to-many', and the continued use of a gift signals its acceptance.<sup>60</sup> The collection of the Bonifatian correspondence as epistolary models,<sup>61</sup> which suggests a continuing legacy of reciprocity and redistribution after the initial exchange, reminds us of this essential quality of the fan gift economy.<sup>62</sup> As Pearson discusses, the openness of online gift exchange creates a bond that goes beyond individual participants, making them instead 'feel connected and linked into something larger than their own immediate social [...] connections.'<sup>63</sup> This 'something larger' for Boniface, his community, and those who collected and copied their correspondence later is both their Christian fervour and their shared admiration for Aldhelm's writing, which links the group together despite their physical distance.

In the fashioning of shared identity through the giving of effort gifts we find echoes between fan and Bonifatian contexts. The match is not, of course, perfect. Contemporary fan fiction raises questions about authority, ownership, and dissemination that are not issues for Boniface and his readers. Likewise, Boniface and his community are grappling with both a foreign language and a verse style that complicate the relationship between the fan and the canon—though, notably, scholarship on fandoms, global language learning, and identity points to fan fiction communities serving as niches for outsiders to come together in ways that permit linguistic imperfection, which is highly relevant to Boniface's community.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, beyond derivativeness and gifting, a central quality of fan fiction is its relationship to the community of fans. Fan fiction is created and read by a community of desiring, non-passive readers.<sup>65</sup> We think it is useful to consider Boniface and his correspondents as just such a community of desiring, non-passive readers—readers who wrote to each other asking for gifts of texts and for engagement with their own texts.<sup>66</sup> The characterization of fan fiction communities as self-policing groups that see themselves as conservators or 'guardians of a legacy' also resonates with the charges of unoriginality often levelled at the work of Boniface and his community.<sup>67</sup> Finally, although we would not wish to push the analogy too far, it is striking that Boniface's audience includes a significant number of women who are physically distanced from each other and who (naturally enough, being nuns) hold themselves aloof from normative, heterosexual relationships. They, thus, share some resemblance with the audiences that make up the majority of fan fiction communities today, who are predominantly white, Anglophone, focused on Western media, and 'almost all women or people of minoritized genders [...] who identify as gender nonbinary, genderfluid, or agender.'<sup>68</sup>

More important, however, is the fact that Boniface's community shares with fan fiction communities an exclusivity derived from intimate knowledge of a much-loved canon of texts. Such exclusivity, then and now, creates ties amongst people distant from each other, but it can also alienate people who are not members of the community. That is how in- and out-groups work, after all. Just as non-fans fail to appreciate fan fiction, so we scholars have failed to understand and appreciate these riddles. This lack of understanding extended, too, to contemporaries outside of Boniface's own community, even if they were primed to appreciate his work. Boniface's status as a missionary saint who commanded the respect of popes and emperors led to the survival of

<sup>60</sup> Turk, 'Fan Work', paragraphs 3.1 and 4.1.

<sup>61</sup> Orchard, 'Old Sources', 18.

<sup>62</sup> Turk, 'Fan Work', paragraph 3.1.

<sup>63</sup> Pearson, 'Digital Gifts'.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, R. W. Black, 'Language, Culture, and Identity in Online Fanfiction', *E-learning*, 3 (2006), 170–84; and Frederik Cornillie, Judith Buendgens-Kosten, Shannon Sauro, and Joeri Van der Veken, "'There's Always an Option': Collaborative Writing of Multilingual Interactive Fanfiction in a Foreign Language Class', *CALICO*, 38 (2021), 17–42.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas, 'What is Fanfiction?', 7.

<sup>66</sup> In addition to Leoba, discussed above, a letter attributed to Lull contains a poem sent to Boniface for correction (Tangl no. 103). See discussion in Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet*, 203–5.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas, 'What is Fanfiction', 8–9.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson, 'Fan Fiction', paragraph 1.5, and n. 3.

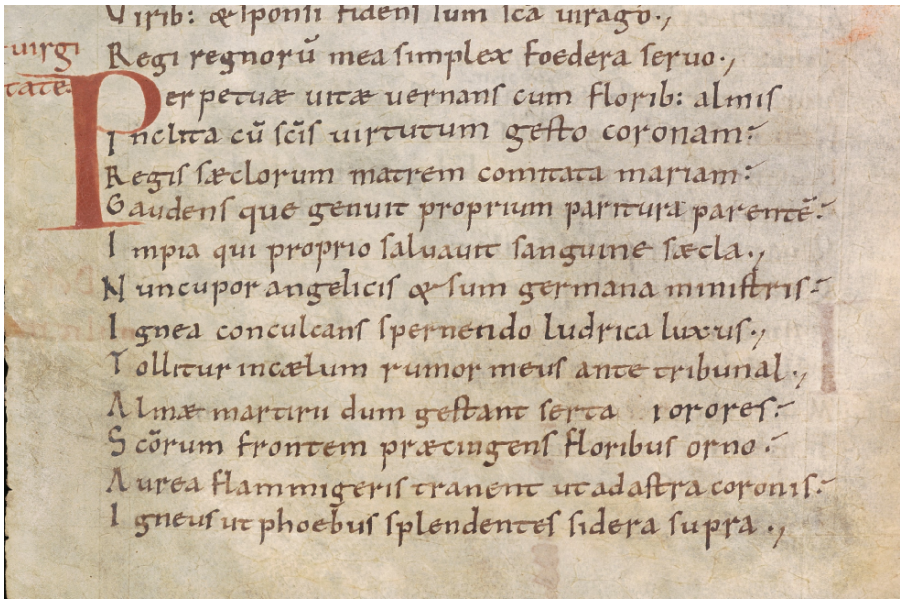


FIG. 2. 'Pirginitas' in Cambridge, University Library, Gg. 5. 35, f. 384 v; reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.



FIG. 3. Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, 735 C, f. 2 v; reproduced by kind permission of Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru / The National Library of Wales.

his works in multiple manuscripts.<sup>69</sup> Yet even this relatively extensive manuscript record sometimes reveals a failure to engage properly with Boniface's collection. For example, as discussed above, the acrostic solutions were essential to Boniface's unique approach to riddling. And yet, the scribe of one manuscript reversed the first two words of the riddle on Virginitas, with the result that the acrostic solution is spelled 'Pirginitas ait humilium', instead of 'Virginitas ait humilium' ('Virginitas of the humble speaks'). The incorrect, rubricated capital 'P' takes up four lines; it stands out like a sore thumb, but it was never corrected (Fig. 2).

Another scribe carefully copied out Boniface's twenty riddles and then wrote: 'Explicit De VIII viciis principalibus' ('Here ends "Concerning the Eight Principal Vices"') (Fig. 3). That is, this scribe wrongly assumed that Boniface's collection contained the customary eight Vices, instead of the ten that are there. The number of Boniface's Virtues and Vices is worth noting, since it breaks free from both the eight-fold model derived from John Cassian and the seven-fold model popularized by Gregory the Great.<sup>70</sup> The error here might be thought to be attributable to the late, eleventh-century date of this manuscript, but the scribe of a ninth-century manuscript did the same.<sup>71</sup> These errors indicate that not only scribes but also the later readers who did not correct them were paying only superficial attention to Boniface's work. Such superficial attention suggests that these later readers valued Boniface's riddles for different reasons than his fandom

<sup>69</sup> In addition to the seven manuscripts mentioned in n. 7 above, other, less complete manuscripts hint at further dissemination: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 13046 (end of the eighth century); Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Cod. Strozzi LXXXI (beginning of the ninth century); and Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, MS C 78 (beginning of the ninth century).

<sup>70</sup> Sinead O'Sullivan, 'Aldhelm's *De virginitate* and the Psychomachian Tradition', *Mediaevalia*, 20 (2001), 313–37, at 315.

<sup>71</sup> See Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. lat. 1553, f. 7 v: 'Explicit De octo vitiis principalibus' ('Here ends "Concerning the Eight Principal Vices"').



did. The solutions to his riddles may be evident for all to see (even if misspelled), but their significance, and the artistry that surrounds them, is best understood by a member of Boniface's community of readers, Aldhelm's fandom.

### PRIDE AND HUMILITY: BONIFACE'S FAN-RESPONSE TO ALDHELM

Let us pretend to be a part of Aldhelm's fandom and attempt to read his work as a fan might read it. To do that, we need to read with one eye on Boniface and one eye on Aldhelm, for, while Boniface quotes words and verse units from Aldhelm, as has long been recognized, his engagement with his source is not limited to quotation. Indeed, the riddle collection's whole conception, from start to finish, is a response to Aldhelm's work. Aldhelm models the idea of sending an effort gift in his twinned *De virginitate*; the first, prose version (*Pdv*) was sent to the nuns at Barking in return for their own writings, whose intellectual and stylistic quality Aldhelm fulsomely praises as the product of strenuous effort.<sup>72</sup> More specifically, in the conclusion to the verse version of his work, the *Carmen de virginitate* (*Cdv*), Aldhelm models the process not only of adopting but also of transforming a much-admired source, Prudentius' *Psychomachia*.<sup>73</sup> Modern fan practices provide helpful parallels here, for fandom is messy: the creators of fan fiction incorporate not only elements from their main source but also from other fans. In a similar way, we can observe Boniface listening to Aldhelm listening to Prudentius. Boniface's riddles are best understood as a response to an ongoing conversation about the conflict between the Virtues and Vices.

The 'Psychomachian tradition', as Sinead O'Sullivan has dubbed it, is typified in Prudentius's late antique poem, which depicts pairs of personified Virtues and Vices battling each other, with the former inevitably striking down the latter.<sup>74</sup> Aldhelm's *Cdv* draws upon this tradition but takes a different approach. His poem describes the actions of its eight Vices—*Ingluvies ventris* ('Gluttony'), *Fornicatio* ('Lechery'), *Philargiria* or *Cupiditas* ('Greed'), *Ira* ('Anger'), *Tristitia* ('Despair'), *Accidia* ('Sloth'), *Cenodoxia* or *Vana gloria* ('Vainglory'), and *Superbia* ('Pride')—as they march into war but does not list out their individual opposing Virtues. Instead, Aldhelm presents an undifferentiated group of allegorical figures, 'Iustitiae comites et virtutum agmina sancta' (*Cdv* 2455, 'the companions of Justice and the holy battle-line of the Virtues'), who accompany his chief Virtue, Virginity, as she battles against the Vices.<sup>75</sup> This, of course, is because Virginity is the main theme of Aldhelm's twinned work. Yet, having written many pages of exuberant prose and thousands of lines of enthusiastic verse about the unique superiority of virginity, Aldhelm betrays more than a hint of uneasiness when he comes to his description of the monstrous Vice of Pride and its armies:

Talia monstra potest humilis superare satellis,  
Qui tumido nescit mentis turgescere typho  
Atque superborum conculcat crimina morum.  
Nequiquam integritas famae praeconia captat,  
Si cordis peplum corrodens tinea sulcat;  
Si mentis gremium ventosa superbia farcit,  
Frustra virginitas laudem rumoribus aptat:

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, *Pdv*'s reference to how the nuns' 'melliflua divinarum studia scripturarum sagacissima sermonum serie patuerunt' (31, ll. 7–9, 'studies of the sacred scriptures, flowing with honey, were revealed by [their] most acute arrangement of words').

<sup>73</sup> For discussion of the playful, messy relationship between Aldhelm and Prudentius, via Cassian's *Collationes*, see Gernot Wieland, 'Aldhelm's "De Octo Vitiis Principalibus" and Prudentius' "Psychomachia"', *Medium Aevum*, 55 (1986), 85–92.

<sup>74</sup> 'Aldhelm's *De virginitate*', 314. For an edition of Prudentius' influential text, see *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis carmina*, ed. M. P. Cunningham, CCSL 126 (Turnhout, 1966).

<sup>75</sup> The one exception is Patience, who is individually mentioned in her battle against Anger. On Aldhelm's chief Virtue, see O'Sullivan, 'Aldhelm's *De virginitate*'.



Culmina celsa valet humilis conscendere virgo  
Si sequitur Christum ....

(*Cdv* 2752–60)<sup>76</sup>

(The humble attendant can conquer such monsters, the one who does not know how to swell with the puffed-up vanity of the mind, and he tramples the crimes of proud customs. Chastity fruitlessly grasps the praises of reputation if the gnawing worm [of pride] bores through the outer robe of the heart; if conceited pride stuffs full the interior of the mind, virginity accepts praise from common opinion in vain: [but] the humble virgin is able to ascend the towering heights if she follows Christ ....)

Here, following a passage that describes Lucifer's downfall, Aldhelm worries that members of monastic houses may fall victim to 'superbia' ('pride') in the physical state of 'virginitas' ('virginity'). Overconfidence in Aldhelm's chief Virtue opens the door to a Vice that can all too easily undermine the virtuous. Only the 'humilis ... virgo' ('humble virgin') is safe.

Boniface responds to this anxiety in his riddles, in several ways. Most explicitly, in *Superbia*, his character, Pride, draws upon Aldhelm's *Cdv* 2708–9 to boast that she tries 'rectos ex armis propriis prosternere' (l. 16, 'to overthrow righteous ones with their own weapons'). As Aldhelm warned, a virtue can itself lead to a fall. More subtly, as Amy Clark has argued, Boniface's riddle collection uses repeated words and phrases to point to the danger of Vices twisting Virtues to their own ends.<sup>77</sup> Most profoundly, however, Boniface creates a new structure of ten plus ten that, while containing familiar subjects, is distinct from the seven- and eight-fold models mentioned above. Boniface's collection of twenty riddles thus constitutes something very like a fan-response to Aldhelm's own engagement with the Psychomachian tradition, a response that shows him reflecting on and revising Aldhelm's sharp focus on Virginity. Indeed, Boniface amasses a full range of Virtues and Vices to galvanize the female recipient of his effort gift, restoring the balance of the wider Psychomachian tradition and encouraging his community to be alert to Aldhelm's anxiety. At the same time, Boniface's riddles are not simply an augmented collection of personifications in battle with each other. Rather, Boniface assigns to each individual Virtue and Vice a monologue in which she tells her own story. He thus creates characters from Aldhelm's work, each of whom speaks for herself, commenting on and interacting with one another.<sup>78</sup> Boniface draws attention to the fact that these are characters giving *speeches* through the poems' acrostics, the majority of which include a verb of speaking, often in the present tense ('ait', 'fatur', 'fatetur', 'loquitur') and occasionally in the past ('dixit', 'dicebat'). The individual riddles thus contribute to an ongoing conversation that reveals two distinct group identities within the texts and invites the recipient to identify with the 'us' of the Virtues, rather than the 'them' of the Vices.

We will begin with Virginity's riddle, because of her position as the chief Virtue in Aldhelm's work:

Vitae perpetuae vernans cum floribus almis,  
Inclita cum sanctis virtutum gesto coronam,

<sup>76</sup> The *Pdv* includes similar anxiety about pride in virginity. See, for example: 'isti vero, quod se caelibes castos et ab omni spurcitiae sentina funditus immunes arbitrentur, fiducia virginitatis inflati arroganter intumescunt et nequaquam crudelissimam superbiae balenam, ceterarum virtutum devoratricem, humilitatis cercilo declinant' (10, ll. 33–8, 'These ones indeed, because they consider themselves to be chaste, innocent, and completely immune to all the scum of foulness, flushed with faith in their virginity, arrogantly swell up and do not at all evade, with the nose-ring of humility, the cruellest whale of pride, the devourer of the other Virtues'). The nose ring of humility recalls Job 40:21; see *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, tr. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Cambridge, 1979), 67.

<sup>77</sup> Clark, 'Familiar Distances', 44–50. See also Thornbury, 'Boniface as Poet and Teacher', 117–18.

<sup>78</sup> Thornbury has also noted that verbs of speech position the riddles as monologues, though her focus is on the security these encoded acrostic attributions provide against 'worrysome doctrinal consequences if virtues and vices became confounded'; see *Becoming a Poet*, 116.

- Regis saeculorum matrem comitata Mariam,  
 Gaudens quae genuit proprium paritura parentem,  
 5 Impia qui proprio salvavit sanguine saecula.  
 Nuncupor angelicis et sum germana ministris,  
 Ignea conculcans spernendo ludicra luxus.  
 Tollitur in caelum rumor meus ante tribunal,  
 Almae martyrii dum gestantserta sorores.  
 10 Sanctorum frontem praecingens floribus orno,  
 Aurea flammigeris tranent ut ad astra coronis.  
 Igneus ut Phoebus splendentes sidera supra,  
 Tangor non pullis maculis speciosa virago.  
 Hac auri vinco specie gemmata metalla,  
 15 Virgine me facie quia non est pulchrior ulla.  
 Me cives caeli clamant: 'Carissima virgo,  
 In terris longe fueras, soror inclita, salve!  
 Lucida perpetuae exspectant premia vitae  
 Internusque dies atque inmutabile tempus'.  
 20 Vivida quique mei proiecit foedera iuris.  
 Mentis eius non ingredior habitacula demum.

(Blooming with the nourishing flowers of everlasting life, glorious among the saints, I wear the crown of virtues, having accompanied Mary, mother of the king of ages, who, rejoicing that she would give birth, bore her own parent, the one who saved the impious world with his own blood. I am named and I am the sister to angelic servants, scorning and spurning the burning games of excess. My reputation is raised up in heaven before the seat of judgement, while [my] exalted sisters wear wreaths of martyrdom. I adorn the foreheads of saints, encircling them with flowers, so that they might pass to the golden stars with luminous crowns. Like fiery Phoebus above the gleaming stars, I, a beautiful heroine, am not touched by dark stains. With this display of gold I surpass jewelled metalwork, because there is no virgin more beautiful than me in appearance. The inhabitants of heaven proclaim me: 'Dearest virgin, you have been on the earth for a long time; glorious sister, welcome! The bright rewards of eternal life await, inner light and unchanging time.' [If] anyone has scorned the living agreements of my law, I do not enter the dwellings of their mind again.)

Boniface's fan-response draws upon his deep understanding of *De virginitate* to qualify this virtuous character in an evocative way. The solution to Boniface's riddle is usually referred to as 'Virginitas' ('Virginity'), but the full acrostic—marked in bold in the text above—spells out 'Virginitas ait humilium' ('Virginity of the Humble Speaks'). We should note immediately that this is not just a riddle about Virginity in and of herself, and we should wonder why Boniface chooses to make this distinction, especially since he also has a separate riddle with the acrostic 'Humilitas Cristiana fatetur' ('Christian Humility Confesses'), which we will discuss below.

An inattentive reader might miss the qualification of virginity. The pattern for most in the collection is to spell out the subject in full before a verb of speaking, and, indeed, no fewer than fifteen of the twenty riddles adhere to this pattern.<sup>79</sup> A further four riddles include no verb of

<sup>79</sup> *Veritas ait* ('Truth Speaks'), *Spes fatur* ('Hope Declares'), *Misericordia ait* ('Mercy Speaks'), *Caritas ait* ('Love Speaks'), *Iustitia dixit* ('Justice Has Spoken'), *Patientia ait* ('Patience Speaks'), *Humilitas Cristiana fatetur* ('Christian Humility Confesses'), *Neglegentia ait* ('Negligence Speaks'), *Iracundia loquitur* ('Anger Speaks'), *Cupiditas ait* ('Greed Speaks'), *Superbia loquitur* ('Pride Speaks'), *Ebrietas dicebat* ('Drunkness Spoke'), *Luxuria ait* ('Lust speaks'), *Invidia ait* ('Envy Speaks'), *Ignorantia ait* ('Ignorance Speaks').

speaking, perhaps because they have a solution made up of multiple words.<sup>80</sup> The expectation created by the majority of the collection is that the verb of speaking—if there is one—marks the end of the solution. This is true even in the four riddles that continue past the end of the acrostic with lines that must be disregarded when reading the solution.<sup>81</sup> In all these cases, a reader can assume that, once the subject has spoken, declared, or confessed, the acrostic is complete: the riddle's identity has been fully revealed. Any reader making that assumption when reading *Virginitas ... humilium*, however, will discover that she needs to adjust her expectations. Boniface makes a point here: his Virtue is not *Virginitas* in and of herself, despite what the manuscripts' titles suggest.<sup>82</sup> Rather, Boniface observes Aldhelm's anxiety about the connection between virginity and pride. He then pens a riddle that requires its readers to address it.

To understand *Virginitas ... humilium*, we must immerse ourselves in Aldhelm. Boniface's use of *virago* ('heroine') in line 13 is symptomatic of his extensive debt to Aldhelm's verse.<sup>83</sup> Like Aldhelm before him, Boniface plays with the substitution of *virago* ('heroine, martial woman') for the contextually more relevant *virgo* ('virgin'): being untouched by stains suits a *virgo* better than a *virago*, but in the context of the broader Psychomachian tradition, they are almost equivalent. Yet, Boniface adopts more than striking language from his source. He also adopts Aldhelm's approach to the idea of beauty and adornment.<sup>84</sup> At first glance, the poem's stated interest in the virginity of humble people appears to clash with its references to crowns, jewellery, and outstanding beauty. Upon closer inspection, however, that beauty transcends the physical, and the adornments, like virginity itself, are always qualified. At the opening of the riddle, for example, Virginity of the Humble states: 'virtutum gesto coronam' (l. 2, 'I wear the crown of virtues'). This is not just any crown, then, but a metaphorical crown of righteousness.<sup>85</sup> In the same way, the flowers with which this Virtue adorns the saints are not simply flowers but 'vitae perpetuae ... floribus' (l. 1, 'flowers of everlasting life'), and the wreaths worn by the Virtues are 'martyria ... sarta' (l. 9, 'wreaths of martyrdom'). By making these qualifications, Boniface dutifully echoes his model and presents images of beauty and adornment subverted to virtuous, spiritual ends.

Boniface develops his fan-response further, however. The superlative language of the 'carissima virgo' (l. 16, 'dearest virgin'), than whom 'virgine ... facie ... non est pulchrior ulla' (l. 15, 'no virgin is more beautiful in appearance'), draws attention to the potential problem of pride in virginity—the very problem that the delayed qualification in the acrostic addresses. Indeed, as Amy Clark has noted, Boniface's riddle on *Vana gloria iactantia* ('Vainglorious Boasting') provides variations on the language of *Virginitas ... humilium*, with its own gold, gems, and silks:<sup>86</sup>

Non una specie, varia sed imagine ludo:  
Auri flaventis passim argenteque mictantis.  
Gemmiferas species, ut ament, mortalibus apto,  
Luciflua ut perdant venturae praemia vitae. (3–6)

<sup>80</sup> *Fides catholica* ('Catholic Faith'), *Pax vera Cristiana* ('True Christian Peace'), *Crapula gulae* ('Overindulgence of the Gullet'), and *Vana gloria iactantia* ('Vainglorious Boasting').

<sup>81</sup> *Pax vera Cristiana* ('True Christian Peace') continues for five lines after the acrostic ends. *Cupiditas ait* ('Greed Speaks') proclaims an extraordinary 55 additional lines. *Luxoria ait* ('Lust Speaks') and *Vana gloria iactantia* ('Vainglorious Boasting') both include six post-acrostic lines.

<sup>82</sup> The six manuscripts that we have consulted present the title as *Virginitas*, *Virginitas ait*, or *De virginitate*, without qualification.

<sup>83</sup> See the notes about this word in Aldhelm's Riddle 95, *Scilla*, line 6 and Boniface's *Humilitas Cristiana*, line 24, in Orchard, *Commentary*, 100 and 242, where he argues that Aldhelm's conflation of *virgo*/*virago* 'becomes something of a verbal tic' in Boniface (100).

<sup>84</sup> See Sinead O'Sullivan, 'The Image of Adornment in Aldhelm's *De virginitate*: Cyprian and his Influence', *Peritia*, 15 (2001), 48–57. In Aldhelm, see *Pdv*, 55, lines 1–5, at p. 715.

<sup>85</sup> As Sykes notes, such ornamentation is only acceptable when metaphorical; see *Monasteries and Families in Early Medieval England*, chapter 3, section 5.

<sup>86</sup> Clark, 'Familiar Distances', 49–50.

(I play in turns with not one [kind of] appearance but with a varying semblance of yellow gold and sparkling silver. I don a gem-studded appearance for mortals so that they will love me, so that they will lose the glorious gifts of the life to come.)

Vainglorious Boasting revels in physical rather than spiritual adornment, which she dons, playfully, in order to turn human heads and, thus, deprive them of eternal life in heaven. Near the end of that riddle, Vainglorious Boasting returns to this idea and makes it clear that her power lies specifically in steering people toward things that are not necessary for their survival:

Et gemma et aurum et vestis, lanugine texunt  
 Quam Seres vermes, propria ad mea iura recurrunt.  
 Omnia humanis non necessaria rebus,  
 Quae homines longe lateque habere videntur:  
 Usibus ecce meis serviunt sub mente superba. (20–24)

(The gem and the gold and the clothing, which Chinese worms weave from their down, return to my own jurisdiction. All things that are not necessary for human affairs, which human beings are seen to have far and wide: behold, they serve my purposes within a proud mind.)

The focus is on adornment once again, and Vainglorious Boasting explicitly states that the use of this unnecessary ornamentation serves her purposes when in combination with a ‘mente superba’ (‘proud mind’). On the other hand, while Virginitas of the Humble is spiritually adorned and endowed with a beauty that surpasses physical finery, Boniface steers us away from the possibility of pride in that exalted state and toward humility. Virginitas of the Humble’s adornment is warranted because it is spiritual rather than physical, but Boniface nevertheless qualifies it: even spiritual ornamentation must be accompanied by humility; even spiritual riches may be at risk from a proud mind. The lesson of remaining vigilant against vice that drives the Psychomachian tradition is shaped by Boniface into vigilance specifically against taking pride in virginitas, just as Aldhelm would have wished. *Humble* virginitas is the virtuous character trait with which he encourages his community to identify.

This idea is further developed in Boniface’s riddle about humility, which is closely tied to *Virginitas ... humilium*.<sup>87</sup> *Humilitas Cristiana* (‘Christian Humility’) confesses:

Hic inter numeror sacras vix sola sorores,  
 Vestibus in spretis specie quia nigrior exsto.  
 Multi me spernunt, cunctis dispector en sum,  
 In terris nusquam similatur vilior ulla,  
 5 Libertatis opem dominus sed dabit in aethra:  
 Ima solo quantum, tantum fio proxima caelo.  
 Terras indutus me Christus sanguine salvat;  
 Ardua caelorum conscendet culmina nullus,  
 Si me forte caret, propria nec sorte sorores,  
 10 Cum domino Christo una sint carissima sponsa.  
 Ruricolae et reges, pueri innuptaeque puellae,  
 Innumeri heroes nati melioribus annis,  
 Sanctorum excellens martyrum pulchra corona,

<sup>87</sup> Although the order of Boniface’s riddles varies across manuscripts, *Virginitas ait humilium* follows *Humilitas Cristiana fatetur* in all six of the manuscripts we have consulted.

- Terribilesque viri meritis cum matribus almis,  
 15 In tanto numero, excepta me, viribus audax  
 Altithroni nullus capiet pia gaudia regis,  
 Ni iugiter nutrix et tutrix omnibus adsim,  
 Aeterni placens et mulcens pectora regis.  
 Flebilis et vacuus vocitatur mente monachus,  
 20 Acta mea pravo tumidus si corde refutat.  
 Terrigenis paucis conprobor amabilis hospes,  
 Et tamen altithroni nato lectissima virgo  
 Trano comes plures ducens super aethra phalanges,  
 Viribus et sponsi fidens sum sancta virago,  
 25 Regi regnorum mea simplex foedera servo.

(Here I alone am hardly numbered among the holy sisters; I stand out in my scorned garments because [I am] blacker in appearance. Many scorn me. Indeed, I am more disregarded than all; nowhere on earth is anyone held as more worthless, but the Lord will give [me] the gift of liberty in heaven: by as much as I am lowest on earth, by just so much I am closest to heaven. Having dressed in me, Christ saves the world with [his] blood; no one ascends the steep heights of the heavens if by chance they lack me, not [even] my sisters by their own lot, because I alone am the spouse most dear to the Lord Christ. Farmers and kings, boys and unmarried girls, countless heroes born in better times, the excellent, beautiful host of holy martyrs, and men awe-inspiring for their worthiness, along with nourishing mothers, in so great a number—without me, no one, however daring in strength, can experience the merciful joys of the high-throned king, unless I, a teacher and guardian to all, am constantly present, pleasing and appeasing the heart of the eternal king. A monk is called lamentable and empty of mind if, swollen in his perverse heart, he refutes my deeds. I prove to be a lovable guest for few earth-dwellers, and nevertheless, the most excellent virgin for the son of the high-throned one, I travel as a companion, leading many troops above the heavens, and, trusting in the strength of my spouse, I am a holy heroine. Guileless, I preserve my covenants with the king of realms.)

A legitimate first reaction to this passage's striking characterization of Christian Humility would be to think of the Song of Solomon. In the Vulgate, the bride proclaims, 'Nigra sum, sed formosa' ('I am black but beautiful').<sup>88</sup> Much theological debate has centred on the significance of the conjunction that links 'nigra' ('black') and 'formosa' ('beautiful'). In Hebrew the conjunction can mean either 'and' or 'but',<sup>89</sup> but the Latin Vulgate's choice of 'sed' makes 'nigra' the opposite of 'formosa' and thus equates blackness with ugliness in a way that is racializing and racist.<sup>90</sup> Early Christian allegorical tradition grapples with this blackness by interpreting the bride as a symbol either of the Church's humility or of the repentance of the individual soul.<sup>91</sup> Given the identity of the speaker here (Christian Humility), all this could be relevant to Boniface's poem. However,

<sup>88</sup> Song of Solomon 1:4, in *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, ed. Robert Weber, 2 vols (Stuttgart, 1983). Note that in most versions of the Bible, this is Song of Songs 1:5.

<sup>89</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and Around the Bible* (Stanford, CA, 2001), 58–9.

<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Siegelman, 'Whose Gotta Have it: Race, Gender, and Violence in the Song of Songs', PhD thesis, Drew University, 2020, 47–50; Erik Wade, 'Reading the Old English *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt* with Abbot Hadrian of Africa: The Influence of Byzantine Readings of the Song of Songs on Early Medieval England', in Annette Schellenberg (ed.), *The Song of Songs through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres* (Berlin, 2023), 89–113. See also the reclamation of this passage in Robert Kuloka Wabyanga, 'Song of Songs 1:5–7: The Africana Reading', *Journal of Southern Africa*, 150 (2014), 128–47.

<sup>91</sup> Hannah W. Matis, *The Song of Songs in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2019), 33 and 98; Mark S. M. Scott, 'Shades of Grace: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriological Exegesis of the "Black and Beautiful" Bride in Song of Songs 1:5', *Harvard Theological Review*, 99 (2006), 65–83. See, however, Wade's argument for Hadrian's different approach to this line ('Reading the Old English *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt*', 95–7).



there is a more proximate source that complicates the Song of Solomon-inspired traditions of the sinful soul or suffering church and explains why Boniface's Christian Humility is not simply 'nigra', but 'nigrior' in the comparative. That source suggests that a different interpretation of 'nigrior' is more likely here.

Unsurprisingly, that source is Aldhelm, and Boniface's fan-response to Aldhelm is both prominent and important. The character of Christian Humility says that she is disdained among the other virtues, her 'sacras ... sorores' (l. 1, 'holy sisters'): 'vestibus in spretis specie quia nigrior exsto' (l. 2, 'I stand out in my scorned garments because [I am] blacker in appearance'). Who she is blacker than is, of course, her sisters, but if we remember our store of Aldhelmian verse, we will recognize that 'nigrior exsto' is a convenient, metrically correct pair of feet drawn from Aldhelm's Riddle 44, *Ignis* ('Fire'),<sup>92</sup> which, in a similarly allusive manoeuvre, includes a veiled reference to Lucifer's pride:

Cum me vita foveat, sum clari sideris instar;  
Postmodum et fato victus pice nigrior exsto. (7–8)

(While life warms me, I am like a bright star; yet afterwards, conquered by fate, I stand out blacker than pitch.)

Here fire has a narrative that echoes the biography of the brightest of all angels, Lucifer. This is a trajectory of extremes, although the story is only elliptically told:<sup>93</sup> Lucifer's fate was to 'stand out' first as brightest, like Venus, the 'star' that bears his name. After his arrogance led him to rebel against God, fall, and take on a new identity as Satan, he stood out as blacker than the blackest imaginable thing, the useful sealing agent that lends its name to the expression 'pitch-black'. If we know Aldhelm's Riddle 44, we know what is at stake in the comparative 'nigrior'. It is not just that Christian Humility is less sparkly than the other Virtues; rather, she is a figure of extreme blackness, blacker than pitch, and her appearance, like her nature, represents the opposite of Lucifer's shining figure of pride. In quoting Aldhelm's riddle here, then, Boniface does not simply borrow a convenient metrical unit. Rather, he creates a character who subverts the easy move from light to darkness and divine service to sin. Just as Aldhelm's light-bearer is left 'standing out' both for and in darkness, so the other Virtues, if not accompanied by Christian Humility, can share in the dire fate of the brightest of angels. Boniface's blacker Christian Humility thus stands out for her blackness, which can bring everyone into the light of heaven. The full story of this character is only clear, however, if Boniface's reader can supply the other, sinister comparator that lurks behind Aldhelm's riddle, and thus behind this fan-response.

Christian Humility in her blackness may be spurned ('multi me spernunt', l. 3 'many scorn me') and unwelcome ('paucis ... amabilis hospes', l. 21, 'a guest lovable to few'), but she is not reluctant to claim a, or rather *the*, central role: 'excepta me, viribus audax, | Altithroni nullus capiet pia gaudia regis' (ll. 15–16, 'without me, no one, however daring in strength, can experience the merciful joys of the high-throned king'). This claim is not unusual; other Virtues, too, state that no one can get to heaven without them.<sup>94</sup> Christian Humility, however, goes further. No one can enter heaven without her, not even if they come equipped with the other Virtues:

Ardua caelorum conscendet culmina nullus,  
Si me forte caret, propria nec sorte sorores,  
Cum domino Christo una sint carissima sponsa. (8–10)

<sup>92</sup> The borrowing and its connection to Lucifer are noted in Orchard, *Commentary*, 54–5 and 241.

<sup>93</sup> Aldhelm is similarly elliptical in his Riddle 81, whose solution is *Lucifer* ('The Morning Star'). Boniface's *Superbia* ('Pride') refers to Lucifer more directly in line 9.

<sup>94</sup> See *Fides catholica* ('Catholic Faith') (9), *Spes fatur* ('Hope speaks') (3), and *Pax vera Christiana* ('True Christian Peace') (21).

(no one ascends the steep heights of the heavens if by chance they lack me, not [even] my sisters by their own lot, because I alone am the spouse most dear to the Lord Christ.)

The rhyming opposition between 'me forte' and 'nec sorte' in line 9 draws attention to Christian Humility's extraordinary claim to be the one key Virtue and the single, most beloved bride of Christ. In short, she is the 'lectissima virgo' (l. 22, 'most excellent virgin'). These lines, of course, echo the passage from Aldhelm's *Cdv* we discussed above, particularly line 2761: 'Culmina celsa valet humilis conscendere virgo' ('the humble virgin is able to ascend the towering heights'). Here, Boniface has the character of Christian Humility directly declare her importance as an aid to earthly people who wish to ascend to heaven. Furthermore, the riddle makes clear that pride is an issue for the monastic community through another Aldhelmian echo in lines 19–20: 'Flebilis et vacuus vocitatur mente monachus, | Acta mea pravo tumidus si corde refutat' ('A monk is called lamentable and empty of mind if, swollen in his perverse heart, he refutes my deeds').<sup>95</sup> Here we have *Cdv*'s 'tumido ... mentis ... typho' (l. 2753, 'puffed-up vanity of the mind') returning to remind us that the monastic way of life does not guarantee either the lack of pride or the presence of humility.

Boniface's riddling fan-response makes it clear that Virginity on its own is not enough, that there is a special, troubling relationship between Virginity and Vainglorious Boasting, and that the scorned appearance of Christian Humility conceals the more important Virtue. Thus, while the order of the virtues and vices vary from manuscript to manuscript, the riddles about humility and virginity always sit next to one another so that Boniface's characters can engage in a conversation with each other. The chorus of voices in his collection shapes the characters into two distinct groups, and there is no ambiguity about which group Boniface wants his reader to identify with—or who is 'us' and who is 'them'. Yet, avoiding vice and embracing virtue is not the full story. Fully understanding this riddle collection's message depends upon recognizing in it Aldhelm's own warning about pride in virginity. If the unnamed female recipient of Boniface's effort gift knew Aldhelm well, she would see that Boniface was not simply lifting words and metrical units from Aldhelm but rather engaging with specific ideas from his model to create something, like fan fiction, that is not entirely original but is nevertheless a development of its source. It is this recognition that establishes Boniface and his recipient as members of Aldhelm's fandom, as members of the same community, and as sharers of the same group identity.

## CONCLUSION

In *Vana gloria iactantia* ('Vainglorious Boasting'), Boniface condenses Aldhelm's wonderfully bombastic diatribe against the ability of the Vices to undermine the Virtues down to three simple but effective lines:

Ieiunium pariter, solamina et pauperis aegri,  
 Almisonaeque preces claris cum laudibus una  
 Clam pereunt, factor si non est cautus in actu.      (11–13)

(Fasting along with the relief of the poor and sick, even pious prayers together with bright praise—these alike secretly perish, if the doer is not careful in the act.)

<sup>95</sup> Although the manuscripts agree on this reading, Orchard emends *monachus* ('monk') to *monarchus* ('monarch'), stating that 'there seems no particular reason to single out monks as lacking humility'; see *Old English and Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition*, 718. Orchard supports his emendation by noting problems with the metre at this point (*Commentary*, 242, n. to 9.19). We disagree, however, because Boniface devotes a great deal of thought to monastic humility and sin, both here and elsewhere. See also his letter to Cuthbert in year 747, which laments how vanity and pride invite other vices into religious environments (Tangl no. 78).

Virtuous people must take care or risk losing their place in heaven. This warning occurs repeatedly throughout Boniface's riddle collection and is one of its most important responses to the Psychomachian tradition.

The collection itself emphasizes the interconnectedness of Boniface's characters—both the Virtues and the Vices—who are positioned in relation to and in conversation with one another, but also as two distinct groups. His ultimate source is, of course, Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, whose echoes are everywhere within these conversations. Boniface's warning about taking pride in virginity and his emphasis on humility are thus a symptom of his larger project to voice Aldhelm's own qualms about his potentially dangerous elevation of Virginity—or, indeed, as Vainglorious Boasting reveals, any Virtue. Only the right kind of reader, however, who can see the changes that Boniface has made in the context of Aldhelm's own work on Virginity, is likely to understand the import of the new balance presented here, with its unique scheme of ten Virtues and ten Vices. The story is familiar, and woven out of the same materials, but it is told in a new way.

We do not know who the dear sister invited to ruminate upon this new creation was, but the characteristics of Boniface's effort gift suggest that she shared with Boniface an epistolary community, Aldhelmian fandom, and group identity. Unlike later scribes and scholars, that is, this valued friend was expected to understand the full significance of the intellectual labour that Boniface put into his twenty unique riddles—whose game is so different from all other surviving riddles from this period. If we can extrapolate from the fan gift economy, she likely shared this effort gift with her own monastic sisters and invited them to join in the fandom, too. We, thus, imagine a learned community that playfully engaged with a collection whose characteristics have been misunderstood and whose method we have begun to spell out here.

*University of Birmingham and Royal Holloway, University of London, UK*