ENGL 301: Topics in Old English Literature
Professor Emily Thornbury

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Simon Van Der Weide

Rising from the Ashes: Queer Theory and The Phoenix

by Simon Van Der Weide ’24

I.

How applicable are the concepts of twentieth- and twenty-first-century queer theory to Old English texts from the tenth-century Exeter Book? Despite a lack of explicit queer representation in the Old English archive, and a relative dearth of secondary literature analyzing Old English in a queer-theoretic frame, the queer analysis of Old English texts is productive. In this paper, I will focus on the connection between one Old English text, the Exeter Book's *The Phoenix*, and one concept in queer theory, the idea of "queer time" and "straight time" expounded by Jose Esteban Muñoz and others. I argue that *The Phoenix*, especially the section devoted to the life-cycle of the eponymous creature, rejects the reproductive focus of "straight time" and instead puts forth a cyclical self-regeneration more closely linked with the temporalities of "queer time." Before approaching *The Phoenix*, I will give an account of queer theory and the concepts of "straight time" and "queer time" as they pertain to my analysis. My theoretical account given, I will move properly into *The Phoenix*.

II.

Before looking into the aspects of queer theory that are most pertinent to my analysis, I will give an account of queer theory in general. Queer theory arose as a critical theory proper in the 1970s and 1980s.[1] It builds off of a number of other critical and literary theories, most

[1] Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 191–208.

directly off of feminist theories.[2] Where feminism deconstructs gender and sex by recognizing women in addition to men, queer theory goes further in its recognition and deconstruction of social constructs around sex and gender. Queer theory, like feminism, aims to account for a societal group that has been systemically excluded from conversations around literature and other topics. At its core, then, queer theory is a recognition of queer modalities of existence. Accomplishing this recognition requires the deconstruction of three major constructs: sex, gender, and sexuality. For queer theory, the binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality are social constructs that are overly limiting and do not capture the different ways people experience life. The male-female binary of sex, for example, cannot account for intersex individuals whose sexual anatomy and development does cleanly match male or female paradigms.[3] The masculine-feminine binary of gender, likewise, cannot account for individuals who do not stand exclusively in one of the binary's two gender roles. The heterosexual-homosexual binary of sexuality, like the others, fails to capture those who experience attraction to people regardless of gender, such as bisexual or pansexual individuals. Queer theory dismantles these binaries and allows for a proliferation of possibilities for sex, gender, and sexuality.

One of the central questions queer theory must answer to determine its position in critical discussions is the question of whether queer culture should assimilate to non-queer culture or should remain separate. For the purposes of this analysis, I will refer to the "non-queer" as the "straight" because this is the term theorists use for the "non-queer" in much of the critical literature. Thus, the central question, rephrased, becomes the question of whether queer culture should assimilate to straight culture. Certain theorists, like Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, argue

---

[2] Ibid.
[3] "What Is Intersex?" *Planned Parenthood*, May 10, 2017, https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity/whats-intersex.

against assimilation to straight culture and argue, instead, for a "radical separation"[4] of queer culture. These theorists tend to view advancements in queer rights as a means for straight culture to mediate and control the modalities of queer existence. The 2011 repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy in the United States military[5] and the legalization of gay marriage through the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015[6] represent instances of assimilation. As evidenced by the leaked draft of a Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*,[7] which established the precedent on which *Obergefell v. Hodges* relies, such protections are always subject to reconsideration and repeal; they are neither stable nor sure. Bersani's and Edelman's rejections of queer assimilation are compelling, and they have influenced many of the queer theorists with whom I will engage in the rest of this analysis.

Tom Boellstorff and Jose Esteban Muñoz, continuing the work of Bersani and Edelman, have contextualized this debate over assimilation through the lens of temporality. Boellstorff describes two modes of temporality, "queer time" and "straight time," each associated with the broader culture it represents. Since the temporalities of "queer time" are distinct from the temporalities of "straight time," temporality functions as a force of "radical separation" and prevents assimilation of queer culture to straight culture. For Boellstorff, "straight time" revolves around the institution of marriage; it is focused on a linear progression through the stages of

---

[4] Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 205, https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574.
[5] "Repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,'" *Human Rights Campaign*, July 15, 2017, https://www.hrc.org/our-work/stories/repeal-of-dont-ask-dont-tell.
[6] Obergefell v. Hodges, 576 U.S. 644 (2015).
[7] Josh Gerstein and Alexander Ward, "Supreme Court has voted to overturn abortion rights, draft opinion shows," *Politico*, May 2, 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/02/supreme-court-abortion-draft-opinion-00029473.

birth, childhood, sexual maturity, marriage, child-bearing, and child-rearing.[8] For Muñoz, "straight time" is a future of "reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through...reproduction,"[9] and has no alternatives. Thus, in both conceptions, "straight time" is uni-directional, sequential, and relatively stable.[10] In contrast, "queer time" concerns itself with a wide variety of alternative futurities. "Queer time" comprises "moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one's past, present, or future"[11] as Muñoz explains. Temporality is a rather abstract, intangible concept, so I will ground my analysis in noting instances of eternal, atemporal, and cyclical temporalities.

III.

The Phoenix is an Old English poem in 677 lines on folios 55v–65v of the Exeter Book. The poem begins with a description of earthly Paradise before narrowing its focus to a bird that dwells in Paradise. The poem calls this bird the phoenix, and the details of its unique life-cycle take up much of the middle of the poem. After describing the phoenix, the poet transforms the bird and its life-cycle into an allegory for human life and salvation with God. Given this focus on Paradise, salvation, and God, *The Phoenix* is working in the Christian religious tradition; it is influenced by the Bible and the works of medieval Christian authors. *The Phoenix* is particularly indebted to an identically named Latin work, attributed to Lactantius, which it adapts.[12] I divide

[8] Tom Boellstorff, "When Marriage Falls: Queer Coincidences in Straight Time," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no.2 (2007): 227–248, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/214997.

[9] Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 22, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/10726.

[10] Although I do not address this much in my analysis, Muñoz's work is engaged with cultural, social, and political ideas and contexts to which it responds. Further investigation into these ideas and contexts would be worthwhile.

[11] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 32.

[12] Carol Falvo Heffernan, "The Old English 'Phoenix': A Reconsideration," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 83, no.3 (1982): 239, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43343458.

the text into three sections: the opening description of Paradise (1–84); the life, death, and rebirth of the phoenix (85–380); and the allegory of humanity (381–667). I have made these divisions for ease of progression; they are neither manuscript nor conventional editorial divisions. Although there is material germane to my analysis in each section of the poem, I am primarily concerned with the second section that describes the phoenix.[13] I will explore the entirety of the phoenix's life-cycle—along with certain passages that are not directly related to its life-cycle but offer interesting contributions— and the queer temporality of cyclical time.

IV.

After an extended description of Paradise, *The Phoenix* introduces its titular bird as the guardian of Paradise, as eternal as the land it protects. The opening description of the phoenix highlights some of its physical attributes and, more notably, explores the limits of its longevity:

> Đone wudu weardaþ wundrum fæger
> fugel feþrum strong, se is fenix haten.
> Þær se anhaga eard bihealdeþ,
> deormod drohtaþ; næfre him deaþ sceþeð
> on þam willwonge, þenden woruld stondeþ.
>
> "A bird, noble in its wonders, strong in its feathers, guards that wood; it is called the phoenix. There, the lone-dweller preserves the land, lives bold-minded; it is never harmed by death on the pleasant-plain as long as the world stands."
>
> (85–89)[14]

[13] If I should write on a similar subject in the future, I would be sure to explore the first and third of these sections. The restraints of time and space prevent me from doing so here.

[14] George Philip Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press), 94–113.
Translations are my own. I am working from the ASPR edition of the Exeter Book cited above.

There are several thing of note in these opening lines about the phoenix. First, the poet uses masculine pronouns to refer to the phoenix. Since Old English pronouns take the grammatical gender of their referents, with the exception of proper nouns, the masculine pronouns reveal only that *fenix* (86) is a masculine noun. In this case, pronouns are not a window into the phoenix's identity. Second, there is the use of the word *haten* (86). This *haten* creates distance between the "fugel" (86) and the *fenix* (86); the bird that guards the wood is not a phoenix in essence but in name. Third, the close of this passage provides an opening for queer time: the phoenix is "never harmed by death...as long as the world stands" (88–89). The juxtaposition of the eternity of *næfre* and the contingency of *þenden*, creates a state of suspense. Harm is always imminent and never quite arrives. Thus, the phoenix, from its first moments, is entwined with time.

As guardian of Paradise, the phoenix witnesses the cyclical passage of the days and marks them with the comings and goings of celestial bodies. After introducing the phoenix, the poet describes a sunrise that the phoenix experiences:

> hwonne up cyme æþelast tungla
> ofer yðmere estan lixan
> ...
> Tungol beoþ ahyded,
> gewiten under waþeman westdælas on,
> bideglad on dægred, ond seo deorce niht
> won gewiteð
> ...
> hwonne up cyme eastan glidan
> ofer sidne sæ swegles leoma.

> "When up comes the noblest of the stars over the wave-sea, shining (from) the east...The stars will be hidden, departed at day-break, and the dark night, dim, will withdraw...when up comes the light of the sky, gliding (from) the east, over the wide sea." (93–94, 96b–99a, 102–103)

As the day breaks, the sun rises over the eastern horizon, the night ends, and the stars vanish below the western horizon. The transition from night into day—and back, although not depicted in this passage—is a temporal cycle. Even though each daybreak brings a new day in a seemingly sequential progression of days, the focus in *The Phoenix* is not on the progression of days but the repetitive cycling between days and nights. Lines 102–103 are a near-repetition of lines 93–94. The poet has directly repeated the phrase *hwonne up cyme* (93, 102) and has minimally varied the remaining components of the lines: *æþelast tungla* (102) becomes *swegles leoma* (104), *ofer yðmere* (94) becomes *ofer sidne s*æ (103), and *estan lixan* (94) becomes *eastan glidan* (102). The movement from the sunrise to the dark night with its stars and back to a variation on the sunrise provides a formal cycle that echoes the cyclicity of time.

The proper life-cycle of the phoenix is several hundred lines long—thus, it is split over numerous paragraphs—but, surprisingly, the life-cycle of the phoenix begins near its end. According to the poem, the phoenix has spent a millennium in Paradise:

> Symle he twelf siþum tida gemearcað
> dæges ond nihtes. Swa gedemed is
> ...
> oþþæt he þusende þisses lifes,
> wudubearwes weard, wintra gebideþ.

"Always, it marks the hours of day and night twelve times. So it is ordained...until it has endured a thousand winters of this life as guardian of the wood-grove." (146–147, 151–152)

This passage is a reflection on the phoenix's past experience. Since the poet has placed these thousand winters in the past, we are looking back, with the phoenix, on its own past. As Muñoz suggests, such reflection on the past opens a space for queerness in the text; this moment is a hesitation, a pause, in the stages that lead to the phoenix's death. After this hesitation, the phoenix's life continues:

Đonne bið gehefgad haswigfeðra,
gomol, gearum frod, grene eorðan
aflyhð, fugla wyn, foldan geblowene,
ond þonne geseceð side rice
middangeardes, þær no men bugað.

"Then, the grey-feathered one will be burdened, ancient, wise with the years, it will flee the green earth, joy of the birds, (flee) the blooming land, and, then, it will seek the wide kingdom of middle-earth, where no humans live." (153–157)

On the micr0scale of the passage, the use of *þonne* (153, 156) indicates sequential, or even linear, time. However, on the macro-scale of the phoenix's life, it is merely an inflection point from one stage in the cycle to the next. The words *bið* (153), *gomol* (154), and *gerum frod* (154) implicate temporality as well; the first is an indicator of the gnomic, and the second two build on the sense of the phoenix's age. Taken together, these two passages effect a shift into the narrative of the phoenix's life-cycle.

As the bird journeys from Paradise to middle-earth, it comes upon a blessed tree, one which embodies an eternity similar to the phoenix's own eternity. The phoenix comes to the same tree in middle-earth each time it reaches its thousandth year in Paradise:

> þæt se ana is ealra beama
> on eorðwege uplædendra
> beorhtast geblowen; ne mæg him bitres wiht
> scyldum sceððan, ac gescylded a
> wunað ungewyrded, þenden woruld stondeð.
>
> "the one which, alone of all the trees led-up on the earth-path, is blossomed brightest; not can aught of bitterness harm it with sin, but it is shielded, always, dwells, uninjured, as long as the world stands." (177–181)

The tree in which the phoenix dwells in middle-earth is an extension of itself, similarly eternal within the limits of an identical concession to the world's age. The end of this passage, lines 179b–181, is a near-repetition of the earlier passage about the phoenix in lines 88b–89. The poet varies the earlier *næfre sceþeð* (88) with *ne mæg sceððan* (179–180) and repeats the *þenden woruld stondeð* (89, 181) with only a variation in *þ* vs. *ð.* The phoenix and the tree are protected from harm "as long as the world stands" (89, 181), a concession that renders them both as eternal as possible.

After finding its place in the eternal tree, there is a moment of stillness, of queer atemporality, as the phoenix begins to build its nest in the tree. Up to this point, much of the poem is focused on movement and change. Here, however, there is a pause, a lingering in time:

> Ðonne wind ligeð, weder bið fæger,
> hluttor heofones gim halig scineð,

beoð wolcen towegen, wætra þryþe
stille stondað, biþ storma gehwylc
aswefed under swegle, suþan bliceð
wedercondel wearm, weorodum lyhteð,
ðonne on þam telgum timbran onginneð,
nest gearwian.

"When the wind is still, the weather will be fair, the holy gem of heaven will shine bright, the clouds will be dispersed, the hosts of waters will stand still, each of the storms will be soothed under the sky, the warm weather-candle will shine from the south, will give light to the hosts, then, it will begin to build in the branches, to prepare a nest." (182–189)

The verbs in this passage—*ligeð* (182), *bið* (182), *beoð* (184), *stille stondað* (185)—emphasize the stillness in the phoenix's environment. It is a moment of serenity, of suspended time, of atemporality indicative of queer time. The building of the phoenix's nest (189) is also an essential stage in the life-cycle of the phoenix, communicated most clearly by the sequence of *Ðonne* (182) and *ðonne* (188). This passage implicates queer temporality in both its cyclical and atemporal aspects.

The central image of the phoenix's life-cycle is its consumption by the fire and rebirth from its own ashes. In straight time, the phoenix's death in the fire would spell the end of its life and the end of its time. However, the phoenix is not limited by straight time's conception of life and death. The phoenix does die:

Bæl bið onæled. Þonne brond þeceð
heorodreorges hus, hreoh onetteð,

fealo lig feormað ond fenix byrneð,
fyrngearum frod. Þonne fyr þigeð
lænne lichoma; lif bið on siðe,
fæges feorhhord, þonne flæsc ond ban
adleg æleð.

"The pyre will be lit. Then, the fire-brand will cover the house of the sword-sorrowful one, will hasten, fierce, will feed the pale flame, and the phoenix will burn, wise with olden-years. Then, the fire will consume the loaned body-home; life will be on a journey, spirit-hoard of the fated one, when the funeral-flame burns flesh and bone." (216–222a)

The death of the phoenix is a moment of looking back on the phoenix's life as well as looking forward to the phoenix's next life. The phrase *fyrngearum frod* (219) looks back on *gearum frod* (154) and connects this passage to the previous passage at lines 153–157 when the phoenix, after its millennium spent in Paradise, leaves for middle-earth in the first place. The phrase *lif bið on siðe* (220) anticipates the phoenix's imminent rebirth; the *sið* is the intervening state between the phoenix's death and birth. The use of *bið* (216, 220) invokes the gnomic aspect of the present tense; the remaining present-tense verbs—*þeceð* (216), *onetteð* (217), *feormað* (218), *byrneð* (218), *þigeð* (219), and *æleð* (222)—take this gnomic aspect from *bið*, complicating the temporality of the passage as a whole. Within this look at the phoenix's death, past, present, and future intermingle, unsettling the stable linearity of straight time.

Before the body of the phoenix can reconstitute itself from the ashes, the spirit of the phoenix returns, purified, and mingles with the ashes. Since the rebirth of the phoenix is divided

into two phases, the phoenix can be both dead and alive in the same moment in time. Its soul restored, the phoenix lives, but its body remains dead:

Hwæþre him eft cymeð

æfter fyrstmearce feorh edniwe,

...

Þonne clæne bið

beorhtast nesta, bæle forgrunden

heaþorofes hof; hra bið acolad,

banfæt gebrocen, ond se bryne sweþrað.

"Nonetheless, after the ordained time, the renewed spirit comes back to it...Then, pure will be the brightest of nests; the battle-excellent home, ground down by the pyre; the body, cooled; the bone-vessel, broken; and the burning will subside." (222b–223, 226b–229)

Of particular note in this passage are the phrases *feorh edniwe* (223) and *clæne* (226). The word *edniwe* entails a renewal of some kind, a restoration of something to its previous state. Thus, *feorh edniwe* is a gesture toward the past of the phoenix as well as its future; the phoenix's past *feorh* informs its future *feorh* through this transformation. The word *clæne* has many possible meanings: it could be something like "clean, pure, or clear" or something more like "chaste, innocent" in a sexual context.[15] Both readings of *clæne* are operative here. While, on the one hand, the nest itself has been purified of life through the fire, it is also pure in the sense that it is a space without sex. The phoenix's rebirth from the ashes, even though it is not yet complete, does

[15] Joseph Bosworth, "CLÆNE," *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichy. Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014. https://bosworthtoller.com/6269.

not require sexual activity; it is an asexual generation. The phoenix has attained a middle-ground—not quite alive and not quite dead—through "pure" means.

The reconstruction of the phoenix's body is one of the most interesting section in *The Phoenix* as a whole: what would be an entire adolescence in straight time becomes mere moments in the phoenix's life-cycle. It develops in stages from the ashes of its corpse into the bird it was before the fire:

> Þonne of þam ade æples gelicnes
> on þære ascan bið eft gemeted,
> of þam weaxeð wyrm, wundrum fæger,
> swylce he of ægerum ut alæde,
> scir of scylle. Þonne on sceade weaxeð,
> þæt he ærest bið swylce earnes brid,
> fæger fugeltimber; ðonne furþor gin
> wridað on wynnum, þæt he bið wæstmum gelic
> ealdum earne, and æfter þon
> feþrum gefrætwad, swylc he æt frymðe wæs,
> beorht geblowen.

"Then, out of the fire, the likeness of an apple will be found again in the ashes; from this, a worm will grow, noble in its wonders, as if it were brought forth from an egg, shining from the shell. Then, in shadow, it will grow so that, first, it is like the young of an eagle, a noble young bird; then, further yet, it will flourish in delights so that it is like an old eagle in its growth; and, after this, it will be

adorned with feathers just as it was in the beginning, brightly blossomed."

(230–240a)

Over the course of ten and a half lines, the phoenix is born and matures into the form of the adult phoenix from before it burned and died. There are five phrases with connections to time—*Þonne* (230), *Þonne* (234), *ðonne* (236), *furþor* (236), and *æfter þon* (238)—that occur within these lines. The density of temporal deictics mirrors the density of the phoenix's development. The fast pace of development is signaled by the repetition of *weaxeð* (233, 235), of *swylce* (234, 236) and *swylc* (239), of *gelicnes* (230) and *gelic* (237), and of *earnes* (235) and *earne* (238). The phoenix, just a moment earlier stuck between life and death, bursts to life in this passage; it begins as an apple-like mass and ends as a fully-formed, decorated phoenix. The phoenix's past and future are exchanged in this moment of reincarnation: the death of the phoenix becomes its birth.

The Phoenix juxtaposes this story of reincarnation with a human analogue: the sowing of seeds and reaping of crops at harvest time. The poet establishes this analogy through the phrase *sumes onlice* (242) and the simile-inducing *swa* (243). The simile is too long to capture in its entirety here, so I have excerpted the sections most relevant to this juxtaposition.

Of þam wæstmum sceal
eorla eadwela eft alædan
þurh cornes gecynd, þe ær clæne bið
sæd onsawen. Þonne sunnan glæm
on lenctenne, lifes tacen,
weceð woruldgestreon, þæt þa wæstmas beoð
þurh agna gecynd eft acende,
foldan frætwe.

"From those fruits, the blessed-wealth of men must be led forth through the *gecynd* of grain, whose seed, sown earlier, is pure. Then, the gleam of the sun in spring, the token of life, gives life to the world-treasures so that the fruits will be born again through their own *gecynd*, adornments of the earth." (250b–257a)

This simile incorporates a number of elements and words seen in previous sections of *The Phoenix*, adapted for the harvest simile. We see the word *gecynd* (252, 256), a word I will revisit near the end, twice in the descriptions of the crops and the use of *clæne* (252) to describe the seeds from which the fruits arise. The word *clæne* establishes the sexual integrity of the seed as the origin of the resulting fruits just it did for the phoenix ashes. The simile is an exploration of the cyclical pattern of human sowing and harvesting in the course of the year. It links the human agricultural cycle, defined by the seasons—here exemplified by the word *lecten* (254), with the cycle of the phoenix's regeneration.

After the phoenix is restored to its new-yet-old body, it begins its departure from middle-earth and collects its own remains. The fire out of which the newborn phoenix arises consumes the nest, the phoenix's old body, and whatever else is present. The young phoenix collects the pieces of itself the fire leaves behind:

Þonne bið aweaxen wyrtum in gemonge
fugel feþrum deal; feorh bið niwe,
geong, geofona ful, þonne he of greote his
lic leoþucræftig, þæt ær lig fornom,
somnað, swoles lafe, searwum gegædrað
ban gebrosnad, æfter bælþræce,
ond þonne þæt wælreaf[16] wyrtum biteldeð,

[16] *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, "wæl-reáf," https://bosworthtoller.com/34347.

fægre gefrætwed.

"Then, the bird, exulting in its feathers, will be grown in a multitude (of) herbs; its spirit will be new, young, full of graces when it collects from the ground its limb-skilled body, which the fire earlier destroyed, the remnants of the burning, skillfully joins the crumbling bones after the pyre's violence, and, then, he covers the remains with herbs, nobly adorned." (265–274a)

This is another instance of what Muñoz would call "looking back on one's past, present, and future," the clearest example of queer time. The young phoenix has just been born. It has not lived 1000 years. Thus, when it humbly collects the "limb-skilled body" and the remains of the fire, it is interacting with its past, its present, and its future. The phoenix of the present is collecting the bones and ashes of a past self, but this phoenix will, after a millennium, become bones and ashes to create the next phoenix.

Having collected the remnants of its past self, the phoenix begins to complete the life-cycle the poem details by leaving its nest for the place of its origin. The phoenix, now reborn, returns to the place of its creation:

Ðonne afysed bið
agenne eard eft to secan.
Þonne fotum ymbfehð fyres lafe,
clam biclyppeð, ond his cyþþu eft,
sunbeorht gesetu, seceð on wynnum,
eadig eþellond. Eall bið geniwad

Translating *wælreaf* is difficult. The Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon dictionary gives "spoil taken in war, spoil, prey" and glosses this specific instance with the Latin *exuvias*. I choose to translate *wælreaf* as "remains" in this context because it is one possible translation of *exuvias* and better fits the idea of these lines in *The Phoenix*.

feorh ond feþerhoma, swa he æt frymþe wæs,
þa hine ærest god on þone æþelan wong
sigorfæst sette.

"Then, it will be impelled to seek again its own home. Then, with its feet, it grasps the remains of the fire, embraces (them) with claws and seeks again his native place, the sun-bright seat, the blessed homeland, in delight. All will be renewed, spirit and feather-home, just as it was at the beginning when God first settled him, victory-fast, in that noble plain." (274b–282a)

This passage brings the phoenix back to its place of origin. It is somewhat ambiguous whether this is Paradise, the place where it begins, or some location on middle-earth. There is a connection between this passage and the introduction: the phrase *þone æþelan wong* (281) echoes the phrase *on þam willwonge* (89) where *willwong* refers explicitly to Paradise. A later section of *The Phoenix*, lines 348b–352a, would contradict this hypothesis, however, and indicate that this *eard* (275) or *cyþþu* (277) or *eþellond* (279) is not Paradise but a third location. Regardless of whether there are two or three locations, the echo hints at the near-completion of the cycle.[17]

The final step in the cycle is the burial of the prior phoenix's remains, a moment that implicates multiple temporalities just as their collection does. The younger phoenix buries the older phoenix's remains either in Paradise or in that third location on earth under the light of the sun:

He his sylfes þær
ban gebringeð, þa ær brondes wylm

[17] The question of whether there are two or three locations (really, four, including the location of the tree) in *The Phoenix* is an interesting one, but there is not room to treat it here.

on beorhstede bæle forþylmde,

ascan to eacan. Þonne eal geador

bebyrgeð beaducræftig ban ond ylsan

on þam ealonde. Bið him edniwe

þære sunnan segn, þonne swegles leoht,

gimma gladost, ofer garsecg up,

æþeltungla wyn, eastan lixeð.

"It brings its own bones there, the ones which the surge of the fire-brand earlier enclosed with flame in the mountain-place, (and) the ashes as addition. Then, the war-crafty one buries all together, the bones and the cinders, on the island. For him, the sign of the sun is renewed when the light of the sky, the brightest of gems, up over the ocean, joy of the noble-stars, shines from the east." (282b–290)

There are similarities between this passage and a passage taking place in Paradise. There is an echo of *swegles leoma* (103) in *swegles leoht* (288), an echo of *ofer yðmere* (94) and *ofer sidne sæ* (103) in *ofer garsecg* (289), an echo of *æþelast tungla* (93) in *æþeltungla* (290), and a near-repetition of *estan lixan* (94) in*eastan lixeð* (290). Each of these parallel phrases ties the burial of the phoenix's remains back to the sunrise scene in Paradise. Thus, even if this is a third location, the burial site is linguistically linked with Paradise. The burial provokes reflection: the phoenix is burying its past self, its future self, and, in essence, all the phoenixes that have come before or will come after its current iteration. Since each phoenix is born from its own flesh, it is also burying itself, provoking a meditation on life, death, and the intertwining of the two in the cycle of the phoenix.

Although the cycle proper finishes with the burial of the previous phoenix and the return to Paradise, the implications of the phoenix's tale for queer temporality continue beyond the cycle. In fact, the passage that originally encouraged me to undertake a queer-theoretic analysis of *The Phoenix* follows later in this section. After the phoenix has left the realm of humankind, the poet offers an interesting reflection on the human appreciation—or lack of appreciation—for the phoenix's existence:

> God ana wat,
> cyning ælmihtig, hu his gecynde bið,
> wifhades þe weres; þæt ne wat ænig
> monna cynnes, butan meotod ana,
> hu þa wisan sind wundorlice,
> fæger fyrngesceap, ymb þæs fugles gebyrd.
>
> "God alone knows, Almighty King, what is its *gecynd*, of woman-hood or of man;
> not anyone of humankind knows that, except the Measurer alone, how wonderful
> are the conditions, the noble old-decree, about the *gebyrd* of that bird." (355b–360)

The poet makes a statement about the unknowability of the phoenix's *gecynd* and *gebyrd*. What do *gecynd* and *gebyrd* mean? The words are polysemous; thus, their definitions are unstable, depending on context and other factors. According to the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, *gecynd* could mean "nature, kind, manner, condition, gender" or "generation, offspring" while *gebyrd* could mean "birth, origin, beginning, family, lineage" or "nature, quality, state, condition, lot, fate."[18] Reducing a word to a single, or even multiple, definition goes against the inherently deconstructive style of queer analysis. For my purposes, it is interesting to

[18] *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, "ge-cynd," https://bosworthtoller.com/13997.
An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online, "ge-byrd," https://bosworthtoller.com/13834.

consider *gecynd* as "gender" or "sex" or some related aspect of identity; the definition of *gebyrd* is not as essential. Since God alone knows the *gecynd*, the gender or sex, of the phoenix, then the phoenix, as far as humans can experience it, is genderless or sexless. It is a creature beyond the binary of *wifhade þe wer* (357). The phoenix, at a fundamental level, is a queer being.

With the intrinsic queerness of the phoenix now recognized, we return to the life-cycle of the phoenix with a new appreciation of its meaning. At the end of the second section of *The Phoenix*, as I have divided the poem, the life-cycle of the phoenix is reiterated once more:

> Forþon he drusende deað ne bisorgað,
> sare swyltcwale, þe him symle wat
> æfter ligþræce lif edniwe,
> feorh æfter fylle, þonne fromlice
> þurh briddes had gebreadad weorðeð
> eft of ascan, edgeong weseð
> under swegles hleo. Bið him self gehwæðer
> sunu ond swæs fæder, ond symle eac
> eft yrfeweard ealdre lafe.

"Therefore, becoming low, it does not fear death, the sore death-pang, (because) it knows life always (will be) renewed after the fire's violence, the spirit after its fall, when, speedily, it is restored again from the ashes according to the bird's nature, growing young again under the protection of the sky. It will be both its own son and its own father[19] and always, too, again the heir to the remains of its life." (368–376)

[19] The implications of these gendered terms of relationship provide another potential avenue for exploration in *The Phoenix*, one which I lack the time and space to expound here.

Recognizing the phoenix as a genderless or sexless being, the true nature of its *gecynd* unknown but to God, we can now see the phoenix's life-cycle as an eternal cycle of self-generation. There is only one phoenix, continually dying and being reborn. For the phoenix, a queer being in itself, Muñoz's idea of queer time as "looking back on one's past, present, and future" is its natural existence.

VI.

The Phoenix is inextricable from the conception of queerness and queer time put forth by Muñoz and other critics. The phoenix is of unknown—even unknowable—gender and sex, evidenced by the passage concerned with its *gecynd* and its *gebyrd*. The phoenix's self-regeneration renders it incompatible with the reproductive linearity of straight time. Regardless of how the phoenix's life is construed, whether an eternal creature merely renewing its body and soul through fire or an ephemeral creature recreating itself through death and concurrent rebirth, it conform to neither the reproductive nor the linear aspect of straight time. From this conclusion, it is evident that queer theory is a useful and, perhaps, necessary tool for analyzing *The Phoenix*. Given the common focus on different modes of temporality in the broader corpus of Old English literature,[20] queer analysis—specifically through the lens of queer time—is an analytic approach that requires more exploration.

References

Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43, 1987, pp.197–222, https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574.

[20] The Exeter Book elegies, especially *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, are particular texts I would have liked to analyze from the perspective of queer time. Much of the Exeter Book, however, is conducive to an analysis of queer time. It is surprising to me how little secondary literature on Old English uses a queer-theoretic perspective. I hope this will change because Old English offers productive departures for queer analysis.

Boellstorff, Tom. "When Marriage Falls: Queer Coincidences in Straight Time." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2, 2007, pp. 227–248, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/214997.

Bosworth, Joseph. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichy. Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014. https://bosworthtoller.com.

Clark, David. "Old English Literature and Same-Sex Desire: An Overview." *Literature Compass* 6, no. 3, 2009, pp. 573–584, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2009.00640.x.

Gerstein, Josh and Alexander Ward. "Supreme Court has voted to overturn abortion rights, draft opinion shows," *Politico*, May 2, 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/02/supreme-court-abortion-draft-opinion-00029473.

Heffernan, Carol Falvo. "The Old English 'Phoenix': A Reconsideration." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 83, no. 3, 1982, pp. 239–254, jstor.org/stable/43343458.

Krapp, George Philip and E.V.K. Dobbie, eds. *The Exeter Book*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3. New York: Columbia University Press, 1936.

Muñoz, Jose Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press, 2009, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/10726.

Obergefell v. Hodges, 576 U.S. 644 (2015).

Parker, Robert Dale. *How to Interpret Literature*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

"Repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,'" *Human Rights Campaign*, July 15, 2017, https://www.hrc.org/our-work/stories/repeal-of-dont-ask-dont-tell.

"What Is Intersex?" *Planned Parenthood*, May 10, 2017, https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity/whats-intersex.