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***(Un)stabolfæstnes* and its Problems: Grounding Minds in Early Medieval England**

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The Old English text *Solomon and Saturn* includes a list of materials from which Adam, the first man, is made. A pound of cloud constitutes his *modes unstaðelfæstnes* [mind's unsteadfastness / instability]. Various other texts from early medieval England also refer to the *mod*, or mind, as an intrinsically unstable and changeable entity, using key terms such as *staðelfæst* [grounded / stable] and *staðolian* [to ground / stabilise]. In many of these texts, this instability is mentioned as an inherent quality of mind. Instability, contingency and change are regarded as integral and typical features of the mind but equally, there are warnings for the waywardness of the mind. The literature frequently encourages readers to ground and maintain control over their minds. Sources recommend restraining and training the mind to 'govern' and 'steer' it, and they even refer to the possibility of finding mental stability in another foundation. This article considers these seemingly contradictory portrayals of minds and instructions for grounding them, and delivers a more nuanced conception of what (physical) freedom early medieval people would imagine their minds to have, and what foundations they considered helpful for grounding them.



Minds are often portrayed as unstable and changing entities in literature from early medieval England. The Old English text *Solomon and Saturn* includes a list of materials from which Adam, the first man, is allegedly made: from a pound of cloud, his *modes unstaðelfæstnes* [‘mind’s unsteadfastness’] is created (Cross and Hill, 1982). Other early medieval texts also refer to the *mod*, or mind, as an intrinsically unstable faculty or entity, often using key terms such as the adjective (*un*)*staþol-fæst*, which can be translated as (un)steadfast, or (un)stable, and the verb *staðolian* [to establish or found] (Bosworth, 2014: *staþol-fæst. staþolian*).¹ This article demonstrates that in such texts, this instability is regarded as an inherent quality of minds and that it is not always viewed as problematic, though there are texts that warn of the need to keep the mind under control. Malcolm R. Godden explains that these warnings reflect in essence what the early medieval mind is considered to be, within the vernacular tradition of writing about the mind: it is wilful, dangerous, and in need of control. It *can* and *must* be stabilised and grounded (Godden, 1985). Using the word *staþol* [foundation] as a guide to the variety and capability of minds in early medieval English literature reveals that instability is an acceptable and typical quality, yet simultaneously a solution is offered for the potential problems it could cause (Bosworth, 2014. *staþol*). The concept (*un*)*staþolfæstnes* in relation to minds frequently indicates that the instability of minds was not considered to be a problematic feature in itself but, if left unchecked, it could affect a person and their environment. The control, or perhaps the stabilisation, that Godden describes is thus a concern for a person’s community; the mind can impact the external physical world, and this is also where solutions for instability can be found. Instability is described as a feature that led people to explore the boundaries of the physical mind, as well as potential foundations for parts of the mind or mental processes which exist beyond the human body.

This article will argue that the stability and instability within representations of minds in early medieval literature from England is related to the demand for communal guidance on how to control the mind, and even to descriptions of the establishment of external foundations for the mind. While early medieval sources frequently describe minds that are physically part of the human body, functioning as the centre of cognition, attention is also devoted to appearances of minds and cognitive processes that transgress the boundaries of the physical container. *Riddle 47* and the poem *The Seafarer*, from the 10th-century Exeter Book, both feature a description of a fragment of a mind that has displaced itself. The travelling or wandering mind has been given

¹ The Old English term *mod* can be translated in a number of ways, but it is used frequently to describe what we would now call the mind. In the context of the selected texts in this paper, *mod* is simply translated with ‘mind’. See Stanley (2007) for examples of *staþol* across the corpus of Old English.

significant scholarly attention, particularly the instances from *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, but the potential relationship between *(un)stabolfæstnes* of the mind and its search for a foundation remains underexplored (Clemoes, 1969; Lockett, 2011; Harbus, 2011). The descriptions of minds that appear outside of the human body are the result of the explicit mental instability that early medieval people described, which gave rise to a need to construct external places for minds and mental processes. In *Riddle 47*, the use of an external *stapol* does not reflect the faultiness of the mind but the transience of its thoughts in the form of speech, which can be fixed (for a while) through writing; in *The Seafarer* the mind roams abroad because it is seeking heaven—its instability is connected to spiritual longing.

Studying the ways in which the features of stability and instability affect minds in a transformational fashion can bring new insights to scholarship on medieval psychology and related fields. It is crucial to incorporate features of the mind that are ambiguous and erratic into research in order to improve our knowledge of the factors that drive mental activity. This must be done despite the difficulty it poses for the creation of coherent or consistent present-day scholarly models of the early medieval mind. Exploring the seemingly inconsistent behaviour of minds influenced by the problems of *(un)stabolfæstnes* in the literature of early medieval England will greatly improve our understanding of the way minds were portrayed and conceptualised.

Concepts of Mind

Various concepts of early medieval minds have been developed by present-day scholars, which differ in their description of the key characteristics of the mind. This section will briefly present some principal points of scholarly discussion to give an impression of what underlies interpretations of medieval descriptions of minds, which led to the formation of present-day models or frameworks of the early medieval mind. These models construe in detail what may have been considered typical features and functions of minds. This article will then examine whether the incorporation of changeable features of the mind, such as the concept of *(un)stabolfæstnes*, affects the composition of such models. This strategy will not resolve any contradictions in contemporary descriptions of medieval minds or isolate a dominant philosophical tradition of the mind in the early medieval period. However, considering the instability of mind as a prominent and variable factor, with the potential to be a significant and metamorphic influence on the mind, drastically affects any concepts of medieval minds we may create.

Many modern scholarly accounts of the early medieval mind rest on a distinction between two philosophical traditions, one Platonism-Christian and one vernacular.

Godden (1985) was the first to argue for this distinction.² The classical philosophical tradition, which can be traced to Plato through Augustine and Boethius, is represented in the early Middle Ages in England by Alcuin of York, Alfred the Great and Ælfric of Eynsham. In this convention, the mind is identified with the soul, whereas in the vernacular tradition, they are distinct entities (Godden, 1985). Godden's insights into the willfulness of the mind (summarised above) apply to the vernacular mind. In her broad study, Leslie Lockett (2011) argues that a vernacular tradition, which considers the mind to be a physical part of the body, had a greater and more complex presence in early medieval psychology in England than the Augustinian tradition. Her inclusion of works on the mind is more comprehensive than Godden's, and she recognises many divisions and variations within the traditions. In the vernacular tradition, the mind is often described as a corporeal entity rather than as part of the soul (Low, 1998). It is difficult to nominate a dominant corporeal locus for the mind: there have been various modern studies that emphatically locate early medieval minds in either the head or the chest, though the latter is usually preferred (Mize, 2006; Lockett, 2015; McIllwain, 2006).³ Soon-Ai Low (1998) has analysed what she considers to be metaphorical usage of the portrayal of the mind in the chest in 'common-sense psychology'. The early medieval descriptions she cites articulate how ideas or emotions can bring on a physical sensation. Lockett (2011) has explored this idea of metaphor versus physicality in detail, based on the 'Mind as Container' model, which dominates readings of many early medieval descriptions of minds, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and Low (1998). Lockett explains that the container, an enclosed physical space in the midsection of the body, is where mental activity is described to occur. Intense mental activities or states, such as emotional distress, can produce heat in or near the container, which can begin to swell, boil and expand. Similarly, the mind can be affected by mental cooling, which causes roominess in the container and stimulates normal functioning of the mind (Lockett, 2011: 57–9). The 'Mind as Container' that Lockett (2011) describes is often also referred to as the 'hydraulic' model of the mind, because its behaviour resembles that of liquid in a container under the influence of temperature. The hydraulic model is not an appropriate comparison for all descriptions

² While the traditions are referred to as Classical or Latin, and vernacular, it is important to note that the Latin tradition can be represented in a text written in the vernacular and vice versa. The language of a certain text, while relevant, does not determine what tradition an idea derives from.

³ Most frequently the mind is explicitly located in the chest, especially in Old English poetry. The brain is occasionally mentioned in the *leechbooks*, which contain a mid-10th-century collection of medical recipes, but its function is hardly discussed (Cockayne, T O, 1864–5). For example, *Leechbook I* contains a reference to skull fractures and recommendations on what to do if the brains are visible, but not on the function of the brain (Cockayne, Vol. 2: I.15). Similarly to the medical books, theological texts or texts referring to the bible generally prefer the head as locus for the mind (Cross and Hill, 145).

of minds that resemble a container. There are instances that emphasise the enclosure itself and its boundaries, such as examples that liken the mind to a treasure chest or chamber that holds valuables (Mize, 2006). There is much more to be said on the presence and prominence of these traditions and on the complex scholarly constructs of mind, but for the present we will concentrate on the specific quality of mind that is *(un)stapolfæstnes*.

Present-day models of early medieval minds, drawing on extant sources, encompass a range of features, yet they do not explore fully the impact that features such as willfulness and instability have on the functioning of the mind and on its (imagined) location. Qualities of the mind that are volatile or transient are often underrepresented in scholarly models of the mind, including the quality *(un)stapolfæstnes*, which can indicate that the mind is capable of being stable, and also of being unstable. However nuanced and sophisticated, the creation of one model concept of the early medieval mind, which attempts to isolate a harmonious and consistent description of the mind, is likely to discount the conflicting and ambiguous information that is also present in early medieval texts, as will be demonstrated below. Therefore, it risks impeding a more complete understanding of what early medieval minds were described to be, as well as neglecting the diversity of concepts present in early medieval literature. As a possible approach to such features, Antonina Harbus reframes an apparently ambiguous concept of the mind and states:

It seems paradoxical that the mind can be imagined as both a storage place for thoughts and also something that can wander away, yet these apparently incongruous figurative schemas underpin the conceptualization of mental life in a wide range of Old English poetry. In combination, they form a dual model of the containing, wandering mind within a vernacular poetic psychology that privileges the collection and storage of wise thoughts, judicious verbal expression, and motivated self-control. (Harbus, 2011: 21)

Perhaps a dual model could be a solution for incorporating characteristics that are variable into the concept of the mind, and which are seemingly on opposite sides of a spectrum. It may seem counter-intuitive to analyse such features when establishing a comprehensive summary of what the mind *is*, rather than what it could potentially be under specific circumstances. However, as the excerpts below will show, this contingency lies at the core of these descriptions of minds. If the minds in these Old English texts are indeed affected and driven by the feature of stability, and able to change from stable to unstable, this suggests the presence of eclectic concepts of minds. An investigation into the concept of *(un)stapolfæstnes* will demonstrate that the capacity for stability and

instability, despite its changeable nature, is a basic and integral part of every mind and should therefore be included in any study of early medieval minds.

The Old English word *stapol* is frequently applied to minds in early medieval literature. This word has a strong semantic relation with ‘stability’, as well as an association with something being grounded in a particular position or foundation.⁴ The word is applied to signify literal as well as metaphorical stability. There are compound nouns that include both *stapol* and terms for mind: *modstapol*, *modstapolness*, and *modstapolfæstness*, all of which appear in the corpus of Old English literature (Stanley, 2007). Following *(un)stapolfæstness* as a central concept within a variety of descriptions of minds shows the frequency of the search for stability, and the implication that instability of mind is a typical feature that is present in Old English literature. The first description to be explored in this article is that of Adam in the Old English prose *Solomon and Saturn*, a dialogue on theology included in the Southwick Codex, copied in the 12th century, which suggests that his mind was intrinsically affected by instability. Instability of mind does not appear to be limited to a particular genre of text or to a particular social category. Examples of unstable minds can also be found in hagiography, confirming that even the minds of saints are in need of a foundation. For instance, ‘him to heofonum hyge stapeliað’ [‘to fix their mind on heaven’] is mentioned in *Guthlac A*, and this is interpreted as a moment where Saint Guthlac is contemplating fastening his mind on heaven (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936: 49–72, l. 66; Harbus, 2002: 103). Of course, this also means that Guthlac’s mind was previously unfastened or unstable: *unstapolfæst*. Furthermore, in *Juliana*, the saint is said to ‘ongan þa fæstlice ferð stapelian’ [she began to fasten her mind firmly] on God (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936: 113–33, l. 271). Metaphors of binding and fastening the mind are not uncommon in early medieval literature: the constriction of the mind can happen voluntarily, or it can tie itself in response to negative emotions (Cavell, 2016). The term *stapol* is not used in all these cases, and constriction or binding is not necessarily always related to the stability of mind. However, the cases of Guthlac and Juliana indicate that minds can be in an unfixed condition and that stability of mind can be achieved by a particular action. The emphasis on this intrinsic instability of minds and on the potential for stabilisation, can be considered a positive acknowledgement that minds are innately changeable. This prompts the question whether there is reason to understand the feature stability or instability of mind as problematic. The description of Adam does not imply this, but the emphasis on restraint and control of the mind and attempts to search for external stability do.

⁴ The full definition of ‘stapol’ in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online* includes: ‘I. a foundation (lit. or fig.), [...], II. fixed condition, state, position, [...], III. a fixed position, station, place, site, IV. the firmament, the heavens’ (Bosworth, 2014).

The description of the creation of Adam, the first man, in the prose Old English text *Solomon and Saturn* specifies what natural elements Adam is made with. The following passage gives some insight into the lack of stability of minds, as it lists the physical substances the mind is created with:

Saga me þæt andworc þe adam wæs of geworht, se ærustan man.
Ic ðe secge, of viii punda gewihte.

Saga me hwæt hatton þage
Ic ðe secge, þæt æroste wæs foldan pund of ðan him wæs flesc geworht. Oðer wæs fyres pund; þanon hym wæs þæt blod read and hat. Þridde wæs windes pund; þanon hym wæs seo æðung geseald; feorðe wæs wolcnes pund; þanon hym wæs his modes unstaðelfæstnes geseald. Fifte wæs gyfe pund; þanon hym wæs geseald sefa and geðang. Syxste was blosmena pund; þanon hym wæs eageana myssenlicnys geseald. Seofodðo wæs deawes pund; ðanon him becom swat. Eahtoðe wæs sealtes pund; þanon him wæron þa tearas sealte (Cross and Hill, 1982: 26).

Tell me the material from which Adam, the first man, was made.
I tell you, from eight pounds' weight.

Tell me what they are called.
I tell you, the first was a pound of earth from which his flesh was made. The second was a pound of fire; from which his blood was red and hot. The third was a pound of wind; from which his breath was given; the fourth was a pound of cloud; from this his instability of *mod* was given. The fifth was a pound of forgiveness; from this was given his *sefa* and thought. The sixth was a pound of blossoms; from this he was given the variety of his eyes. The seventh was a pound of dew; from this he received sweat. The eighth was a pound of salt; from this his tears were salt.⁵

In this description, the terms *mod* and *sefa* are both used, and they are created from two different substances. Godden suggests that the words *mod*, *hyge*, *sefa* and *ferð* were 'used more or less interchangeably' to denote mind, yet other studies suggest that the usage of the variety of terms for 'mind' across the corpus of Old English literature and within specific texts opens up the possibility that they denote distinct aspects of it (Godden, 1985: 289; Philips, 1985; North, 1991; Low, 1998: 20; Harbus, 2002: 35–6; Lockett, 2011: 34). *Mod* and *sefa* certainly appear to refer to separate parts of Adam in this text, receiving different denominators in the listing, different substances and properties.

⁵ All unattributed translations are my own.

Adam is created from materials that already existed, but many of them are transient and changeable; fire, wind, cloud, blossoms and dew only appear under certain conditions, and none of those is permanent. Only one substance can be said to derive directly from God, and that is forgiveness. While Adam may technically be comprised of physical elements, these are ephemeral by nature. Furthermore, the materials that the first man was made of, including the materials that affect his *mod*, cumulate in a risky and unreliable combination. This mirrors the elusive nature of the *mod* and *sefa* and stresses that they are fundamentally unstable, or ungrounded, and changeable. Rather than being a feature of human fallenness, instability of mind is explicitly created by God for Adam.

The mind's instability can appear in a context where it is not in need of control or correction, as evident in the description of the first man. However, controlling the mind is a prominent theme elsewhere in early medieval poetry. The Old English wisdom poem *Maxims I* demonstrates corporeality of the mind by locating both *snyttro* [wisdom] and *modgeþoncas* [mind-thoughts] in the breast:

Hyge sceal gehealden, hond gewealden,
seo sceal in eagan, snyttro in breostum,
þær bið þæs monnes modgeþoncas (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936: 156–63, ll. 121–3)

The mind must be restrained, the hand controlled,
sight must be in eyes, wisdom in the breast,
there are a man's mind-thoughts.

This fragment gives a very physical description of the location of wisdom and thought, and the *hyge* is listed together with other body parts, suggesting it is a physical concept in itself. The breast, where wisdom and thoughts must be, may be considered the same entity as the *hyge*, but this is not clearly stated. Control over *hyge* and hand, as though they are considered two parts of the body, lies at the heart of this description.⁶ While there are no statements on stability in this part of the poem, the necessity for control over the mind invites the idea that the mind described here is not stable.⁷

⁶ *Maxims I* also states that '[h]ond sceal heofod inwyrca[n]' (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936: 156–63, ll. 121–23, 67–68). Problematically, however, the latter can be translated as either 'the head must influence the hand', or 'the hand must influence the head', as the grammatical form of both *hond* and *heofod* can be read as nominatives. We cannot conclude with certainty therefore, whether the head could be seen as the seat of thought or provoker of action in this specific poem, or alternatively, as a reactive entity, driven by sensory input. Lockett maintains that the head is only mentioned here because it 'can see, not because it can engage in deliberative thought' (Lockett, 2015: 38).

⁷ A slightly odd feature of this excerpt is the lack of verbs in the second clause of lines 121–22. This is not unusual in the maxims, but it is unclear which modal or auxiliary verb the poet implied to be used for *hond gewealden* and *snyttro in breostum*. As *sceal* and *bið* are frequently used throughout the poem and precede these clauses, either of these may have been intended.

Ideas of control and training of the mind with a particular anticipated result is not uncommon in literature from early medieval England. *Maxims I* further warns us that,

Lef mon læces behofað. Læran sceal mon geongne monnan,
 trymman ond tyhtan þæt he teala cunne, oþþæt hine mon atemedne hæbbe,
 sylle him wist ond wædo, oþþæt hine mon on gewitte alæde.
 Ne sceal hine mon cildgeongne forcweþan, ær he hine acyþan mote;
 þy sceal on þeode geþeon, þæt he wese þristhygende.
 Styran sceal mon strongum mode. (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936: 156–63, ll. 46–51)

An injured man needs a doctor. The young man should be taught,
 Strengthened and urged to know rightly, until he has been tamed,
 Give him food and clothing, until he be brought to exercise his reason.
 He must not be rebuked as a young child, before he may prove himself.
 He must be trained among people, so that he is bold-thinking.
 One must govern a strong *mod*.

An obligation to train young men is expressed: to a point where they can exercise reason, are firm of purpose, and with the ultimate aim that they become capable of governing their own mind (Harbus, 2002: 74). Scholarship has paid much attention to similarities of the final sentence with ‘Stieran mon sceal strongum mode’ in the Old English poem *The Seafarer* (Harbus, 2002; Cavill, 1999; Shippey, 1994; Krapp and Dobbie, 1936: 143–7, ll. 109a). Paul Cavill and T. A. Shippey differentiate between the two lines by translating this part of *Maxims I* with ‘[o]ne steers [rules] by means of a strong mind’ and the *Seafarer* ‘[a] headstrong spirit must be controlled’ (Cavill, 1999: 75; Shippey, 1994: 149–50). However, this final sentence of *Maxims I* has also been translated as ‘[o]ne must discipline an impetuous mind’, an appropriate translation given *mode* is a dative singular and the adjective *strongum* a neuter dative (O’Camb, 2009: 259). The term *styran* itself connotes steering and ruling, but it also connotes correction, and while the term *stieran* only yields the definition ‘to correct’ in Bosworth and Toller’s dictionary, the *Thesaurus of Old English* includes steering and guidance as well (2014: *ge-styran*. *ge-stieran*; Roberts, 2017: *stieran*). Perhaps associations of correction of the mind are valid in the context of learning, which this fragment from *Maxims I* appears to centre on. *Maxims I* claims that the minds of young men can develop under guidance, and the purpose of teaching is not to transfer knowledge from one mind to another, but to pass on the skills to govern a wayward mind. It is the *mod* that needs to be controlled, rather than the

mod exercising control.⁸ The untrained mind is, according to this description, not capable of exercising reason and of being bold-thinking. The description of this mind is perhaps not very different from the mind that needs to be restrained in ll. 121–23 of *Maxims I*: both minds are somehow unstable, but they can be controlled and influenced through teaching, nurturing and training within a person’s community.

Consequences of not controlling the mind are not explicitly specified in texts such as *Maxims I*, though there are some indications in the corpus of Old English literature of what could potentially go wrong. The legendary case of King Heremod, which is relayed in *Beowulf*, implies that control over a mind can be lost completely, with disastrous results. Heremod provides an interesting and unusual case of mental development, as undesirable growth of his mind is given as the reason he harms his environment: ‘hwæpere him on ferhþe greow breosthord blodreow’ [nevertheless, in his *ferhþe* grew to him the *bréosthord* bloodthirsty] (Fulk et al, 2008: 58, ll.1718b–21). Whereas *ferhþe* and *breosthord* are often translated as near-synonyms denoting mind, here we see the *breosthord* located within the *ferhþe*, and it is the *breosthord* that grew increasingly bloodthirsty and unruly. There is an implication that this growth could normally be constrained, but that it is now bursting out of the *ferhþe*, which recalls the image of the hydraulic model of the mind: it is expanding with the heat of emotion.

The parts of Heremod’s experience that are shared in *Beowulf* suggest that, through nobody’s explicit fault, Heremod’s mind altered and he became greedy for treasure and so full of anger that he even killed his closest allies and companions:

ne geweoƿ he him to willan ac to wælfearle
 ond to deaðcwalum Deniga leodum
 breat bolgeneatas beodgeneatas
 eaxlgesteallan, oþ þæt he ana hwearf. (Fulk et al., 2008: 58, ll. 1711–14)

He did not mature as they had hoped, but [grew up] for destruction
 and for slaughter of the Danish people;
 Enraged in mind he destroyed his table-companions,
 Shoulder-friends, so that he was alone.

⁸ A potential actor in controlling the mind is the ‘self’. Godden (1985: 288–9) indicates that aside from the soul and the mind, a conscious ‘self’ can be identified in many vernacular texts, among which *Maxims I*, *Beowulf* and the *Wanderer* are mentioned. Harbus (2002: 12) develops this idea to create a ‘model of the mind in poetic expression [and to study] how it interacts with the self as a catalyst in personal development’.

We do not know what age Heremod is when this occurs, but there is an indication of a problem in a stage of mental development, such as childhood or adolescence, as Heremod is described as being in the care of his people and he does not grow, *weaxan*, as his people wished. Contrastingly, the child Scyld is earlier in the poem described to ‘weox under wolcnum’ [‘grow under the sky’], and he is explicitly described as a good king (Clarke, 2010: 165–82). *Willan* suggests that there is a wish among the people for a certain result, but not necessarily that there is active involvement in Heremod’s development by those people. *Maxims I* specifically indicates that a young man or child must be trained among people in order to acquire a set of mental skills, including control over the mind. For Heremod, the problem is not, or perhaps not only, a lack of acquisition of knowledge, but there is flawed growth in his mind itself, and it is not reasonable or purposeful, nor is it controlled.⁹ Rather than unstable or wayward, which we have seen described as a typical or basic feature of minds, the mind here has developed into something undesirable and unmanageable. We cannot know whether the descriptions of training and control in *Maxims I* apply to Heremod in *Beowulf*, but there is a clear perception in both that significant problems in minds can arise in the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood due to a lack of control over the mind. Furthermore, untrained or uncontrolled behaviour of the mind does not meet the hopes and expectations present in a social environment, and it may endanger that social environment.

The Extended Mind

Lack of stability in minds can be a cause for concern and, as demonstrated in *Maxims I*, this can be addressed by exercising control over the mind. However, literature from early medieval England also presents alternative ideas of stabilising a mind. The literature exhibits ways of seeking external control or foundations for the mind, or for an aspect of the mind, illustrating possible conceptions where external objects can function as repositories for minds, and as stabilising forces. The use of the term *stapol* in one of the Exeter Book riddles provides a new perspective on perceptions of the mind and a new way of finding stability. It also opens up potentially more radical ways of conceptualising the mind and its limits in the primary sources. *Riddle 47* is usually resolved with the answer ‘bookworm’:

Moððe word fræt. Me þæt þuhte
wrætlicu wyrd, þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,

⁹ For an analysis of the relationship between Heremod and knowledge, or ‘sapientia’, see Kaske (1958: 423–56).

þæt se wyrm forswealg wera gied sumes,
 þeof in þystro, þrymfæstne cwide
 ond þæs strangan stapol. Stælgieſt ne wæs
 wihte þy gleawra, þe he þam wordum swealg
 (Krapp and Dobbie: 205, ll. 1–6).

A moth ate words. To me it seemed
 a remarkable fate when I discovered the miracle
 that the worm had swallowed the speech of a man.
 A thief in the night, a mighty saying
 and its strong foundation. The stealing guest was not
 any the wiser – even though he swallowed the words.

This riddle tells us of the worm that is eating a person’s speech out of a book. *Moððe*, *wyrm*, *þeof* and *stælgieſt* are terms used for the bookworm, who eats *gied sumes*, *þrymfæstne cwide* and *wordum*: a voice in written form, together with its *stapol*, referring to the page. There is information bestowed unto the page, and there is an expectation that whoever encounters this will become wiser. The bookworm, which does not read but eat the words, is emphatically said to be an exception to this. John Scattergood (1999) draws a comparison between the description in this poem and terms that denote the consumption of information, such as ‘ruminantion’ and ‘digestion’, as ways of processing knowledge and activating memory. The bookworm is thus making a similar effort to understand the *wordum* but it consumes both the words and their *stapol* without intellectual gain.

Riddle 47 has a focus on oral language, which has established itself on the page. There is no mention of any of the materials that a book and its written content are produced with. Instead, spoken words are referred to. The riddle tells us that a person has left their ‘speech’, containing wisdom, on the page so that it can be accessed again.¹⁰ Many of the scholarly discussions on objects that hold text or textual inscriptions are carried within analysis of ‘voice’, centring the verbalisation, rather than the origin of a particular message. ‘Voice’ is described by James Paz (2017) as something given to, and received by humans, but expressed by an object which appears to have the ability to drastically change that ‘voice’. What is called ‘voice’ in scholarship does not generally concern sound, but refers to a symbol or a textual inscription as a way

¹⁰ Notably, wisdom is considered to have a physical presence in the body in some early medieval texts: wisdom [snytro] is in the breast in *Maxims I*. This riddle indicates that wisdom can be encompassed in a ‘voice’ and moved to another physical object. The ‘voice’ thus acts as a vessel or container like the mind and the *stapol*.

of transmitting a human voice. Catherine E. Karkov (2011) identifies various distinct types of inscription—on, for example, the Ruthwell Cross—as different ‘voices’, based on their language and script, and even on images that are used. There is a purpose in creating such voices on inanimate objects, and the ‘voice’ expresses implications about the creator of its message. The references in *Riddle 47* to the ‘speech of a man’ and ‘a renowned saying’, clearly imply that the ‘voice’ that the bookworm devours is not the voice of the book itself, but that it is merely contained there and that it was previously owned by a person. This person has thus succeeded in leaving their thoughts or their ‘voice’, in the form of written words, in a tangible object. By referring to speech, the riddle also indicates a potential function of the writing beyond its current usage, and for which a person’s voice will be needed again, and yet the ‘voice’ exists without a person, silent and material. The emphatic concern about losing the ‘voice’, which originates in a person and can be used again, but which survives without a person here, suggests that there is more at stake than losing the written words symbolising a piece of information.

The page of the book is described as being a *stapol*: a stable foundation on which to place someone’s thoughts or ‘voice’. While this may solve the problem of information being lost, presumably by a mind, the riddle also shows anxiety over the medium of the book – is it stable enough to be used as foundation for our thoughts and speech? Indeed, Scattergood (1999: 120) notes that *Riddle 47*’s primary concern is not ‘the illiterate worm [but] the mutability of songs as they pass from the traditional *wordhord* of the *scop* into the newer and strangely susceptible form of the literate memoria’.¹¹ He explains that the worm is incapable of preserving any meaning, but also that the *word* or *cwīde* cannot be eaten; however, the written symbols representing the voices can be consumed, and because the *word* can ‘be recalled and re-presented’ by those symbols ‘[...] that is why the Anglo-Saxon poet calls the book a ‘support’ (*stapol*) for words: it is, in itself, of secondary importance’ (Scattergood, 1999: 126). The ‘voice’ in *Riddle 47* has been lost as a result of damage to the foundation it was placed on, but despite the lack of success, this riddle describes the practice of stabilising the contents of a mind.

The use of *stapol* in the riddle and the search for a foundation invite a comparison to the study of Extended Mind Theory, which considers the possibility of cognitive states and processes to extend beyond the brain and into the world, and specifically, into objects. This object then becomes part of a cognitive process (Clark and Chalmers, 1998; Sutton, 2010). I base my understanding of the ‘extended mind’ on

¹¹ The *wordhord* is often likened to a treasure chest or storehouse and, like the mental container, it is unlocked by the speaker who selects his words (Amodio and O’Brien O’Keeffe, eds., 2003). The compound *wordhord* has been noted to have been ‘constructed on the same fundamental concept of the mind as an enclosure with contents’ (Mize, 2006: 70).

Merlin Donald's theory of engrams and exograms, which argues that some cognitive processes can be extended beyond the human mind and be placed inside an object. An extended process, or exogram, can function as an external memory record, it can be retrieved, it offers perceptual access, and it has the potential to be permanent. In contrast, an engram, or internal memory record, offers restricted perceptual access, is 'limited to the capacity of the human central nervous system', and it lasts only as long as the individual that contains it lives (Donald, 1991: 313). An exogram has particular advantages derived from its potential to survive for a long time and its accessibility by others. John Sutton describes this as 'the realm of the mental [spreading] across the physical, social and cultural environments, as well as bodies and brains' (Sutton, 2010: 189–226). The mental can thus extend itself and leave a mark of its existence. Although we cannot simply compare this modern theory to what is described in the *Riddle 47*—not in the least because of the discrepancy in medieval and modern concepts of mind and brain—the 'voice' resembles what is essentially a mental process, placed on a new foundation. The written medium may have been considered an appropriate foundation to accommodate or even stabilise a type of extension, or exogram, of their minds.

The properties of the 'voice' in *Riddle 47* adhere strongly to what we might expect of an extended mind: it is a cognitive process represented by written words, that is placed outside of the human body, and it may be retrieved. The 'voice' is stated to be a man's speech, which has been placed in the book. It thus has a clear origin and exists without a receiver. The only alteration it can suffer is by the destructive bookworm, or by someone else's usage (Scattergood, 1999: 127). The 'voice' thus does have a relationship with the object that holds it, even if that is not where it originates, and it depends on that object for survival. *Riddle 47* indicates that a 'voice' can exist separately from its creator and before it is spoken, heard or otherwise revived by a receiver. The mind itself may not be stabilised in this riddle, but, in the same way as an exogram, some fragments of the mind can be anchored to a *stapol*. This curious poetic conceptualisation of a 'voice' in a book exemplifies a prospective method of extending a mind, and preserving it, but it also exposes its limits.

The Travelling Mind

The search for a stable foundation of minds is a recurring topic in texts for early medieval England. One text that depicts most clearly that a mind was considered capable of leaving the body is the Old English poem *The Seafarer*, contained in the Exeter Book. The description given in this poem can be interpreted as a mind leaving its physical container and roaming over the sea before returning to the body. Towards the end of *The Seafarer*, the term *stapol* is used twice:

Meotod him þæt mod gestapelað,
 forþon he in his meahte gelyfeð.
 Stieran mon sceal strongum mode,
 ond þæt on stapelum healdan,
 ond gewis werum, wisum clæne. (Krapp and Dobbie: 143–7, ll. 108–12).

God establishes the *mod* within him,
 because he trusts in His power.
 A man must steer his wilful *mod*
 and keep it grounded, and certain with men,
 pure in direction.

In contrast to the establishment of Adam’s unstable mind in the prose *Solomon and Saturn*, God stabilises a *mod* here. It appears that this is the result of, or even the reward for the faith in God’s power. Indeed, God appears to be the ultimate *stapol* or foundation in other texts: in the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, it is stated that,

Wel bið þam þe him are seceð,
 frofre to fæder on heofonum, þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð. (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936: 137, ll. 114–15)

It is well for the one that seeks mercy,
 consolation from the father in heaven, where for us all stability stands.

In this quotation, stability can be achieved through God. Notably, Bosworth and Toller’s dictionary gives ‘the firmament, the heavens’, as one of the potential definitions for *stapol* (Bosworth and Toller, 2014: *stapol*). Nevertheless, the mind in *The Seafarer* is still explicitly described as ‘strongum’, and it is still in need of steering or controlling. This passage strongly resembles lines 46–51 of *Maxims I*. While training in a communal context gave a person the skills to control his mind in *Maxims I*, effort and control are required to keep this mind ‘on stapelum’ – grounded. *The Seafarer* also clarifies what could potentially happen when it is not stabilised, as the homiletic narrator describes how the mind travels outside of the body, and therefore does not remain physically grounded.

The Seafarer describes how the enclosed physical container is abandoned for free movement outside of the body. An excerpt from the second part of the poem, preceding the passage quoted above, describes this departure of the mind:

Forþon nu min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan,
 Min modsefa mid mereflode
 Ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide,

Eorþan sceatas, cymeð eft to me
 Gifre ond grædig, gielleð anfloga
 Hweteð on hwælweg hreþer unwearnum
 Ofer holma gelagu (Krapp and Dobbie, 1936: 143–7, ll. 58–64).

And now my *hyge* turns out of its *hreþerlocan*,
 my *modsefa* travels with the sea
 over the whale's realm, moving wildly,
 the corners of the earth, then comes to me again
 eager and greedy, flying solitary and yelling,
 urging the unhindered *hreþer* over the whale-road,
 over the ocean's waves.

It has been suggested that the travels described in this poem refer to dreams, hallucinations or even that they are an allegory for death (Clemoes, 1969: 73). Allen J. Frantzen concludes that because the protagonist of *The Seafarer* does not mention sleep, this must describe the mind's flight through memory, and Harbus argues that the travelling mind represents wandering thoughts (Frantzen, 2012: 78; Harbus, 2011: 22). However, the physicality of these descriptions is striking and can potentially improve our understanding of the mind: the *hyge* escapes from its bodily container, and flies over land and sea. It is emotional, greedy and it yells, and it does not seem to need the body for any of this. The materiality of the mind's place of origin, and of the external environment it travels through and attempts to impact vocally, resemble aspects of the description of the creation of Adam in *Solomon and Saturn*. Specifically, the emphatic presence of the elements wind and water in the external world surrounding the mind, conjuring up the image of a stormy sea, corresponds to the 'cloud' from which Adam's instability of mind is made. Several words in this excerpt refer to the mind and its container, but there are no references to any body part that a modern reader would recognise, such as the heart, the chest or the head. Interestingly, the agency of the mind shifts in this passage; the *hyge* is the agent in departing from the body but is then described as coming to 'me', and ends with the *hreþer* being excited by something, possibly by the *hyge* or 'me'. Godden (1985: 294) discerns 'two centres of consciousness' here: an inner personality, and a 'self', which can control action. The *hyge* escapes the *hreþerlocan*, which appears to be its container. Afterwards, assuming *modsefa* is used as synonym, it travels over the sea. Harbus states that early medieval 'poets in particular deploy [metaphors for the mind and the] concept of containment and escape characterized by various concrete qualities from the natural world' (Harbus, 2011: 30). Indeed, this idea is evident in the poem, but the qualities from the natural world are notably unsettled, and appear in a particular unstable state or condition, much like Adam's mind when it is made. This location has been prominent in the poem and draws attention to the

potential materiality of the setting of this flight of the mind – it does not disappear, nor does it travel to an imaginary location. The purposeful friction between the material and the imaginary, and the mind travelling between body and external world, perhaps encourages a reading that is both literal *and* metaphorical.

The stark contrast caused by the change in situation of this mind, which was previously enclosed and hindered, and is now roaming the world and even yelling, suggests that a change in foundation or a change in control unleashes a mind's abilities. What may have initially been a unified mind now appears to be fragmented: the *hyge* splits from its *hreþerlocan* and is changed (perhaps only linguistically) into the *modsefa*, which in turn appears to chase the *hreþer*. The yelling indicates that the *modsefa* suddenly has an audible voice; it manifests itself in the external world, and its sound can be perceived. The separation and vocalisation of the mind, as it becomes unstable, echoes the fragmentation of the extended mind in *Riddle 47*, where a cognitive process is removed from its original foundation in order to find a new *stapol*. It also holds similarities to a description found in *Adrian and Ritheus*, a text with dialogues closely resembling those in *Solomon and Saturn*:

Saga me hwær byð mannes mod.

Ic þe secge, on þam heafde and gæð ut þurh þone muð. (Cross and Hill, eds., 1982: 145)

Tell me where a man's mind is.

I tell you, in the head and it goes out through the mouth.

This description suggests movement of the mind; it goes from inside the head through the mouth and outside to display and perhaps to vocalise itself. Lockett explains that in this fragment, the mouth is mentioned because 'the contents of a man's mind are put on display in the form of speech' (Lockett, 2011: 272). This may indeed be a playful metaphor for the mind's thoughts revealing themselves through speech, but speech is not mentioned. Furthermore, its similarity with the travelling mind in *The Seafarer*, and with the 'voice', or extension of the mind in *Riddle 47*, reinforce the conclusion that the departure of (an aspect of) the mind is represented in various texts. The described journey of the mind implies that minds were considered capable of mobilising themselves. *Riddle 47* and *The Seafarer* show that while this carries the risk of fragmentation, the unstable mind reveals new abilities, and the mobilisation of the mind may ultimately lead to a new foundation.

Conclusion

This article has analysed a range of descriptions relating to the mind's *(un)stapolfæstnes*, which indicate that the lack of stability is typical in minds in texts from early medieval

England, and equally, that it is possible to achieve stability. The frequency with which the term *stapol*, and descriptions of (in)stability are used in relation to concepts of mind, indicates that people had deep concern for the way their minds behaved. While the unstable mind is not necessarily regarded as a problem, it could potentially be one. Various methods for stabilising a mind have been revealed in this paper, including education to gain control over the wilful mind, and anchoring (part of) the mind in the external world through the establishment of an exogram, and through travelling in search of a foundation. The descriptions of *(un)stapolfæstnes* examined in this article signify that the unstable mind can be ‘fastened’ by God, who is the ultimate foundation for mental stability. Despite this, the various other ways of establishing stability that are described suggest that there is a curiosity, if not a requirement for alternative methods of exercising control over the mind. The emphasis on training the mind, and the desire to extend the mind refer to individual practice as well as experimentation. Descriptions of activity of the mind in search of a new foundation inform us that early medieval people found it somehow helpful or stimulating to consider mental processes or fragments outside of their physical container.

The combination of the terms such as *(un)stapolfæstnes* and terms denoting mind has enabled new insight into the relationship between mind and materiality. Tracing this term can be of use in detecting and understanding the mind’s functions, location, and if circumstance requires it, its ability to leave its foundation in these texts. The fixation on foundations, stability and control plays a fundamental role in the abilities of minds to transpose themselves, and this analysis has demonstrated that early medieval minds are presented as capable of a vast amount of change: they can be grounded in a particular state or condition, and they can extend, travel, deconstruct themselves, and yell. These unstable minds are not destructive and in need of control, but they are dynamic and extensive. The mind, as influenced by the erratic feature *(un)stapolfæstnes*, displays drastic changes in its composition and corporeality, and thus resists categorisation according to present-day scholarly models of the early medieval mind. Features such as the instability of mind need to be considered an integral part of concepts of minds in this period, so that we might come to a more complete understanding of the way early medieval minds were considered to behave. This suggests that conventional models of the early medieval mind should be re-examined, nuanced and enlarged. Recognising unstable and changeable features of the mind transforms our comprehension of historical perspectives on minds and mental activity, with further implications for the study of philosophy of mind, the history of medicine, and the study of materiality.

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