

# Arachnophobia and Early English Literature

Cavell, Megan

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Megan Cavell

University of Birmingham

### Arachnophobia and Early English Literature<sup>1</sup>

‘If the terrestrial world is a stage, then any predator as abundant and ubiquitous as the spider must be a major character in the ensuing ecological and evolutionary dramas’.<sup>2</sup>

In view of their great variety, number and pervasiveness in everyday life, the impact of spiders in any given cultural climate cries out for investigation.<sup>3</sup> While the abundance of spiders makes them central to the study of ecology and evolution, their commonness and long collective lifespan also position them as prime material for historical discussion. It is, however, these creatures’ literary potential that stands out in the above-quoted ecologist’s metaphor. As a highly resilient family, spiders would likely have been as common in early

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the European Union Co-fund scheme and Durham University for funding my initial research on this topic. My thanks also go to Daniel Anlezark, Richard Dance, Francis Leneghan and M. J. Toswell for their comments on earlier drafts, and to this journal’s editors and anonymous reviewers. Any remaining errors are my own.

<sup>2</sup> David H. Wise, *Spiders in Ecological Webs* (Cambridge, 1993), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Spiders and their ancestors have existed for hundreds of millions of years; there are now well over forty thousand documented species around the world, with new species discovered at a rate of about five hundred per year. The oldest fossilized spider remains in England are roughly 140 million years old. See Katarzyna Michalska and Sergiusz Michalski, *Spider* (London, 2010), 7, 19; and Martin Brasier, Laura Cotton and Ian Yenny, ‘First Report of Amber with Spider Webs and Microbial Inclusions from the Early Cretaceous (c. 140 Ma) of Hastings, Sussex’, *Journal of the Geological Society* 166 (2009), 989–97.

and high medieval England as they are today,<sup>4</sup> making encounters between them and the human communities responsible for our surviving texts certain. How much did the common presence of spiders in quotidian contexts influence writers in this period? One of this article's aims is to address this question, by surveying the background to and instances of spider imagery in Old and early Middle English, with reference to biblical, medical, philosophical, penitential, homiletic, hagiographic, and bestiary texts.

It is, however, true that commonness is not always a predictor of popularity within written texts. If spiders do not immediately spring to mind as an animal emblematic of early English literature it is because they are not; references to these abundant creatures are few and far between. From the perspective of Old English, literary engagement with the non-human world frequently betrays a focus on human interests. Hence, predators (wolves, serpents, and birds of prey) abound, as do creatures with heroic connotations (horses and boars), and agricultural animals (cattle and bees). Still, as John Baker points out in his discussion of invertebrates in English place-names, '[t]hese small creatures are an ever-present aspect of human existence, and although they may not often inspire poetic outpourings or the interest of bureaucrats, they must have occupied a certain space in the early medieval consciousness, as

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, despite their small size and fragility, remains of large and small arachnids are noted in the English archaeological record. Harry Kenward, 'Invertebrates in Archaeology in the North of England', *English Heritage Research Department Report Series* 12 (2009), 62. A project mapping the insect fauna in the reconstructed Anglo-Saxon dwellings at West Stow also – perhaps obviously – found spiders in the pitfall traps set throughout the site. Harry Kenward and Jess Tipper, 'Insect Invaders of Reconstructed Anglo-Saxon Houses at West Stow, Suffolk, England', *Environmental Archaeology* 13 (2008), 51–7 (53).

they still do today'.<sup>5</sup> My question, then, is how spiders in particular occupied this space in the medieval consciousness: were they simply present in the background or were they ever considered to be significant to human life in the early and high Middle Ages?

One of the most remarkable aspects of modern human-spider relations is the prevalence of arachnophobia in places with few or no highly dangerous spider species.<sup>6</sup> There is still debate among psychologists about the extent to which spider-specific phobias stem from humans' evolutionary history and/or social learning.<sup>7</sup> Also under debate is the precise emotion that drives this phobia: fear and/or disgust? Fear is a response to the threat of danger or pain, which motivates an animal to freeze, attack or seek to escape, depending on the

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<sup>5</sup> 'Entomological Etymologies: Invertebrates in English Place-names', in *Representing Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia*, ed. Michael D. J. Bintley and Thomas J. T. Williams (Woodbridge, 2015), 229–52 (229).

<sup>6</sup> Michalska and Michalski, *Spider*, 41–53.

<sup>7</sup> See Michalska and Michalski, *Spider*, 44; Arne Öhman and Susan Mineka, 'Fears, Phobias, and Preparedness: Toward an Evolved Module of Fear and Fear Learning', *Psychological Review* 108.3 (2001), 483–522; Carlos Magalhães Coelho and Helena Purkis, 'The Origins of Specific Phobias: Influential Theories and Current Perspectives', *Review of General Psychology* 13 (2009), 335–48; Antje B.M. Gerdes, Gabriele Uhl, and Georg W. Alpers, 'Spiders are Special: Fear and Disgust Evoked by Pictures of Arthropods', *Evolution and Human Behavior* 30 (2009), 66–73; Graham C. L. Davey, 'The "Disgusting" Spider: The Role of Disease and Illness in the Perpetuation of Fear of Spiders', *Society and Animals* 2 (1994), 17–25; Harald Merckelbach, Peter J. de Jong, Peter Muris, and Marcel A. van den Hout, 'The Etiology of Specific Phobias: A Review', *Clinical Psychology Review* 16.4 (1996), 337–61 (349–50, 355); and Geoffrey K. Isbister, 'Necrotic Arachnidism: The Mythology of a Modern Plague', *Lancet* 364 (2004): 549–53.

specific circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Disgust, on the other hand, is an emotion that manifests in the physiological reaction of nausea, avoidance, and an aversion to contamination by an object/being; as an adaptive trait, disgust aims to prevent the eating of objects/beings that may transmit disease.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, however, it is not the precise origins and emotional reactions of arachnophobia that are of concern to this article, but rather the long-ranging and widespread nature of the phobia, along with milder forms of fear, disgust and dislike. An aversion to spiders – triggered by a perceived predatory threat, a desire to avoid the transmission of disease by a disgust-evoking object/being, or a combination of the two – has come to mark human-spider relations in a way that has significant implications for their literary and cultural history.

Whether or not traces of this phenomenon can be identified in those few early English texts that mention spiders is another concern of this paper. In fact, I will argue that an aversion to spiders is present in several early English texts, including the Old English translation of Boethius' *De consolacione philosophiae*, the *Handbook for the Use of a Confessor*, Psalm 89 from the *Paris Psalter*, the early Middle English *Physiologus* and, perhaps most intriguingly yet metaphorically, the Old English poetic *Judith*. In adapting Latin sources, the majority of these texts highlight an aggressiveness that aligns spiders with the monstrous, and thus they amount to the earliest potential evidence for arachnophobia to appear in vernacular English texts. Given that these implications reach beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries, the detailed and nuanced literary and cultural history of human-spider

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<sup>8</sup> Öhman and Mineka, 'Fears, Phobias, and Preparedness', 483. See also Arne Öhman, 'Fear and Anxiety: Overlaps and Dissociations', in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones and Lisa Feldman Barrett, 3rd edn (London, 2008), 709–29.

<sup>9</sup> Davey, 'Diguisting Spider', 20. See also Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark R. McCauley, 'Disgust', *Handbook of Emotions*, 757–76.

relations in early and high medieval England that this article aims to bring to light may be of interest to an audience across several fields in the humanities and sciences.

### **Spiders in Context: Classical and Late Antique Artistry**

Since arachnophobia may have at least partial origins in social learning (which varies from culture to culture), I will address the background to and wider context of medieval spider references before turning to the vernacular material that forms the focus of this essay. There is a good range of in-depth evidence for classical and Late Antique interest in spiders, particularly in relation to their artistic and industrious behaviour.

In addition to encountering spiders on a daily basis, learned Anglo-Saxons may have come across these creatures in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (early first-century CE). As Michael Lapidge and Marilina Cesario have both recently argued, fragments and quotations indicate that this text was likely known to at least some Anglo-Saxons.<sup>10</sup> Notably, Ovid's work contains what is now perhaps the most famous reference to the myth of Arachne's transformation into a spider. This story, which demonstrates a clear link between spiders and artistry through its depiction of the textile-making competition of Arachne and Athena, makes

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<sup>10</sup> See Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), 67, 98, 111–12, 115, 183, 221, 248–9; and Cesario, 'The Myth of Scylla in Aldhelm's *Aenigmata*', in *The Anglo Saxons: The World through their Eyes*, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Brian W. Schneider, BAR British Series 595 (Oxford, 2014), 103–10 (106–10). Only one short excerpt from the *Metamorphoses* appears in a surviving Anglo-Saxon manuscript. See Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100* (Toronto, 2014), 664 (no. 919).

no mention of a fear of or disgust toward spiders themselves. Rather, Arachne's transformation is depicted as the sad result of her inciting the wrath of the goddess:

non tulit infelix laqueoque animosa ligavit  
guttura: pendentem Pallas miserata levavit  
atque ita "vive quidem, pende tamen, improba" dixit,  
"lexque eadem poenae, ne sis secura futuri,  
dicta tuo generi serisque nepotibus esto!"  
post ea discedens sucis Hecateidos herbae  
sparsit: et extemplo tristi medicamine tactae  
defluxere comae, cum quis et naris et aures,  
fitque caput minimum; toto quoque corpore parva est:  
in latere exiles digiti pro cruribus haerent,  
cetera venter habet, de quo tamen illa remittit  
stamen et antiquas exercet aranea telas.<sup>11</sup>

(The wretched girl could not endure it, and put a noose about her bold neck. As she hung, Pallas lifted her in pity, and said: "Live on, indeed, wicked girl, but hang thou still; and let this same doom of punishment (that thou mayst fear for future times as well) be declared upon thy race, even to remote posterity." So saying, as she turned to go she sprinkled her with the juices of Hecate's herb; and forthwith her hair, touched by the poison, fell off, and with it both nose and ears; and the head shrank up; her whole body also was small; the slender fingers clung to her side as legs; the rest was belly. Still from this she ever spins a thread; and now, as a spider, she exercises her old-time weaver-art.)

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<sup>11</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses: Books 1–8*, ed./trans. Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library 42, 3rd edn (London, 1977), Book VI, 296/8, lines 134–45 (translation, 297/9).

Although Ovid couches Athena's actions in terms of pity, he also indicates that the transformation is a punishment for Arachne and her descendants. The girl's movement from human to spider is certainly a grotesque one – as are all the transformations that take place within the *Metamorphoses* – and yet the tension of this scene stems more from the transformation itself than the physical form of the spider Arachne is forced to assume. What makes this a grotesque punishment is Arachne's loss of humanity. While the fact that she can still practise her weaving may provide some consolation, it also acts as a constant reminder of her crime.

Arachne is likewise present – this time as the supposed inventor of linen – in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (late first-century CE).<sup>12</sup> Four manuscripts containing excerpts of this text survive from Anglo-Saxon England (dating from the eighth to eleventh centuries), implying that it was disseminated more widely there than Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>13</sup> While the reference to Arachne provides a link between Ovid's and Pliny's interest in spiders, it is in the latter's descriptions of spiders themselves that we find a fascination with the creatures' artistry. This fascination is typical of the period, as Ian C. Beavis notes in his study of classical invertebrates: 'the attitude toward spiders in antiquity [...] was generally a favourable one', with a tendency to view the industriousness of these creatures alongside that of bees and ants, and the skill of web-making as a sign of intelligence.<sup>14</sup>

Pliny – drawing on Aristotle's *Historia animalium* – has a great deal to say about the different types of spiders, from venomous hunters to hole-dwellers and web-spinners. The last

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<sup>12</sup> Pliny, *Natural History: Books 3–7*, ed./trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 352, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA, 1983), Book VII.56, 638 (translation, 639).

<sup>13</sup> Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, 297 (no. 373), 346 (no. 423), 350 (no. 428.4), 602 (no. 838).

<sup>14</sup> *Insects and Other Invertebrates in Classical Antiquity* (Exeter, 1988), 39.



of these takes up the majority of his chapter on spiders, where he praises the artfulness of spider-webs and the cleverness of the predator who creates them. The following is an excerpt:

tam moderato ungue, tam tereti filo et tam aequali deducit stamina, ipso se  
pondere usus. texere a medio incipit circinato orbe subtemina adnectens,  
maculasque paribus semper intervallis sed subinde crescentibus ex angusto  
dilatans indissolubili nodo implicat. quanta arte celat pedicas scutulato rete  
grassantes! quam non ad hoc videtur pertinere crebrae pexitas telae et  
quadam politurae arte ipsa per se tenax ratio tramae! quam laxis ad flatum ad  
non respuenda quae veniant sinus! derelicta a lasso praetendi summa parte  
arbitrere licia: at illa difficile cernuntur atque ut in plagis lineae offensae  
praecipitant in sinum. specus ipse qua concamaratur architectura!<sup>15</sup>

(with such careful use of its claw and such a smooth and even thread it spins  
the warp, employing itself as a weight. It starts weaving at the centre, twining  
in the woof in a circular round, and entwists the meshes in an unloosable knot,  
spreading them out at intervals that are always regular but continually grow  
less narrow. How skilfully it conceals the snares that lurk in its checkered net!  
How unintentional appears to be the density of the close warp and the plan of  
the woof, rendered by a sort of scientific smoothing automatically tenacious!  
How its bosom bellies to the breezes so as not to reject things that come to it!  
You might think the threads had been left by a weary weaver stretching in  
front at the top; but they are difficult to see, and, like the cords in hunting-nets,  
when the quarry comes against them throw it into the bosom of the net. With  
what architectural skill is the vaulting of the actual cave designed!)

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<sup>15</sup> Pliny, *Natural History: Books 8–11*, ed./trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 353, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA, 1983), Book 11.28, 480/2 (translation, 481/3).

Pliny's spider 'arte' (skillfully) conceals the trap, which is itself depicted as a feat of 'architectura' (architecture). The focus here is on the beauty and detail of the web, although the predatory nature of spiders does also draw some attention. Later in this chapter, we hear of the creatures' attentiveness:

quam remotus a medio aliudque agentis similis, inclusus vero sic ut sit necne intus aliquis cerni non possit! [...] cum vero captura incidit, quam vigilans et paratus accursus! licet extrema haereat plaga, semper in medium currit, quia sic maxime totum concutiendo implicat.<sup>16</sup>

(How distant it is from the centre, and how its intention is concealed, although it is really so roofed in that it is impossible to see whether somebody is inside or not! [...] But when a catch falls into the web, how watchfully and alertly it runs to it! although it may be clinging to the edge of the net, it always runs to the middle, because in that way it entangles the prey by shaking the whole.)

Here, the spider is praised for being 'vigilans et paratus' (watchful and alert). Despite the potential for finding fault with the secrecy of the spider's method of attack, the tone of this text is distinctly enthusiastic.

The Late Antique writers known to the Anglo-Saxons approach spiders through a similar lens as the above classical texts. We find a skillful spider, for example, in the fourth/fifth-century collection of *enigmata* (riddles) by Symphosius.<sup>17</sup> This collection provided a model for Anglo-Saxon riddle-composers, and several Anglo-Latin and Old

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<sup>16</sup> *Natural History*, Book 11.28, 482 (translation, 483).

<sup>17</sup> For more on the date of this collection, see T. J. Leary, *Symphosius: The Aenigmata. An Introduction, Text and Commentary* (London, 2014), 4–6.

English poems draw directly from the Late Antique author.<sup>18</sup> Symphosius' *Enigma 17*, which is solved as *Aranea* (spider), reads:

Pallas me docuit texendi nosse laborem,  
Nec pepli radios poscunt nec licia telae;  
Nulla mihi manus est, pedibus tamen omnia fiunt.<sup>19</sup>  
(Pallas [Athena] taught me to know the work of weaving; my robes demand  
neither rods nor the threads of the warp; I have no hands, yet all things are  
made by my feet.)

Interest in the spider's anatomy, as well as the reference to the myth of Arachne, links this riddle to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In fact, the whole riddle turns on the differences between spider-weaving and human art. Even without Pliny's depth of description, Symphosius makes clear the artistic nature of this spider's creation, with the mention of the spider's 'pepli' (robes, especially robes of state) ascribing some status to the creature.

While Symphosian *enigmata* do appear alongside the work of a number of Anglo-Latin riddlers (including Aldhelm, Boniface, Eusebius and Tatwine) in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts,<sup>20</sup> and while a spider is depicted in the Old Norse riddles of *Gestumblindi*,<sup>21</sup> no

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<sup>18</sup> Aldhelm specifically refers to Symphosius in his *Epistola ad Acircium* (to which his *enigmata* are appended). *Aldhelmi opera omnia*, ed. Rudolf Ehwald, MGH Auct. ant. 15, 2 vols (Berlin, 1919), 1:75. See also Andy Orchard, ed./trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Riddle Tradition*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming 2017); and Joseph P. McGowan, 'An Introduction to the Corpus of Anglo-Latin Literature', in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Oxford, 2001), 11–49 (22–3).

<sup>19</sup> F. Glorie, ed., *Variae collectiones aenigmatum Merovingicae aetatis*, CCSL 133–133A (Turnhout, 1968), 133A:638 (my translation).

<sup>20</sup> See Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, 25–6 (no. 12) and 388 (no. 478).

such subject is found in the Anglo-Saxon riddle corpus. This is not for lack of interest in invertebrates as a group: there are seven invertebrates in Aldhelm's collection of one hundred *enigmata*,<sup>22</sup> one in Alcuin's *Pippini regales et nobillimi iuvenis disputatio cum Albino scholastico*,<sup>23</sup> one in Eusebius's collection of sixty *enigmata*,<sup>24</sup> and potentially two in the Old English riddles of the *Exeter Book*.<sup>25</sup> Notably, the continental Bern *enigmata*, a collection that may have Insular links, contains four texts about invertebrates, including a potential spider riddle (which will be discussed at greater length below).<sup>26</sup>

Many of these riddles, furthermore, were influenced by Isidore of Seville's early

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<sup>21</sup> This poem is mainly concerned with the spider's physical appearance – specifically the number of eyes and feet, and the positioning of the legs above the belly – and so it will not be addressed in detail here. See Christopher Tolkien, ed./trans., *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins Vitra; The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (London, 1960), 34, st. 49.

<sup>22</sup> *Enigma 12, Bombix* (silkworm); *Enigma 20, Apis* (bee); *Enigma 34, Locusta* (locust); *Enigma 36, Snifes* (midge); *Enigma 38, Tippula* (water-strider); *Enigma 43, Sanguisuga* (leech); and *Enigma 75, Crabro* (hornet). Editions and translations of the Latin texts cited here and in the following four footnotes can be found in Orchard, *Anglo-Saxon Riddle Tradition*, forthcoming.

<sup>23</sup> No. 77, *Pediculi* (lice), which likely draws on Symphosius' *Enigma 30, Pediculi* (lice).

<sup>24</sup> *Enigma 51, De scorpione* (about the scorpion).

<sup>25</sup> *Riddle 47* (bookworm) and *Riddle 77* (oyster), according to the numbering system in George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds, *The Exeter Book*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York, 1936).

<sup>26</sup> *Enigma 21, De apibus* (on bees); *Enigma 28, De serico* (on silk; more aptly solved as 'silkworm'); *Enigma 43, De vermibus bombycibus sericas vestes formatis* (on silkworms that fashion silken garments; more aptly solved as 'spider'); *Enigma 47, De cochlea* (on a snail).

seventh-century *Etymologiae*.<sup>27</sup> Widely known in early and high medieval England, this text also includes a brief description of the spider:

Aranea vermis aeris, ab aeris nutrimento cognominata; quae exiguo corpore  
longa fila deducit, et telae semper intenta numquam desinit laborare,  
perpetuum sustinens in sua arte suspendium.<sup>28</sup>

(The spider is the insect of the air, named for its nourishment from the air; it  
spins long threads from its small body, and, always attentive to its web, never  
ceases to work, sustaining perpetual suspension in its own piece of art.)

This account of the spider not only focuses on its supposed etymology, but also makes reference to the association between spiders and art that stems from classical literature. In addition to the spider's art, Isidore also emphasizes the dedication of this craftsman who 'numquam desinit laborare' (never ceases to work). A classical and Late Antique admiration for the spider's skill as weaver and hunter is, therefore, clear in the influential works of Ovid, Pliny the Elder, Symphosius and Isidore. All these writers situate spiders in relation to industriousness and art, and together provide evidence for an intellectual approach to spiders that, as we will see, falters when it reaches early medieval England.

### **Spiders in Context: Biblical Fragility, Sin and Evil**

If classical and Late Antique spiders were diligent artists, then a competing tradition can be found in the biblical material that shaped much of early English literature. In the biblical

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<sup>27</sup> See Mercedes Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata* (Morgantown, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford, 1911), 2:XII.v.2 (my translation).

tradition, an association between spiders and fragility is the norm. This association typically carries negative connotations (as will be demonstrated below), but very occasionally the spider's fragility is invoked in a positive light.

We see this positivity, for example, in Bede's *Beati Felicis confessoris vita*, which draws on Paulinus of Nola's fourth-/fifth-century verse life of Felix. The passage in question occurs when Felix, fleeing religious persecution, hides behind a ruin. A pile of debris and spider-webs immediately spring up in front of the wall, and when his pursuers reach it one says:

Nonne stultum est nos huc hominem quaerendo ingredi, cum liquido appareat,  
neminem hic praeisse? quia si quisquam intrasset, nequaquam hic araneorum  
fila integra remanerent, quae etiam muscae perrumpentes minimae  
nonnunquam scindere solent.<sup>29</sup>

(Is it not foolish for us to begin searching for a person here, when it is perfectly clear that no one has been here before? Because, if anyone had entered, by no means would these threads of spiders have remained whole, which even the smallest flies are sometimes accustomed to tear through.)

Despite the miraculous context of this passage elevating the spider and webs, the underlying association between these creatures and fragility persists. Felix is protected precisely because his pursuers cannot imagine a person entering the ruin without destroying the webs that cover it. Also of note is the fact that these spider-webs are associated with the debris surrounding the ruined building; they are, thus, linked to both the abandonment of a human construction and its ensuing contamination by a creature who would otherwise have likely been kept at bay. In similar miraculous rescues from the Hebrew, Arabic, Japanese and Chinese traditions, a spider-web appears over the entrance to a cave or hollow of a tree rather than a rubble-

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<sup>29</sup> PL 94:0793B (my translation).

covered ruin.<sup>30</sup> The fragility of the web is, however, consistent across the variants employing this motif, and Bede emphasizes this aspect in his summation of the episode, in which he quotes his source:

et humilem Christus famulum suum a persequentibus armatis hostibus,  
tremulis araneorum casibus, ne inveniri vel capi posset, abscondit, vere ut  
venerabilis Pater Paulinus de his loquens ait:

..... Ubicunque

Christus adest nobis, et fiet aranea murus:

At cui Christus abest, et murus aranea fiet.<sup>31</sup>

(and Christ concealed his humble servant with the fragile webs of spiders, so that he was not able to be found or captured by pursuing armed enemies, as the venerable father Paulinus says concerning this, speaking truly: “Wherever Christ is near to us, a spider’s web will become a wall; but for him from whom Christ is distant, a wall will become a spider’s web.”)

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<sup>30</sup> Uri Rubin notes that a version of the spider-web episode in the Hebrew story of David fleeing Saul found in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* was the likely source of the similar episode in the Arabic legend of the prophet Muhammad’s flight from Mecca. ‘The Life of Muhammad and the Qur’ān: The Case of Muhammad’s *Hirja*’, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003), 40–64 (58). See also David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky, eds, *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature* (New Haven, 1998), 186; and Ian Richard Netton, *Islam, Christianity and the Mystic Journey: A Comparative Exploration* (Edinburgh, 2011), 54–8. For the story of the spider-web protecting the twelfth-century Japanese hero, Minamoto no Yoritomo, and its link to tenth-century histories of the Chinese general Liu Bang (247–195 BCE), see Vyjayanthi R. Selinger, *Authorizing the Shogunate: Ritual and Material Symbolism in the Literary Construction of Warrior Order* (Leiden, 2013), 54–5.

<sup>31</sup> PL 94:0793B–0793D (my translation).

Felix's spider is not, then, invoked for the sake of her/his industriousness or artistry. Rather, the fragility of this spider's web points toward Christ's great powers of protection.

When it comes to the lives of everyday or non-holy people, however, spiders are commonly invoked in negative contexts, particularly in the Old Testament. As E. Ruth Harvey notes, the biblical spider 'appears as a symbol of useless ingenuity, fleeting and insecure hope, and lifeless desiccation'.<sup>32</sup> This is perhaps best demonstrated in the Psalms – some of the most influential biblical texts during the medieval period. The first of two spiders appears in Psalm 38.12: 'propter iniquitatem corripuisti hominem / et tabescere fecisti sicut araneam animam eius'<sup>33</sup> (Thou hast corrected man for iniquity. And thou hast made his soul to waste away like a spider). The meaning is clear: sin eats away at the soul, which withers like a fragile spider. This psalm's interpretation in early medieval England is fairly straightforward, as its many Old English versions confirm. These tend to take a direct route to translating it.<sup>34</sup> See, for example:

Vespasian Psalter (from the Roman Psalter): 'fore unrehtwisnisse ðu ðreades

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<sup>32</sup> 'The Swallow's Nest and the Spider Web', in *Studies in English Language and Literature: 'Doubt wisely': Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley*, ed. M. J. Toswell and E. M. Tyler (London, 1996), 327–41 (332).

<sup>33</sup> All Vulgate quotations are from Bonifatius Fischer, Roger Gryson, Jean Gribomont, H. F. D. Sparks, Walter Thiele and Robert Weber, eds, *Biblia sacra: iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, 5th edn (Stuttgart, 2007). Unless otherwise stated, translations are from *The Holy Bible Douay-Rheims Version* (Baltimore, 1899), <http://drbo.org>. The Psalms printed in this edition are from the Gallican version; in this case, the passage is identical in the Roman Psalter. See Robert Weber, ed., *Le Psautier romain et les autres anciens psautiers latins: Édition Critique* (Rome, 1953), 85.

<sup>34</sup> For the full range of Old English spider terms, see below, 000.



mon 7 aswindan ðu des swe gongeweafran sawle his'<sup>35</sup> (for iniquity you corrected man and you made his soul waste away like a spider).

Regius Psalter (from the Roman Psalter): 'fore unryhtwisnesse þu nyrwdest mann weorpian ðu dydest swa swa rengan sawle his'<sup>36</sup> (for iniquity you constrained man; you made his soul languish like a spider).

Lambeth Psalter (from the Gallican Psalter): 'for unrihtwisnysse þu ðreadest mannan 7 aswarcen † acwinan 7 aydlia † aswindan þu dydest swaswa ætterloppan † ryngan sawle his'<sup>37</sup> (for iniquity you corrected man and you made his soul languish / dwindle and become useless / waste away like a spider / spider).

One further example in the eleventh-century *Paris Psalter* (from the Roman Psalter) is slightly freer and more explanatory than the original: 'Ælcne man þu þreast for his agenre

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<sup>35</sup> London, British Library, MS. Cotton Vespasian A.I, fol. 42v, in Sherman M. Kuhn, ed., *The Vespasian Psalter* (Ann Arbor, 1965), 36 (my translation). This manuscript is digitized at [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton\\_MS\\_Vespasian\\_A\\_I](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Vespasian_A_I) [accessed 7/11/2017].

<sup>36</sup> London, British Library, MS. Royal 2 B V, fol. 50r, in F. Roeder, ed., *Der altenglische Regius-Psalter*, Studien zur englischen Philologie 18 (Halle, 1904; repr. 1973), 71 (my translation). The manuscript is available online at [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal\\_ms\\_2\\_b\\_v\\_fs001r](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_2_b_v_fs001r).

<sup>37</sup> London, Lambeth Palace, MS. 427, fol. 50v, in U. Lindelöf, *Der Lambeth-Psalter*, Acta societatis scientiarum Fennicae 35.1 and 43.3 (Helsinki, 1909–14), 35.1:63–4 (my translation).

scylde and gedest þæt he aswint on his mode and wyrð swa tedre swa swa gangewifran nett<sup>38</sup>  
 (Each man you correct for his own sin and make it so that he wastes away in his soul and it becomes as fragile as a spider's web). Rather than the soul simply wasting away like a spider, here the translator points specifically to the soul's fragility and associates it with a web, choosing to interpret *aranea* in its secondary sense.<sup>39</sup>

The second psalm-spider builds on this fragility, depicting the passing of time and the negligibility of human lifespans. Psalm 89.9: 'quoniam omnes dies nostri defecerunt [et nos] in ira tua defecimus anni nostri sicut aranea meditabantur'<sup>40</sup> (For all our days are spent; and in thy wrath we have fainted away. Our years were considered as a spider). The translation of this psalm into Old English is likewise fairly straightforward in most cases, although some glossators did have trouble parsing the psalm's meaning, as the first two examples below indicate:

Vespasian Psalter: 'for ðon alle degas ure asprungun 7 we in eorre ðinum asprungun ger ur swe swe gongeweafre 7 grytte werun smegende'<sup>41</sup> (for all our days have ceased and in your anger we have ceased; our years were considered as a spider / sand<sup>42</sup>).

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<sup>38</sup> *King Alfred's Old English Prose Translation of the First Fifty Psalms*, ed. Patrick P. O'Neill (Cambridge, MA, 2001), Psalm 38.10, 147; and Patrick P. O'Neill, ed./trans., *Old English Psalms* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 136 (my translation).

<sup>39</sup> See Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933), s.v. *aranea*.

<sup>40</sup> The Gallican and Roman Psalters differ here; I have placed 'et nos' from the Roman in square brackets; note that the Roman Psalter also reads *meditabuntur* (will be considered). See Weber, *Le Psautier romain*, 225. The Douay-Rheims translation also reads 'shall be considered' here.

<sup>41</sup> Fol. 87v, in Kuhn, *Vespasian Psalter*, 88 (my translation).

<sup>42</sup> For more on this translation, see sense 2 of the term's entry in the *Dictionary of Old English*: 'part of a double gloss of *aranea* 'spider'; apparently the glossator wrote the obvious gloss first

Regius Psalter: ‘ealle dagas ure geteorodon 7 we on eorre þinum geteorodon gear ure renge ƿ frocga smeadoƿ’<sup>43</sup> (all our days have ceased and in your anger we have ceased; our years considered a spider / frog).

Lambeth Psalter: ‘forþi þe ealle ure dagas ateorodon on þinum yrre 7 we ateorodon ure gær swaswa lobbe ƿ rynge beoþ asmeade’<sup>44</sup> (for all our days have ceased and in your anger we have ceased; our years are considered as a spider / spider).

As in Psalm 38.12, the implication here is once again that spiders are inherently fragile.

Various commentaries on the Psalms also make the connection between spiders and fragility clear. The vast majority of commentaries available to the early medieval English are steeped in the biblical tradition’s interest in weakness and mortality. Hence, Augustine notes of Psalm 89.9: ‘Defecisse dies dicit, siue quod in eis deficiant homines amando quae transeunt, siue quod ad paucitatem redacti sint’<sup>45</sup> (He says our days have faltered, either because men falter in them by loving that which passes away, or because they are reduced to a *(gongeweafre)*; then he or a contemporary scribe, thinking that *aranaea* might be a mistake for *(h)arena* ‘sand’, supplied an alternative gloss’. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al., eds, *The Dictionary of Old English: A–H Online* (Toronto, 2016), <http://www.doe.utoronto.ca>, s.v. *grytt*. Hereafter cited as *DOE*.

<sup>43</sup> Fol. 107v, in Roeder, *Regius-Psalter*, 171 (my translation). Perhaps due to the mistaking of ‘aranaea’ for ‘rana’, a second, less polished gloss of ‘frocga’ (frog) appears next to the original gloss of ‘renge’ (spider) in this manuscript.

<sup>44</sup> Fol. 114v, in Lindelöf, *Lambeth-Psalter*, 35.1:145 (my translation).

<sup>45</sup> D. Eligius Dekkers and Johannes Fraipont, eds, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini: enarrationes in psalmos 51–100*, CCSL 39 (Turnhout, 1956), 1248 (my translation).

scarcity). While he does not elide spiders altogether, Jerome similarly has little more to say of this psalm verse than: ‘Ut araneorum telae sunt futiles et caducae, et ad omnem tactum cito pereunt: ita vita nostra fragilis et morti proxima est’<sup>46</sup> (Just as spiders’ webs are worthless and insecure, and are quickly destroyed at every touch: so is our life fragile and close to death).<sup>47</sup> Likewise, pseudo-Bede’s *De psalmorum libro exegesis* tells us: ‘id est, in corruptibilibus laboramus, et vana et inutilia conteximus, velut aranea’<sup>48</sup> (that is, we labour at corruptible things, and weave vain and useless things, like a spider). The focus is, thus, repeatedly on fragility and even futility.

In Cassiodorus’ sixth-century commentary, however, the fragility of humans and their spider counterparts gives way to a greater interest in evil.<sup>49</sup> Hence, Cassiodorus maintains that

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<sup>46</sup> Germanus Morin, ed., *Sancti Hieronymi presbyteri opera: commentarioli in psalmos* (Oxford, 1895), 69 (my translation).

<sup>47</sup> See also pseudo-Jerome’s *Breviarium in psalmos*: ‘Videte quid dicat. Quomodo aranea quasi mittit fila, et huc illucque discurrit, et textit tota die, et labor quidem grandis est, sed effectus nullus est, sic et vita hominum huc illucque discurrit. Possessiones quaerimus, divitias appetimus, procreamus filios, laboramus, in regna sustollimur, et omnia facimus, et non intelligimus, quia araneae telam teximus’ (Consider what it says. How just as the spider casts threads, and dashes about here and there, and weaves for the whole day, and certainly the effort is great, but the result is nothing, so the life of humans dashes about here and there. We strive for possessions, seek riches, produce children, labour, are raised on high in power, and make everything, but we do not understand, because we weave the web of a spider). PL 26:1094A (my translation).

<sup>48</sup> PL 93:0966B (my translation).

<sup>49</sup> See also Theodore of Mopsuestia’s commentary on Psalm 89.9: ‘Et in ira tua deficimus. Ita omnis uita nostra sine mora consumpta est, ut facile araneorum ossa rumpuntur. Sicut aranea quippe meditabuntur, – id est, festinant in telas sedulo, – sic aetas nostra instantium malorum assiduitate detrita est, nullas per hostes indutias adepta est laboris’ (‘And in thy wrath we have fainted away.’ So,

the comparison between human lives and spiders is an apt one because:

Malignitatem uitae nostrae posita similitudo declarat. Aranea est enim animal debile ac tenuissimum, quod transeuntibus muscis ad escam sibi procurandam quaedam retia dolose contextit: sic anni eorum qui sceleratis operibus dediti sunt, inanibus et subdolis machinationibus occupantur.<sup>50</sup>

(The specified parallel reveals the malice of our lives. For a spider is a weak and feeble animal, which cunningly weaves nets for passing flies in order to procure its food. Thus the years of those who are devoted to evil deeds are occupied with empty and deceitful tricks.)

Cassiodorus then goes on to quote Isidore and to note the lack of profit in years spent this way. This commentary is notable for its focus on humanity's malice, evil and deceitfulness, which are linked to the spider's cunning use of 'retia' (nets) for trapping flies. Although the presence of such a contraption echoes Pliny's description of arachnids' marvelous hunting qualities, Cassiodorus' spider remains – as in the biblical tradition – 'debile ac tenuissimum' (weak and feeble), and ultimately focused on attaining her/his meal through deceptive means. It is the creature's fragility, and the way it resorts to deception to compensate for this

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our entire life is destroyed without delay, as easily as the bones of a spider are broken. Thus, "Our years shall be considered as a spider," – that is, they hasten, busily, into their webs, – and thus our lifetime is wasted away in the practice of evil pursuits, no cessation of labour is gained through the enemy). *Theodori Mopsuesteni expositionis in psalmos Iuliano Aeclanensi interprete in Latinum uersae quae supersunt*, ed. Luc de Coninck and Maria Joespha d'Hont, CCSL 88A (Turnhout, 1977), 311 (my translation).

<sup>50</sup> *Magni Aurelii Cassiodori expositio psalmorum LXXI–CL*, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 98 (Turnhout, 1958), 825 (my translation). This influential passage can also be found in Bruno of Wurzburg's eleventh-century *Expositio psalmorum*. See PL 142:0336B–0336C.

weakness, that lays the groundwork for the analogy between the spider's cunning hunting methods and human sin.

Cassiodorus' interest in malice and evil may well stem from the fact that the majority of Old Testament spider references appear in the context of sin and idolatry. Though still fragile, these spiders – or more specifically their webs – are invoked in distinctly negative contexts. Hence, in Job 8.14, Baldad speaks of the hypocrite who forgets God, saying: 'non ei placebit vecordia sua et sicut tela araneorum fiducia eius' (His folly shall not please him, and his trust shall be like the spider's web). The hypocrite's word is easily broken, in other words. Isaias 59.5-6 builds on this negative association of spider-webs when linking the works of sinners with the spider's industriousness, which is depicted as ultimately futile:

ova aspidum ruperunt et telas araneae texuerunt / qui comederit de ovis eorum morietur / et quod confotum est erumpet in regulum / telae eorum non erunt in vestimentum neque operientur operibus suis / opera eorum opera inutilia et opus iniquitatis in manibus eorum.

(They [i.e., sinners] have broken the eggs of asps, and have woven the webs of spiders: he that shall eat of their eggs, shall die: and that which is brought out, shall be hatched into a basilisk. Their webs shall not be for clothing, neither shall they cover themselves with their works: their works are unprofitable works, and the work of iniquity is in their hands).

The works of sinners are futile because in time God will sweep them away like the fragile webs of spiders to which they are metaphorically connected. The association of spider-webs, futility and fragility is also specifically linked to idolatry in Osee 8.6: 'quia ex Israhel et ipse est / artifex fecit illum et non est Deus / quoniam in araneorum telas erit vitulus Samariae' (For itself also is the invention of Israel: a workman made it, and it is no god: for the calf of Samaria shall be turned to spiders' webs). Sinful acts, and specifically impious or idolatrous

acts are, thus, depicted repeatedly in terms of the fragile work of spiders in the Old Testament.

This biblical approach to the spider-web as a fragile and futile construction with links to sin and evil is also evident in Bede's *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, which makes direct reference to God breaking the snares of the devil like a spider-web:

didicerat temptatis multifarias antiqui hostis pandere uersutias, quibus facile caperetur animus, qui uel fraterno uel diuino amore nudatus existeret, at qui integra fide roboratus incederet, insidias aduersarii Domino auxiliante quasi casses transiret araneae.<sup>51</sup>

(he had learned to reveal to the tempted the multifarious deceits of the ancient enemy, by which the soul that appears unprotected by brotherly or divine love might easily be trapped, but that might go forth strengthened by untarnished faith, [and] with God helping might pass by the snares of the enemy like the webs of a spider.)

With God on one's side, Bede tells his audience, evil snares are to be feared as much as a spider-web – that is, not at all. This reference is clearly founded in the biblical tradition's association of spiders and fragility, and it points toward a fundamental difference between the biblical and classical approaches to these creatures. As demonstrated above, the classical tradition is much more interested in recounting observations of spiders, as well as their skill and artistry, while in the biblical tradition these creatures and their works are invoked allegorically to stand in for (at best) weakness and (at worst) evil.

### Anglo-Saxon Spiders

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<sup>51</sup> *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed./trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940; repr. New York, 1969), ch. 22, 228 (my translation).

A tradition that treats spiders with such negativity – like that outlined above – poses a problem for a survey of arachnophobia in a literary culture so heavily influenced by Christianity. That is to say, how can we tell the difference between a genuine, early English fear of or disgust toward spiders and simply an inherited approach that employs them as an allegorical figure of sin or evil? There is, of course, no reason to claim that any given spider-reference must relate to only one or the other of these influences. A predisposition for arachnophobia may well feed on the negative associations of spiders from the biblical tradition. However, a good way to approach this issue is to bear in mind that the sinfulness or evil of biblical spiders is specifically a fragile one. If this fragility does not appear in the English references, then we may be dealing with a different phenomenon. Likewise, the biblical references tend to occur in passing only. Where extended or expanded descriptions of spiders and their behaviours exist in English, we may again have something unique. Finally, direct references to frightening and/or disgust-evoking spiders provide tantalizing evidence for the literary history of arachnophobia.

Before turning to the vernacular evidence, there is an ideal example of such a fear/disgust-response in an early medieval Latin riddle. *Enigma 43* from the seventh/eighth-century Bern collection, which may stem from an Insular centre on the Continent,<sup>52</sup> reads:

Innumeros concepta mitto de nido uolatus  
 Corpus et immensum paruis adsumo de membris.  
 Molibus de plumis uestem contexo nitentem  
 Et texturae sonum aure nec concipit ullus.  
 Si quis forte meo uide[a]tur uellere tectus,

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<sup>52</sup> Patrick J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, PA, 2011), 4; Orchard, *Anglo-Saxon Riddle Tradition*, forthcoming; and Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, 14, 256.



Protinus excussam uestem reicere temptat.<sup>53</sup>

(Having conceived, I direct countless flights from my nest and assume a large body from little limbs. I weave a glittering garment from supple down and no one perceives with their ears the sound of weaving. If anyone happens to be covered by my fleece by accident, s/he tries at once to throw off the garment that was set down.)

The solution that appears in the manuscript is ‘De uermibus bombycibus serica uestes formantibus’ (On silkworms creating a silken garment). However, a spider, rather than a silkworm, may better explain the implied revulsion in the final line.<sup>54</sup> Because silk was a high-status fabric, it is unlikely that someone would cast off such a garment. It makes a great deal of sense, on the other hand, to read this as a reference to a fear/disgust-evoking spider. Pliny also saw a connection between spiders and silkworms that may speak to this problem of categorization: ‘Araneorum his non absurde iungatur natura digna vel praecipua admiratione’<sup>55</sup> (To these [silkworms] may be joined, not ineptly, the nature of spiders, which deserves even exceptional admiration). There is also a verbal overlap in the Latin riddle tradition between the ‘tela’ (web) of Symphosius’s spider (discussed above) and the ‘telas’ (threads) of Aldhelm’s silkworm in *Enigma 12*.<sup>56</sup> Clearly silkworms and spiders were seen as carrying out similar activities by at least some early writers.<sup>57</sup> Given this, the final lines of the Bern riddle likely hold the key to solving a misleading puzzle that stumped even the scribe

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<sup>53</sup> Glorie, *Variae collectiones aenigmatum*, 133A:589 (my translation).

<sup>54</sup> I am grateful to Andy Orchard for this suggestion (personal communication).

<sup>55</sup> *Natural History*, Book 11.28, 480 (translation, 481).

<sup>56</sup> For Aldhelm’s riddle, see Glorie, *Variae collectiones aenigmatum*, 133:394-5; and Orchard, *Anglo-Saxon Riddle Tradition*, forthcoming.

<sup>57</sup> See also the discussion of the Old English term *loppe* below, 000.

who recorded the solution: of two spinning creatures, which one's work is quickly thrown off, while the other's is valued? The clear answer to this is *arana* (spider). This text may well be the earliest direct reference to a link between spiders and fear/disgust to survive from an Insular context, which makes it especially significant to arguments about the literary history of arachnophobia.

When it comes to Old English material, however, we are often faced with brief examples from which to draw out a discussion of the fear of and disgust toward spiders. This lack is all the more surprising given the sheer range of Old English spider terms; the *Thesaurus of Old English* lists the following:<sup>58</sup>

Term in <i>TOE</i>	Notes
• <i>atorcoppe</i>	from <i>attor</i> (poison/infection) and <i>cop</i> (top/summit) or <i>copp</i> (cup)
• <i>gangewifre</i>	from <i>gangan</i> (to go/move/walk) and <i>wefan</i> (to weave)
• <i>gangolwæfre</i>	as above
• <i>grytte</i>	likely an error, see above, n. 42
• <i>hunta</i>	(hunter)
• <i>inspiderwiht</i>	emendation of <i>inspidenwiht</i> , discussed below
• <i>lobbe</i>	
• <i>loppe</i>	
• <i>reng</i>	
• <i>spipra</i>	emendation of <i>swipra</i> , see below, n. 71

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<sup>58</sup> Jane Roberts and Christian Kay, with Lynne Grundy, eds, *A Thesaurus of Old English*, 2 vols (London, 1995), 1:95, no. 02.06.09.02.10; Digital Edition (Glasgow, 2015), <http://oldenglishtesaurus.arts.gla.ac.uk>, no. 02.06.09.02.10 n.

- *wæfergange* from *wefan* (to weave) and *gangan* (to go/move/walk); cf. *gangewifre* and *gangolwæfre* above
- *wæterbucca*<sup>59</sup> from *wæter* (water) and *bucca* (male goat)
- *wætergat* from *wæter* (water) and *gat* (goat)

The first term in this list – familiar to modern audiences through the famous scene in *The Hobbit*, inspired by J. R. R. Tolkien’s son’s own arachnophobia<sup>60</sup> – demonstrates clearly that spiders were considered dangerous in early medieval England. As this compound’s *DOE* entry indicates, the first element means ‘poison’ or ‘infection’ and second either ‘top’, ‘summit’ or ‘cup’.<sup>61</sup> This link between spiders and poison/infection speaks to their importance within the Anglo-Saxon medical tradition. It is here that we find the highest concentration of references to spiders, although these tend to occur in passing only and lack more detail than: ‘wiþ attorcoppa / gangewifra / gangolwæfra / huntan bite ... [remedy]’ (against the bite of

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<sup>59</sup> This and the term below appear only in one glossary entry, where they gloss Latin *tippula* and refer to water-insects; hence, they do not fall within the scope of this article. See David W. Porter, ed., *The Antwerp-London Glossaries: The Latin and Latin-Old English Vocabularies from Antwerp, Museum Plantin-Moretus 16.2 – London, British Library Add. 32246, Vol. 1 Texts and Indexes*, Publications of the Dictionary of Old English 8 (Toronto, 2011), 61, line 546.

<sup>60</sup> See the interview with J. R. R. Tolkien on January 15, 1957 by Ruth Harshaw for the ‘Carnival of Books’ radio show, in Douglas A. Anderson, *The Annotated Hobbit*, rev. edn (London, 2003), 210. Note also that Tolkien outlines his own more positive opinion of spiders in his letter to W. H. Auden, dated 7 June 1955, in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, with assistance from Christopher Tolkien (London, 1981), letter 163, 211–17 (217).

<sup>61</sup> *DOE*, s.v. *attor-coppa*, *attor-coppe*. In the sixteenth century and later, the term was also used figuratively to refer to a ‘venomous malignant person’. *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford, 2017), [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com), s.v. *attercop*, sense 2. Hereafter cited as *OED*.

a spider ... [remedy]). A search of the *DOE* and its online *Corpus* yields ten collocations (including headings) of a spider term and *bite* in *Bald's Leechbook*, two in the *Herbarium* and one in *Medicina de quadrupedibus*.<sup>62</sup> There is also a remedy 'ad muris & araneae morsum' (on the bite of the mouse and spider) in the early twelfth-century Anglo-Latin Oxford, St John's College MS 17, fol. 177va.<sup>63</sup>

These early medieval English texts and manuscripts are heavily influenced by or else directly draw on Mediterranean medical works.<sup>64</sup> They are all, however, carefully organised and translated compilations, and M. L. Cameron notes especially of the *Herbarium* that the number of manuscripts surviving leaves 'no doubt that these copies were not mindless scribal exercises but were made to be used'.<sup>65</sup> It is therefore worth noting that, although there are no fatally poisonous spiders in England, minor bites can still be painful, and '[m]ost spider bites are more dangerous for the bacteria they introduce into the wound than for any venom injected'.<sup>66</sup> Hence, there may well be a relevant medical basis for these remedies in targeting

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<sup>62</sup> *DOE*, s.v. *attor-coppa*, *attor-coppe*; *gange-wæfre*, *gange-wifre*; and *gangol-wæfre*; and Antonette diPaolo Healey, ed., with John Price Wilkin, and Xin Xiang, *The Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (Toronto, 2009), <http://www.doe.utoronto.ca>, s.v. *hunta*. Hereafter cited as *DOE Corpus*.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Singer, 'A Review of the Dark Ages, with a New Text of About 1110', *Proceedings of Royal Society of Medicine* 10 (1917), 107–60 (148) (my translation). The manuscript is available online, via the *Oxford Digital Library*, <http://www2.odl.ox.ac.uk/gSDL/cgi-bin/library?e=d-000-00---0stjohn01--00-0-0-0prompt-10---4-----0-11--1-en-50---20-about---00001-001-1-1isoZz-8859Zz-1-0&a=d&cl=CL3.1&d=stjohn001-aaa.1>.

<sup>64</sup> M. L. Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 7 (Cambridge, 1993), 32–3, 42–5, 59–64.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>66</sup> M. L. Cameron, 'Anglo-Saxon Medicine and Magic', *Anglo-Saxon England* 17 (1988), 191–215 (207).

bacterial infections or the discomfort caused by the bite of a small number of non-fatal English species. Given the texts' Mediterranean influences, these references equally speak to the passing on of inherited tradition from places with spiders whose venom is more dangerous.<sup>67</sup> The Old English instances may also reflect a belief that all spiders were potentially harmful enough to require medical attention, as the etymology of *attorcoppe* implies. It is likely that there are a number of factors at play here, but because these examples all occur in passing we can glean very little from them apart from noting that a number of Anglo-Saxon compilers considered remedies for spider bites important enough to include them in their medical compendia.

Another medical text with a reputed spider-reference is, on the other hand, entirely unique. This is the metrical charm *Wið Dweorh* (Against a Dwarf/Fever), which depicts a strange creature binding the victim of an illness. The cryptic opening lines of its incantation read:

Her com ingangan    inspidenwiht.

Hæfde him his haman<sup>68</sup> on handa,    cwæð þæt þu his hæcgest wære.

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<sup>67</sup> This is certainly the case for the *Herbarium*; the earliest manuscript of its Latin source reads 'ad morsum araneorum quos Graeci spalangiones vocant' (on the bite of the spiders that the Greeks call *spalangiones*). Hubert Jan de Vriend, ed., *The Old English Herbarium and Medicina de Quadrupedibus*, EETS o.s 286 (London, 1984), 47, ch. 5.8 (my translation). A search of the *DOE Corpus* yields nine instances of *spalangiones* in Old English medical texts and glosses, where the term refers to a number of venomous insects, snakes and spiders. Pliny's chapter on remedies for the bite of the *phalangium*, which equally indicates a range of venomous insects and spiders, also provides a potential source. See *Natural History: Books 28–32*, ed./trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library 418 (Cambridge, MA, 1963), Book 29.27, 236–41.

<sup>68</sup> See *DOE s.v. hama*, 2, where the word is described as a crux. Edward Pettit accepts the suggestion that the most likely interpretation in this context is 'bridle' or 'harness', despite the fact

Leg[d]e þe his teage an sweoran.<sup>69</sup>

(Here came walking in an *inspiden* creature. He had his bridle in his hands, he said that you were his horse. He laid his bonds on your neck.)

There has been wide support for emending the otherwise unattested word *inspidenwiht* to *inspiderwiht*, because it is difficult to translate as it stands.<sup>70</sup> However, the form ‘spider’ is not attested in Old English and begins its Middle English life as *spiðre*, with the first instance of a /d/ (voiced dental stop) rather than an /ð/ (voiced dental fricative) in the *OED* occurring in the

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that the *OED* does not record this use of ‘hame’ before 1300. *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library Ms Harley 585: The Lacnunga*, 2 vols (Lewiston, NY, 2001), 2:189. See also B. R. Hutcheson, ‘*Wiþ Dweorh*: An Anglo-Saxon Remedy for Fever in its Cultural and Manuscript Context’, in *Secular Learning in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. László Sándor Chardonnens and Bryan Carella, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 69 (2012), 175–202 (189–90).

<sup>69</sup> London, British Library, Harley MS 585, fol. 167r–v, in Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies*, 1:72, 74 (my translation). Letters enclosed by square brackets are editorial emendations that do not appear in the manuscript. I have silently erased other editorial marks. The manuscript is available online at [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley\\_MS\\_585](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_585).

<sup>70</sup> This emendation was first proposed by Thomas Cockayne, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*, 3 vols (London, 1961), 3:43; and followed by Felix Grendon, ed., ‘The Anglo-Saxon Charms’, *Journal of American Folklore* 22.84 (Apr. 1909), 105–237 (167); Godfrid Storms, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1948), 51, 166–7; Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, *ASPR* 6 (New York, 1942), 121; Robert E. Bjork, ed./trans., *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume II: Wisdom and Lyric* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 202 [note that he incorrectly asserts (269), that Hutcheson retains the manuscript reading of *inspidenwiht*]; as well as numerous scholars undertaking critical analyses of the text.

fifteenth century.<sup>71</sup> Hence, the most recent editor of the late tenth-/early eleventh-century *Lacnunga* rejects the emendation *inspiderwiht*, along with the more drastic proposals *inwriðenwiht* and *unspedigwiht*.<sup>72</sup>

The desire to emend *inspidenwiht* has achieved support in the past because the second ‘n’ is written over an erasure – though the letter underneath appears to have had an ascender.<sup>73</sup> Yet this correction to ‘n’ is significant, as Philip A. Shaw notes:

[the] early-eleventh-century scribe found *spiden* entirely satisfactory. It is, of course, entirely possible that *inspidenwiht* is, as Pettit insists, corrupt, but it does not follow from this that it makes no sense; here we have a scribe who altered some readings which did not make sense to him or her (including

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<sup>71</sup> s.v. spider. Note that Bosworth and Toller emend ‘swiþra’ to ‘spiþra’ in the following medical passage: ‘Wip þon gif hunta gebite mannan, þæt is swiþra ... [remedy]’ (Against that, if a hunting-spider should bite a person, that is *swiþra*... [remedy]). Bosworth and Toller define this term as ‘a covering’. Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1898), *Supplement* by T. Northcote Toller (Oxford, 1921), Digital Edition (Prague, 2010), <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/>, s.v. *spiþra* [accessed 7/8/2017]. However, careful attention to the text indicates that the compiler is not clarifying what s/he means by ‘hunta’ – as Bosworth and Toller clearly assumed – but comparing this particular spider, which is ‘swiþra’ (stronger) to a weaker, second spider (a ‘gongelwæfre’) whose remedy follows the first. See *Bald’s Leechbook I* in London, British Library, Royal MS 12 D XVII, fols. 53v–54r, no. lxviii. The manuscript is available online at [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Royal\\_MS\\_12\\_D\\_XVII](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Royal_MS_12_D_XVII).

<sup>72</sup> Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies*, 2:186–8. *Inwriðenwiht* was proposed by John Grattan and Charles Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine: Illustrated Specially from the Semi-Pagan Text Lacnunga* (London, 1952). *Unspedigwiht* was proposed by Heather Stuart, ““Spider” in Old English’, *Parergon* 18 (1977), 37–42.

<sup>73</sup> See Harley MS 585, fol. 167v, line 2.

readings which seem better to us than the scribe's modified versions), but left this reading intact. It therefore seems more likely than not that this scribe understood *inspidenwiht* to mean something.<sup>74</sup>

A desire to emend the scribe's work as little as possible has led B. R. Hutcheson to argue for a minor error that saw a *wynn* replaced by a 'p'.<sup>75</sup> In correcting for this, Hutcheson suggests the text depicts a creature or spirit that is *\*inswiden*.<sup>76</sup> He argues that this is a participial form of a strong verb *\*swiðan*, a cognate to Old Norse *sviða* (to burn/roast) and Old High German *swidan*.<sup>77</sup> With a locative prefix, *in*, Hutcheson defines the Old English form as 'heated within' or 'feverish'.<sup>78</sup> We should therefore read the reference as to a creature that is burning from within: some sort of fever-spirit that – malicious at first – is forced to act toward a cure.<sup>79</sup> If Hutcheson's theory is correct, we can finally say that *Wið Dweorh* does *not* in fact refer to spiders, and it is therefore not relevant to the current discussion. Either way, there are so many ambiguities in this charm-text that it would be problematic to argue that it presents evidence for arachnophobia.

There is, however, one philosophical text that provides extended evidence for the medical conception of spiders as creatures to be feared by humans. This is the Old English translation of Boethius' sixth-century *De consolazione philosophiae*. The Latin original briefly mentions a fly in a passing reference to the fragility of the human body:

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<sup>74</sup> 'The Manuscript Texts of *Against a Dwarf*', in *Writing and Texts in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Alexander R. Rumble (Cambridge, 2006), 96–113 (102).

<sup>75</sup> '*Wiþ Dweorh*', 186.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 186, 191.



Quid vero, si corpus spectes, imbecillius homine repperire queas, quos saepe muscularum quoque vel morsus vel in secreta quaeque reptantium necat introitus?<sup>80</sup>

(Truly, if you consider the body, what can you find weaker than a human, whom the invasion of tiny flies either by bite or internal creeping often kills?)

The tenth-century Old English translation, on the other hand, expands this passage to list a number of small creatures capable of harming humans:

Hwæt, ge þonne magan eaðe geþencan, gif ge hit georne ymbe smeagan willað and æfterspyrgan, ðæt nanre wuhte lichoma ne bið þonne tederra þonne þæs monnes. Þæm magon derian þa læstan fleogan, ge ða gnættas mid swyðe lytlum sticelum him deriað, and eac þa smalan wyrmas ðe ðone mon ægðer ge innan ge utan wyrdað, and hwilum fulneah deadne gedoð. Ge furðum þios lytle loppe hine deadne gedeð.<sup>81</sup>

(Indeed, you can easily perceive, if you are willing to think about it diligently and investigate it, that no creature's body is weaker than a human's. The smallest flies can harm him/her, and the gnats harm him/her with very little stings, or also the small worms who corrupt the person both within and without, and sometimes very nearly kill him/her. Or moreover, this little *loppe* kills him/her.)

*Loppe* may be a form of the spider-term *lobbe*. However, the precise semantic range of this

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<sup>80</sup> *De consolatione philosophiae, opuscula theologica*, ed. Claudio Moreschini (Munich, 2000), Book 2, prose 6.5, 47, lines 17–20 (my translation).

<sup>81</sup> Malcolm Godden and Susan Irvine, eds/trans., *The Old English Boethius: An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 2 vols (Oxford, 2009), C-text, prose 8, 1:416, lines 49–55 (my translation). See also B-text, ch. 16, 1:273, lines 49–56.

word is not certain, since it appears in a gloss alongside flying serpents and spiders, as well as in a gloss for the silkworm, and also refers to fleas and flies in Middle English.<sup>82</sup> The slippage between these different animals should give us pause, and may suggest that *loppe* is simply a multi-purpose term for an insect-like creature, perhaps specifically one who spins or bites.

We should note, however, that the gloss linking flying serpents and spiders is corrupt; according to the *DOE*, two lemmata – *iaculus* and *arana* – are likely missing from the manuscript.<sup>83</sup> The glossary appears to be drawing on Isidore’s *Etymologiae* entries for the *iaculus* (flying serpent) and the *arana* (spider).<sup>84</sup> Their appearance together in the glossary may stem from Isidore’s reference to spiders as ‘vermis aeris’ (insects of the air), as discussed above. While this corruption likely eliminates ‘flying serpent’ from *loppe*’s semantic range, it does not account for ‘silkworm’, which is found in a separate manuscript. It is, however, highly unlikely that a silkworm is the referent in the above passage from the Old English Boethius. Furthermore, a final gloss provides a certain link to spiders: the compound *attorloppe* appears in the *Lambeth Psalter*’s translation of Psalm 38.12 (discussed above).<sup>85</sup> Because *attorloppe* glosses *arana* in this psalm, the *DOE* defines it unequivocally as ‘spider’.<sup>86</sup> Finally, it is notable that Godden and Irvine find influences for many Old English expansions in the early medieval tradition of glossing Boethius’ Latin text; here, they note that glosses of *areanos* (spiders), *crabrones* (hornets) and *reptilium* (reptiles, for *reptantium*)

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<sup>82</sup> See Porter, *Antwerp-London Glossaries*, 60, line 533: ‘Loppe . fleonde næddre . † attorcoppe’; W. G. Stryker, ‘The Latin-Old English Glossary in MS. Cotton Cleopatra A.III’ (PhD Diss., Stanford University, 1951), 80, line 119: ‘Bombix siolucwyrn † sidwyrn † loppe’; and *MED* s.v. *loppe*.

<sup>83</sup> *DOE*, s.v. *fleon*, sense C.1.a.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*; and *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. Lindsay, XII.iv.29 and XII.v.2.

<sup>85</sup> Fol. 50v, in Lindelöf, *Der Lambeth-Psalter*, 35.1:63–4.

<sup>86</sup> *DOE*, s.v. *attor-loppe*.

occur in some manuscripts.<sup>87</sup> Given these glosses, as well as the particular context of the *attorloppe* psalm and the references to spider bites in the medical tradition, interpreting the Boethian *loppe* as a spider is fitting.<sup>88</sup>

The context of the Boethian passage is once again related to fragility, this time specifically connected to the human body. The introduction of a variety of small creatures – themselves presumably fragile – who pose a threat to humans is an innovation on the part of the Old English translator, drawing on the glossary tradition. Furthermore, spiders are positioned as the most dangerous of these creatures. Spiders do not simply harm humans, like flies and gnats (as indicated by the verb *derian*), nor do they ‘fulneah’ (very nearly) kill humans. These spiders are depicted as deadly, with no qualifiers.

The fact that this extra material has been added by the Anglo-Saxon translator is especially interesting in the light of other similar expansions and adaptations of spider-references. One of the most intriguing but elusive occurs in the Old English *Handbook for the Use of a Confessor*:

mistlice ðreala gebýriað for sýnnum · bendas oððe dýntas · oððe pollúpas ·  
oððe carcern ðýstra . lobban oððe balcan · & hwilum eac limlæwa · & hwilum  
liflæsta.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> *Old English Boethius*, 1:5-8, 2:310.

<sup>88</sup> Note also that ‘spider’ continues to be the primary sense of *loppe* in Middle English, although the term does occasionally refer to flying insects as well. See Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn and Robert E. Lewis, eds, *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1954–2001); Digital Edition, ed. Frances McSparran, Paul Schaffner, John Latta, Alan Pagliere, Christina Powell and Matt Stoeffler (Ann Arbor, 2001), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, s.v. *loppe*, n.1. Hereafter cited as *MED*.

<sup>89</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 121, fol. 67a, in Allen J. Frantzen, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Penitentials: A Cultural Database*, [http://www.anglo-saxon.net/penance/index.php?p=JUNIUS\\_67a,X55.03.02](http://www.anglo-saxon.net/penance/index.php?p=JUNIUS_67a,X55.03.02) (my translation).

(Various punishments pertain to sins: bonds or blows, or scourges, or prison-darkness, spiders or beams, and sometimes also mutilation of the limbs, and sometimes loss of life.)

Spiders are, somewhat bizarrely, depicted as a torment here, alongside imprisonment and violence. It is not clear whether their presence in this context implies that their bites cause physical pain like the blows and scourges, or simply that their presence in a dark enclosure elicits fear. Perhaps, given the preponderance of physical versus mental torments, we should assume the former.

It is also possible that *lobbe* here indicates not an actual spider, but an instrument of punishment. There is a parallel in Isidore's *Etymologiae*, which refers to a type of switch named for another arachnid, the 'scorpio' (scorpion): 'si lenis fuerit, virga est; si certe nodosa vel aculeata, scorpio rectissimo nomine, quia arcuato vulnere in corpus infigitur'<sup>90</sup> (if it is smooth, it is a switch; without doubt, if it is full of knots and barbed, its proper name is scorpion, because it is driven into the body with a curved wound). The metaphorical link between the barbed switch and this arachnid is, however, derived from the shape of the wound, which curves like a scorpion's tail; this does not carry over to the context of a spider.<sup>91</sup> The pairing of *lobbe* and *balc* in the *Handbook* provides further ambiguous support

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<sup>90</sup> *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. Lindsay, V.xxvii.18 (my translation). See also his entries for the arachnid (XII.v.4) and a poisoned arrow also referred to as a 'scorpio' (XVIII.viii.3).

<sup>91</sup> The Old English word for scorpion is *prowend*, and Ælfric's homily *In Letania maiore* emphasizes especially its venomous tail. See Peter Clemoes, ed., *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, EETS s.s. 17 (Oxford, 1997), 321, lines 124–5, 129, 131. For more on this term, see Herbert Dean Merritt, *Some of the Hardest Glosses in Old English* (Stanford, 1968) 87–9. There are no indications in other Old English texts or the *Oxford English Dictionary* that *lobbe*'s semantic range might embrace scorpions in addition to spiders. See *OED* s.v. *lob*, n.<sup>1</sup>. It should be noted, however that

for both the instrument and spider interpretations. *Balc* occurs in relation to an instrument of punishment in one other place: the same chapter of the Old English version of Boethius' *De consolacione philosophiae* as the killer *loppe* passage discussed above.<sup>92</sup> There, *balc* refers to an object to which Regulus has prisoners of war bound, though there is no indication that they are tortured.<sup>93</sup> It is possible, then, that the pairing of *balc* and *lobbe* in the *Handbook* indicates a beam and barbed switch to be used together, or that it points to the association of the weakness of human bodies, which are both harmed by vermin and bound to wooden beams in quick succession in Boethius. Further support for interpreting the penitential's *lobbe* as an actual spider can be found in the *Peterborough Chronicle*'s entry for year 1137, which describes many barbaric acts carried out by traitors to King Stephen, who put people in prison 'þar nadres 7 snakes 7 pades wæron inne, 7 drapen heom swa' (wherein there were adders and snakes and toads, and so killed them).<sup>94</sup> It is not a stretch to suggest spiders should be read alongside these other animals, since all were associated with poison in the early and high Middle Ages. Finally, the specific context of the *Handbook* passage also supports the spider reading; the text goes on to describe the confessor as a 'læca' (physician) who draws sins out like 'attor' (poison/infection) from a wound. The fact that the poisonous/infected bites of spiders occur in the Anglo-Saxon medical tradition places these potential spiders in a distinctly physical – though metaphorical – context.

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*lobbe* and *loppe* appear to be related, and, as discussed above, the precise semantic range of *loppe* is less certain.

<sup>92</sup> See DOE, s.v. *balc*, *balca*, *balce*.

<sup>93</sup> See Godden and Irvine, *Old English Boethius*, B-text, ch. 16, 1:274, lines 81–3; and C-text, prose 8, 1:417, lines 81–3.

<sup>94</sup> Susan Irvine, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition. Volume 7: MS. E* (Cambridge, 2004), 134 (my translation).

Where this material came from is, furthermore, unclear. The passage quoted above appears in only one of the manuscripts that contains the *Handbook* (from the late eleventh century), and the addition's source is unknown.<sup>95</sup> Does this variant record an esoteric and localized association between spiders and punishment, or does it provide a glimpse into torments imagined by the one who penned the text? Either way, spiders (or perhaps punishing instruments named for them) are clearly intended to do damage to humans, and therefore presumably provoked fear in the real or imagined sinners in question.

Such fearful associations speak to another isolated Old English spider reference, occurring in the context of the apocalypse. The beginning of Homily XV from the tenth-century *Vercelli Book*, which draws on the *Apocalypsis Thomae*, reads: 'Godes hus beoð aweste & þa weofodu beoð to þan swiðe forlætene þæt ða attorcoppa habbað innan awefene'<sup>96</sup> (God's house will be destroyed and the altars will be so abandoned that spiders have webs within). Unlike the *Handbook*'s spiders, however, who are clearly associated with danger, these post-apocalyptic spiders are aligned with neglect. Linking them to the spider-web that protected Felix from those pursuing him in his Latin life (discussed above) draws out the Vercelli homily's association between spiders and the ruins of human civilization. Here, spiders are mentioned in order to emphasize the abandoned nature of the religious buildings the text describes. What was once a sacred structure has been neglected and deserted to the extent that it falls into ruin and is reclaimed by a creature unlikely to have been tolerated in the building's prime.

Together, these medical, philosophical, penitential and homiletic instances indicate that, in an Anglo-Saxon context, spiders are unpleasant creatures reserved for dark and dirty

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<sup>95</sup> See the note following the passage in Frantzen's database.

<sup>96</sup> D. G. Scragg, ed., *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, EETS, o.s. 300 (Oxford, 1992), 254, lines 19–21 (my translation).

places, with dangerous bites that require medical attention. These are a far cry from the artistic spiders of the classical and Late Antique tradition, and appear distinctly less fragile than biblical spiders. They may be most closely aligned, then, with the maliciousness that emerges from psalm commentaries like that of Cassiodorus.

This brings me to a further Old English translation that builds on its source in an intriguing way. When Psalm 89.9 (discussed above) is adapted into verse, the portrait of the spider undergoes a distinct transformation. The poetic version recorded in the *Paris Psalter* reads:

Forþam ðe ure dagas      ealle geteorudun,  
and we on þinum yrre synt      swiðe gewæhte.

Wæran anlicast      ure winter  
geongewifran,      þonne hio geornast bið,  
þæt heo afære      fleogan on nette<sup>97</sup>

(For our days have ceased entirely, and in your anger we are very troubled.

Our winters are most like a spider, when it is most eager, that it may frighten  
flies into its net).

In translating this verse, the poet leaves behind the fragility of the biblical psalm, and instead paints a new, vivid picture of the creature's behaviour. This spider is 'geornast' (most eager) to frighten victims and catch them in her/his net.<sup>98</sup> Although *georn* (eager) carries both

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<sup>97</sup> George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, ASPR 5 (New York, 1933), Psalm 89.9–10, 61 (my translation).

<sup>98</sup> Scholars have noted the tendency of the *Metrical Psalms* poet to employ intensifying adverbs and adjectives as poetic filler. See M. S. Griffith, 'Poetic Language and the Paris Psalter: The Decay of the Old English Tradition', *Anglo-Saxon England* 20 (1991), 167–86 (177, 182); and Anya Adair, 'Hateful Hills and Joyful Dread: Emotive "Filler Words" in the Old English Metrical Psalms', *English*

positive and negative connotations in Old English, it is noteworthy that the only other non-human animal to be eager is a beast of battle lusting after human flesh.<sup>99</sup> In addition to the spider's eagerness and bloodlust, the use of the verb *afæran* (to frighten) is significant. This spider is actively unpleasant. S/he does not just want to catch and eat flies (because that is what spiders do), but instead wants to scare them. This depiction is completely at odds with the actual psalm, which invokes the spider in order to allude to her/his fragility and to the pointlessness of her/his toil; fully in line with the biblical tradition, the original psalm points to how easily humans' lives are stamped out, no matter how much skill they may possess.<sup>100</sup> The *Paris Psalter's* translation of Psalm 89.9, on the other hand, paints both sin and spiders in

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*Studies* 98 (2017), 15–25 (16–17). However, Adair has recently noted that *georne* is frequently invoked, not as filler, but with a more specific sense of volition (19–23). In this case, given the wide range of spider-terms available to the poet, the fact that the 'geongewifre' and 'geornast' both alliterate and assonate may suggest intentionality on the part of the poet, who selected two words that complement each other poetically.

<sup>99</sup> See *Judith*: 'ac him fleah on last / earn ætes georn, urigfeðera; / salowigpada sang hildeleoð' (but there flew behind them the eagle eager for food; dewy-feathered, the dark-coated one sang a battle song), in Mark Griffith, ed., *Judith*, (Exeter, 1997), 103, lines 209b–11 (my translation); and *The Battle of Maldon*: 'Pær wearð hream ahafen, hremmas wundon, / earn æses georn; wæs on eorþan cym' (There an outcry was raised up, ravens flew, an eagle eager for food; there was an uproar on the earth), in Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ASPR 4 (New York, 1942), 10, lines 106–7 (my translation).

<sup>100</sup> I disagree with the suggestion that the poet shifts the focus from the original psalm's spider-web to the spider her/himself. See Helen Bartlett, *The Metrical Division of the Paris Psalter: A Dissertation* (PhD Diss., Bryn Mawr, 1896), 30; and O'Neill, *Old English Psalms*, 676–7. There is ample evidence in the commentary tradition (see above) and in other translations of this psalm that the spider was understood to be the point of focus here.



a much more aggressive – and overtly frightening – light.

The use of the term *nett* is also telling, because it transforms the spider from a weak creature into a hunter and an active agent (not unlike Pliny's spider). Although Old English dictionaries give 'web' as one of the options for *nett*'s meaning,<sup>101</sup> the term's association with hunting or fishing nets is far more common. In fact, the only instances where *nett* is definitively used of a spider-web occur in the *Paris Psalter*.<sup>102</sup> Given that this passage takes liberties with its source, we should at least entertain the possibility that it is also taking liberties with the term, perhaps even using it figuratively.

Indeed, there are other nets in Old English that are clearly associated with evil predation. *Andreas*, for example, provides an analogue in the form of Matthew's desperate cry: 'Hu me elpeodige inwitwrasne / searonet seowað!'<sup>103</sup> (Oh, how these alien men sew for me a deceitful/evil fetter, a skillful net!). Here, Matthew is speaking of his capture by the cannibalistic Mermedonians, who hold him in literal bonds. There is, however, a metaphorical level to the fetters and net that bind Matthew, since the success of the Mermedonians relies on their use of potions to deprive their victims of reason and, according to the poet, reduce their status to that of grazing animals. The *inwitwrasen* and *searonet* of *Andreas* may also be compared to *Beowulf*'s *inwitnet*:

Swa sceal mæg don,  
nealles inwitnet    oðrum bregdon

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<sup>101</sup> Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *nett*; and J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th edn (Toronto, 1960), s.v. *nett*.

<sup>102</sup> The second example (discussed above) also appears in the *Paris Psalter* (as Psalm 38.10, for 38.12), although it stems from a separate set of prose translations.

<sup>103</sup> George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Vercelli Book*, ASPR 2 (New York, 1932), 4, lines 63–4a (my translation).

dyrnum cræfte,      deað renian

hondgesteallan.<sup>104</sup>

(So must a kinsman act, not at all braid an evil net for another with secret skill,  
contrive the death of a hand-companion.)

This *Beowulf* passage sets a clear precedent for an association between evil, violence and metaphorical nets in Old English. As in the broader biblical tradition, evil tricks in this poetic tradition are a net with which to ensnare one's enemies.

In addition to the biblical spider references addressed above, there is also a precedent for associating actual nets and evil humans in the biblical tradition. Psalm 140.9-10 reads: 'custodi me a laqueo quem statuerunt mihi / et ab scandalis operantium iniquitatem / cadent in retiaculo eius peccatores' (Keep me from the snare, which they have laid for me, and from the stumblingblocks of them that work iniquity. The wicked shall fall in his net). Psalm 140 is also concerned with eyes and sight, which makes it all the more appropriate to read alongside the above passage from *Andreas*, in which Matthew retains his spiritual vision even after his earthly eyes are blinded. Furthermore, although iniquity is a common recurring concept in the psalms in particular and the Vulgate as a whole, its use here in relation to a net – along with its use in Psalm 38.12 (where it was humanity's iniquity that caused the species to waste away like a spider) and its use in Isaia (where the works of sinners are linked to spider-webs) – may be what laid the groundwork for a link between spiders and evil nets.

Cassiodorus, likewise, presents a similar portrait of a predatory spider to that of the *Paris Psalter*.<sup>105</sup> In his commentary for Psalm 89.9 (discussed above), Cassiodorus describes

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<sup>104</sup> R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th edn (Toronto, 2008), 73, lines 2166b–9a (my translation).

<sup>105</sup> J. D. Tinkler also notes that this passage likely derives from a commentary like Cassiodorus's. He does not, however, commit to an argument of direct influence, and emphasizes that the same ideas

a clever creature whose use of ‘retia’ (nets) to catch the flies s/he feeds on resembles the malice of evil-doers. Given the direct relevance of this commentary passage, it is notable that other Anglo-Saxon psalters contain scholia drawing on Cassiodorus.<sup>106</sup> In fact, William Davey has traced approximately 75% of the Regius Psalter’s marginal and interlinear commentary to Cassiodorus.<sup>107</sup> While the scholia accompanying Psalm 89.9 in this particular manuscript do not appear to be direct quotations of Cassiodorus’ portrayal of spiders,<sup>108</sup> the precise passage from Cassiodorus noted above does in fact appear in the marginal additions to

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often run through a variety of commentaries. *Vocabulary and Syntax of the Old English Version in the Paris Psalter: A Critical Commentary* (The Hague, 1971), 11, 38.

<sup>106</sup> Mechthild Gretsch, *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform* (Cambridge, 1999), 29–31. See also Rebecca Rushforth, ‘Annotated Psalters and Psalm Study in Late Anglo-Saxon England: The Manuscript Evidence’, in *Rethinking and Recontextualizing Glosses: New Perspectives in the Study of Late Anglo-Saxon Glossography*, ed. Patrizia Lendinara, Loredana Lazzari and Claudia Di Sciacca, *Textes et Études du Moyen Âge* 54 (Porto, 2011), 39–68; and M. J. Toswell, *The Anglo-Saxon Psalter*, *Medieval Church Series* 10 (Turnhout, 2014), 145, 237, 262, 267.

<sup>107</sup> ‘The Commentary of the Regius Psalter: Its Main Source and the Influence on the Old English Gloss’, *Mediaeval Studies* 49 (1987), 335–51 (338). For more on this manuscript, see Toswell, *Anglo-Saxon Psalter*, 260–8.

<sup>108</sup> The comment in the left-hand margin of fol. 107v reads: ‘de nolentibus deum intellegere dicitur’ (it is said about those who are unwilling to understand God), while the right-hand comment reads: ‘sicut illa maligna sic nostra uita secularis’ (in the same way that wicked one so is our life in the world) (my translation). Davey does not identify a source for either, but notes that the latter’s ideas are similar to those of Cassiodorus. *An Edition of the Regius Psalter and Its Latin Commentary* (PhD Diss., University of Ottawa, 1979), xxxiv, 558 and 667. I would argue, however, that the vagueness of this comment makes it difficult to distinguish a Cassiodorean influence from that of the other psalm commentaries discussed above.

the ninth-century Achadeus Psalter.<sup>109</sup> These additions are written in an English Caroline minuscule hand from the eleventh-century.<sup>110</sup> While the *Paris Psalter* itself does not contain scholia, it is reasonable to assume that this scribe too would have consulted psalm commentaries like the ones that influenced more highly glossed psalters, especially when it came to difficult passages;<sup>111</sup> the additional glosses of ‘grytte’ (sand) and ‘frocga’ (frog) in the Vespasian and Regius Psalters (discussed above) certainly indicate that some Anglo-Saxon translators found this verse difficult. This makes a potential link between the *Paris Psalter* poet’s vicious spider and Cassiodorus’ cunning one all the more likely.

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<sup>109</sup> Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 272, fol. 91v, via *Parker Library on the Web*, <https://parker.stanford.edu>. The quotation, which runs down the left-hand side of the folio, is by and large the same as the above-quoted text by Cassiodorus with only a few minor omissions and substitutions: ‘Aranea est animal debile ac tenuissima . quod transeuntibus muscis ad escam sibi preparandam retia sibi dolosa connectit. Sic qui sceleratis operibus dediti sunt inanibus & subdolis machinationibus occupantur’. For more on this manuscript, see Toswell, *Anglo-Saxon Psalter*, 140–7.

<sup>110</sup> Rebecca Rushforth, ‘The Script and Text of the Achadeus Psalter Gloss: Reusing Continental Materials in Eleventh-century England’, *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 14.2 (2009), 89–114 (92). On the use of Cassiodorus throughout this manuscript, see also 100–3.

<sup>111</sup> See Tinkler, *Vocabulary and Syntax*, 11. Note that although Patrick P. O’Neill argues for an overall lack of influence from the commentary tradition on the poet of the *Metrical Psalms*, he does concede that the verse version ‘occasionally betrays influences from the commentary tradition’. ‘Strategies of Translation in the Old English Versions (Prose and Metrical) of the Psalms in the Paris Psalter (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonds latin, 8824)’, *Bulletin of the Institute of the Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University* 48 (2015), 137–71 (155). M. J. Toswell similarly points out that the poet ‘displays some knowledge of psalter commentary, [...] usually where the translation into Old English verse is difficult’. ‘The Relationship of the Metrical Psalter to the Old English Glossed Psalters’, *English Studies* 4 (1997), 297–315 (314).

Still, Cassiodorus's emphasis remains on a feeble sort of guile, rather than the eagerly frightening spider that the Old English poem depicts. Like the Old English Boethian, medical and penitential spiders discussed above, the psalm spider is once again a cause for fear, and this particular spider takes up the task enthusiastically. Given that classical and biblical writers all remark variously upon the spider's artistry, industriousness and fragility, and given that the biblical tradition's references to evil – exemplified by Old Testament sinners and Cassiodorus's commentary – stop short of fear and point to deceitful people who are best avoided, it is possible to find an emerging trend among Anglo-Saxon texts of adapting, adding or expanding upon spider references to emphasize their frightening and dangerous nature.

### Early Middle English Spiders

Notably, the early English tradition's tendency to highlight the unpleasantness of spiders continues after the Norman Conquest. In the twelfth/thirteenth-century poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*, for example, tantalizing evidence occurs in passing:

Ac wat etestu, þat þu ne liȝe,

Bute attercoppe & fule ulige,

An wormes, ȝif þu miȝte finde

Among þe uolde of harde rinde?<sup>112</sup>

(But what do you eat, and do not lie, apart from spiders and foul flies and worms, if you can find them in the crevices of hard bark?)

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<sup>112</sup> Neil Cartlidge, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Exeter, 2001), 15, lines 599–602 (my translation).

The implication is that spiders, alongside ‘fule’ (foul) flies and worms, are revolting to eat; hence, we have a clear, though brief, case for spiders evoking disgust – one of the mooted underlying emotions that drives arachnophobia. That disgust is a response specifically aimed at avoiding disease transmitted through contaminated food makes this passage particularly compelling. Furthermore, this reference to disgust-evoking creatures is strengthened by the fact that the list occurs shortly after the owl accuses the nightingale of building a nest near human privies. The association between the nightingale’s scatological habitat and choice of food clearly points to both behaviours as disgustingly unclean.

When it comes to frightening and dangerous spiders, however, there is only one early Middle English case whose depth of detail and debt to Anglo-Saxon diction makes it especially significant to this discussion. This example is from the early Middle English version of the *Physiologus*, and it hints at a broader early English tradition of amplifying spiders in translation. The early Middle English text draws on Theobald’s *Physiologus*, a Latin poem existing in an eleventh/twelfth-century manuscript and possessing a long narrative history. Despite this history, P. T. Eden, the editor of the Latin text, maintains that Theobald was especially innovative when it came to his description of the spider,<sup>113</sup> which reads:

Vermis araneus exiguus  
Plurima fila net assiduus,  
Texere que studet artificus.  
Retia sunt ea, musca, tibi,  
Ut volitans capiaris ibi,  
Dulcis et utilis esca sibi.  
Huic placet illud opus tenue,  
Sed sibi nil valet ut fragile :

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<sup>113</sup> Theobaldi ‘*Physiologus*’, *Mittellateinische Studien und Texte* 6 (Leiden, 1972), 5.

Quelibet aura trahit patulum ;

Rumpitur et cadit in nihilum.<sup>114</sup>

(The small insect, the spider, ceaselessly spins many threads, which, expertly, it strives to weave. Those are nets for you, fly, so that you are caught there, flying, a sweet and profitable meal for it. That delicate work is pleasing to this one, but it is worth nothing to it as fragile as it is: any breeze draws it apart; it is destroyed and falls into nothing.)

Following this description is an allegorical interpretation of the spider as an example of the sort of person who cheats friends and eventually pays the price in death. Eden notes the poem's debt to Isidore and the *Dicta Chrysostomi*, the latter of which alludes briefly to Psalm 89 and mentions that the industriousness of the spider is pointless because the finished web is, once again, too fragile.<sup>115</sup> Theobald's editor does not, however, identify Pliny as a potential source, nor any psalm commentaries, including that of Cassiodorus. This is an oversight, given what appears to be a debt to both the classical and biblical traditions of skillful, industrious and fragile spiders, as well as to Pliny's and Cassiodorus' interest in catching flies in nets – with the same term, 'rete', appearing in all three Latin texts. On the whole, the tone has more in common with classical references to spiders, this one being an 'artifex' (expert) who creates an 'opus tenue' (delicate work). There is, furthermore, no trace of fear or disgust, despite the fact that the fly is addressed as a meal. In fact, we are told that this meal will be 'dulcis et utilis' (sweet and profitable) for the spider, fragile though her/his work may be.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 52/54, lines 1–10 (my translation).

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 52.

This fragility is, however, nowhere to be seen in the mid-thirteenth-century Middle English adaptation.<sup>116</sup> Instead – much like the Old English versions of Latin texts – the translator emphasizes danger, disgust and fear:

Seftes sop ure Seppande, sene is on werlde,  
Leiðe & lo[dl]ike, ðus we it leuen,  
Manikines ðing, alle manne to wissing.  
Ðe spinnere on hire [web] swi[ðe] 3e weueð,  
Festeð atte hus-rof, hire fo [ð]redes,  
O rof er on ouese, so hire if on elde,  
Werpeð ðus hire web, & weueð on hire wise.  
Ðanne 3e it haueð al idi3t, ðeðen 3e driueð,  
Hitt hire in hire hole, oc ai 3e it biholdeð  
Til ðat ðer fle3es faren & fallen ðerinne,  
Wiðeren in ðat web, & wilen ut wenden.  
Ðanne renneð 3e rapelike, for 3e is ai redi:  
Nimeð anon to ðe net & nimeð hem ðere.  
Bitterlike 3e hem bit & here bane wurðeð,  
Drepeð & drinkeð here blod, doð 3e hire non oðer god,  
Bute fret hire fille, & dareð siðen stille.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> For an overview of works of natural history available in thirteenth-century England, see Harvey, ‘Swallow’s Nest and the Spider Web’, 328, 331–3. Note that a key addition to the classical natural histories and biblical approach to spiders addressed earlier in this article is Alexander Neckam’s *De naturis rerum* (late twelfth-century CE). As in the biblical tradition, his spider is a symbol of greed and deception. See Neckham, *De naturis rerum*, ed. Thomas Right, Rolls Series 34 (London, 1863), ch. 113, 193–4.



(Our creator created creatures, visible in the world, detestable and loathsome, and so we believe that many different kinds of things are for man's instruction. The spinner/spider weaves her web, fastens her hostile/variegated threads at the roof of the house, from the roof or from the eaves, as if she were on a hill, threads thus her web, and weaves it in her manner. When she has it all ready, she dashes away from there, hides in her hole, but she always looks upon it until flies come to it and fall therein, writhe in that web, and want to go out. Then she runs hurriedly, for she is always ready: immediately she steals to the net and seizes them there. Fiercely she bites them and becomes their murderer, subdues them and drinks their blood, she does for herself no other good, but eats her fill, and then sits still.)

Taking some rather marked liberties with its Latin source, this poem introduces a gendered element to its description of the spider. While Theobald's text uses the grammatically masculine form *araneus* and avoids gendered pronouns, the English translation repeatedly employs feminine ones. With the loss of grammatical gender in Middle English, the choice to include feminine pronouns cannot be attributed to the grammatically feminine nature of most spider-terms, as is the case in Old English. This gendered element may draw on associations between women and textile production, and perhaps with the domestic space in which this story plays out. Likewise, it may reflect a belief that only female spiders create webs.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Hanneke Wirtjes, ed., *The Middle English Physiologus*, EETS 299 (Oxford, 1991), 12–13, lines 313–28 (my translation). Letters enclosed by square brackets are editorial emendations that do not appear in the manuscript. I have silently erased other editorial marks.

<sup>118</sup> See, for example, Pliny's statement: 'feminam putant esse quae texat, marem qui venetur; ita paria fieri merita coniugio' (People think that it is the female that weaves and the male that hunts, and that thus the married pair do equal shares of service). *Natural History*, Book 11.28, 484 (translation, 485).

However we choose to interpret it, it is not carried through to the allegorical interpretation that follows; instead, this passage refers to the man who deceives.<sup>119</sup>

The bulk of the poem, however, is very much focused on the female spider as a frightening – even monstrous – murderer. In fact, we are told outright in the opening lines that the spider falls into the category of creatures both ‘leiðe’ (detestable) and ‘lodlike’ (loathsome). It is noteworthy that disgust is so overtly sign-posted through the latter term. This term (a form of *lothli*) derives from Old English *laðlic*,<sup>120</sup> which is linked to a disgust-response evoked by disease or death in several of the passages in which it appears.<sup>121</sup>

Other diction that derives from Old English includes the term ‘fo’ (from Old English *fah*), which is applied to the web’s threads, and carries a range of meanings from ‘hostile’ to ‘variegated’ and ‘stained’.<sup>122</sup> In Old English, *fah* is especially invoked in relation to Satan, serpents and associated individuals, including the former’s monstrous kin in *Beowulf*.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, links between *fah*, sin and blood – common in Old English literature – are all

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<sup>119</sup> ‘Dis wirm bitokeneð ðe man ðat oðer biswikeð, / On stede er on stalle, stille er lude, / In mot er in market, er oni oðer wise. / He him bit ðan he him bale selleð / & he drinkeð his blod wanne he him dreueð / & ðo freteð h[i]m al ðan he him iuel werkeð’ (This insect signifies the man who deceives another, in one place or another, in a meeting or in the market, or in any other way. He bites him when he does him harm and drinks his blood when he troubles him and then eats him when he continually causes evil for him). Wirtjes, *Middle English Physiologus*, 13, lines 329–34 (my translation).

<sup>120</sup> See *MED*, s.v. *lothli*. Note, however, that the spelling of ‘leiðe’ (a variant of *loth* in the *MED*) derives not from Old English *lað*, but from Old Norse. See Erik Björkman, *Scandinavian Loan-Words in Middle English*, Studien zur englischen Philologie 7 (Halle, 1900), 47.

<sup>121</sup> Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *laðlic*.

<sup>122</sup> *MED*, s.v. *fo* (adj); and *DOE*, s.v. *fah*<sup>1</sup>, *fag*<sup>1</sup> and *fah*<sup>2</sup>, *fag*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>123</sup> *DOE*, s.v. *fah*<sup>1</sup>, *fag*<sup>1</sup> and *fah*<sup>2</sup>, *fag*<sup>2</sup>; and Fulk, Bjork and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, lines 554a, 578a, 811b, 1001a, 1263b, 2671a.

present in this passage.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, diction associated with the spider's actions derives from Old English, with verbs like *drepan* (to strike) and *fretan* (to devour) being linked to battle, blood and monstrosity. *Drepan* especially refers to striking with literal or figurative weapons, including the bitter arrows of pride in *Beowulf*.<sup>125</sup> The verb's nominal form is also, notably, the term associated with the decapitation of Grendel, after which the monster's poisonous blood melts the sword that carried out the act.<sup>126</sup> In Middle English, *drepen* is especially associated with the devil, sinful humans and venomous non-humans such as dragons and serpents.<sup>127</sup> *Fretan*, on the other hand, is linked particularly to non-human animals or humans with cannibalistic tendencies.<sup>128</sup> It is also specifically associated with worms gnawing on dead bodies in several Old English homilies and poetic texts.<sup>129</sup> The same connotations are true of Middle English *freten*.<sup>130</sup> Finally, an indication of the spider's monstrosity can also be detected in the formula 'bane wurðeð' (becomes the murderer), variations of which occur in Old English, Old Norse, Old Saxon and Old High German. Calvert Watkins has argued that this diction demonstrates an Indo-European interest in heroic killings of or by dragons, as

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<sup>124</sup> For a list of contexts in which this term appears, see Filip Missuno, 'Glowing Paradoxes and Glimmers of Doom: A Re-evaluation of the Meaning of Old English *fāh* in Poetic Contexts', *Neophilologus* 99 (2015), 125–42 (131).

<sup>125</sup> Fulk, Bjork and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, lines 1745–7.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, line 1589b.

<sup>127</sup> *MED*, s.v. *drepen* (1).

<sup>128</sup> *DOE*, s.v. *fretan*.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, sense 2.a.i.–2.a.i.b. I include *Riddle 47*'s bookworm here because the book it devours is, of course, made from animal flesh.

<sup>130</sup> *MED*, s.v. *freten*, sense 1a–1b.

well as particularly nasty human murders like fratricide.<sup>131</sup> The diction of the early Middle English *Physiologus* clearly points to the spider as taking part in this tradition.

A final aspect that links this later text to frightening Anglo-Saxon spider depictions is the readiness of the *Physiologus* spider. Indeed, this spider's readiness may be analyzed alongside the superlative eagerness ('geornast') of the *Paris Psalter* spider. The origin of this readiness may ultimately stem from Pliny's remarks on how quick spiders are to pounce on their prey; as noted above, Pliny's spider is watchful and alert:

cum vero captura incidit, quam vigilans et paratus accursus! licet extrema  
haereat plaga, semper in medium currit, quia sic maxime totum concutiendo  
implicat.<sup>132</sup>

(But when a catch falls into the web, how watchfully and alertly it runs to it!  
although it may be clinging to the edge of the net, it always runs to the middle,  
because in that way it entangles the prey by shaking the whole.)

Certainly, there are similarities between the preparedness of Pliny's spider and the one depicted in the Middle English *Physiologus*, although the tone is notably far more reverential in the classical text. There are also key differences, such as the fact that the early Middle English spider does not shake the web in order to trap her prey; she seizes her victim violently. Likewise, she is not pretending to be distracted; she is carefully and closely watching. The aggressive behaviour of this spider links her to the Old English examples that depict spiders as dangerous and actively frightening. The *Physiologus* spider, like the spiders in the Old English versions of philosophical, medical, penitential and biblical texts, possesses a disturbing set of behaviours that point toward the spider's ability to provoke a fear/disgust response in their human observers.

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<sup>131</sup> *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford, 1995), 418–24.

<sup>132</sup> *Natural History*, Book 11.28, 482 (translation, 483).

## Conclusion: Spiders as a Living Metaphor

There is one final Old English passage that I would like to consider in closing. This passage, which ties together many of the themes discussed above, does not – at least overtly – depict a spider per se. It occurs in *Judith*, and describes the very calculated way in which the eponymous heroine’s enemy Holofernes keeps his men under surveillance:

þær wæs eallgylden  
fleohnet fæger    ond ymbe þæs folctogan  
bed ahongen,    þæt se bealofulla  
mihte wlitan þurh,    wigena baldor,  
on æghwylcne    þe ðær inne com  
hæleða bearna,    ond on hyne nænig  
monna cynnes.<sup>133</sup>

(There was an entirely golden, fair fly-net, hung around the leader of the people’s bed, so that the baleful one, the ruler of warriors, could look through it upon everyone who came in there, the children of heroes, and no one of humankind could look upon him.)

The ‘fleohnet’ in *Judith* has long intrigued scholars. The term translates the Latin *conopeum* (canopy/mosquito-net) that surrounds Holofernes’ bed in the Vulgate’s book of Judith. Although the object is present in the poem’s source, its function there is less voyeuristic. Rather, the biblical *conopeum* – as a high-status textile woven with precious stones – acts as

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<sup>133</sup> Griffith, ed., *Judith*, 98, lines 46b–52a (my translation).

an indicator of Holofernes' wealth.<sup>134</sup> This prestige is preserved in the Old English *Judith*'s reference to the textile as 'eallgylden' and 'fæger', and yet I would argue that the evidence for arachnophobia in early English texts suggests an alternative, allegorical interpretation when it comes to the Old English passage as a whole. Could the 'fleohnet' also be a *nett* that aims to catch flies, rather than keep them out?<sup>135</sup> We have seen such nets in the *Paris Psalter* and the early Middle English *Physiologus*, texts that appear to build upon the Old Testament connection between spiders and sin, as well as Cassiodorus's interpretation of the psalm spider as a cunning and evil creature. That *Judith* and Psalm 89.9 in the *Paris Psalter* are the only two Old English poems to contain a collocation of *fleoge* and *nett* makes the case for reading them together compelling.<sup>136</sup> Analyzing *Judith* alongside the watchful and ready spider of the Middle English *Physiologus* also reminds us that Holofernes is a voyeuristic figure associated with evil, deception and fear who is struck down in an encounter that is seething with complex gender dynamics.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Judith 10.19: 'videns itaque Holofernem Iudith sedentem in conopeo / quod erat ex purpura et auro, et zmaragdo, et lapidibus pretiosis intextum' (And Judith seeing Holofernes sitting under a canopy, which was woven of purple and gold, with emeralds and precious stones). The conopeum also appears in passing at 13:10, 13:19, 16:23.

<sup>135</sup> Carl T. Berkhout and James F. Doubleday gesture toward this interpretation when they discuss evil nets in the Old Testament. They do not, however, make the connection between the 'fleohnet' and a spider-web. See 'The Net in *Judith* 46b–54a', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 74 (1973), 630–4.

<sup>136</sup> The only non-poetic co-occurrences of these elements are glossary entries for *conopeum*. See *DOE*, s.v. *fleognett*; and Porter, *Antwerp-London Glossaries*, 107, line 2136, 123, line 2726.

<sup>137</sup> See, for example, John P. Hermann, *Allegories of War: Language and Violence in Old English Poetry* (Ann Arbor, 1989), 189–98; Susan Kim, 'Bloody Signs: Circumcision and Pregnancy in the Old English *Judith*', *Exemplaria* 11.2 (1999), 285–307; Karma Lochrie, 'Gender, Sexual Violence and the Politics of War in the Old English *Judith*', in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*:

*Judith* appears to draw on what this article has argued to be – despite the relative rarity of overall references – a coherent tradition of adapting Latin depictions of spiders in order to highlight their unpleasant behaviours and the dangers they pose. Clearly, when it came to spiders, some early English writers felt that their sources’ approach did not go far enough. Indeed, rather than the symbols of artistry, wasted industry, fragility and sin that are so apparent in the classical and biblical traditions, spiders appearing in early English texts are visceral, evil and pose a serious threat to the victims of their bites.

This trend can be detected in both poetry and prose from a variety of genres in early English, including biblical, philosophical, penitential and bestiary texts. In bringing the above evidence together, this analysis sheds light on the sheer *range* of references to potentially frightening/disgust-evoking spiders, which – despite the specific number of occurrences being low – is significant. Additionally, I have identified a clear development from the preceding and highly influential classical and biblical traditions when it comes to early vernacular English writings (with the Bern riddle presenting tantalizing evidence for a potential parallel in Insular Latin). No longer were spiders artistic, futile, fragile or sinful; in early English texts they were actively evil, disgusting and fear-inducing. This change appears to derive from the Latin psalm commentaries, and especially the work of Cassiodorus. However, the development of Cassiodorus’s hints about spider maliciousness in early English writings goes far beyond his actual interpretation. With these texts, an intense aversion to spiders that hints

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*Intersections*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington, 1994), 1–20; Hugh Magennis, ‘Gender and Heroism in the *Old English Judith*’, in *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne (Cambridge, 2002), 5–18; Erin Mullaly, ‘The Cross-Gendered Gift: Weaponry in the *Old English Judith*’, *Exemplaria* 17 (2005), 255–84; and Christine Thijs, ‘Feminine Heroism in the *Old English Judith*’, *Leeds Studies in English* 37 (2006), 41–62.

at the presence of arachnophobia in England – whether just beginning to take shape or already firmly established – began to find its way onto the page.