Ac si omnia precenseas, nulla mansit ara, quails inventa est, nec intra initi- 
tium stetit... Nihil autem crescit sola imitatione.

Quintilian

In the previous chapter we saw how the meme-based theory of tradition 
could be adapted to explain the evolution of genres, and we examined how 
the perceptual and cognitive subsystems of the human mind shape the 
evolution of replicating cultural entities (meme-plexes). Genres are fea-
tures of an adaptive landscape, caused by the tendency of the mind to 
exttract patterns from data and create from them prototypes that then 
serve to canalize cultural evolution along certain lines. Generic relation-
ships are relationships of similarity caused both by homology (the inher-
itance of features) and analogy (the development of similar features in 
similar circumstances). The existence of a prototype can blend analogy 
and homology, influencing the evolution of genres and leading to the 
creation of traditions. In this chapter we will extend the meme-based 
approach to an even more difficult and contested aspect of the study of 
cultures: the problem of authorship.

“Author” seems like an uncomplicated category until one tries to un-
derstand it in detailed literary-theoretical terms. Then it rapidly becomes 
entangled in the unsettled question of whether or not texts are indepen-
dent inventions of the individuals who write them or if they are produced 
by causes like class consciousness, economic arrangements, or the Zeitgeist. 
Answers to this question arise in great part from fundamental assumptions, 
so it is unlikely that it can be resolved by any theory, but the meme-based 
approach does allow us to engage the problem of authorship in a way that 
integrates the insights of several major schools and synthesizes them into a 
consistent model that meets the tests not only of abstract reasoning, but of 
common sense. As further support for its utility, the meme-based approach 
to authorship can then be adapted to explain the particular dynamics of 
influence identified by Harold Bloom in The Anxiety of Influence. In fact,
the meme-based theory explains the phenomena documented by Bloom more effectively than his own analysis, demonstrating that the theory can help us to engage in new way with long-ossified and seemingly intractable problems in literary and cultural studies.

The Author: An Example and Three Models

In a change from the practice in previous chapters, we will start with an example and then build the theory. There are several reasons for doing this, the most significant of which is the necessity of avoiding becoming entangled in abstractions before clarifying the philosophical and practical problems. But there are also rhetorical reasons to try to stay close to a specific example as long as possible. For some reason, the authorship problem easily become contentious. Discussing the problem of authorship with regard to one particular text and only then building a generalized model may allow us to map out some areas of agreement among the competing approaches.

We begin, therefore, with a text mentioned in the previous chapter, the whimsically titled Homiletic Fragment II, a short poem that appears in the Booklet III of the Exeter Book. Booklet III begins with a few poems that seem either enigmatic or elegiac (depending upon the critic): the last few lines of the what is often presumed (I believe erroneously) to be the conclusion of the bird poem from the Physiologus, Soul and Body II, Deor, and Wulf and Eadwacer. A collection of 59 riddles comes after these short poems, and this first riddle collection is in turn followed by another group of short poems. A second riddle collection (Riddles 61–95) concludes the booklet. Homiletic Fragment II appears among the short poems between the two riddle collections. This group begins with The Wife’s Lament and continues with The Judgment Day I, Resignation A and B, The Descent into Hell, Alms-Giving, Pharaoh, and The Lord’s Prayer I. Next is Homiletic Fragment II, which is followed by Riddle 30b, Riddle 60, The Husband’s Message, and The Ruin.

Homiletic Fragment II gives no physical sign of being a fragment. The poem begins with a decorated initial G on the bottom of folio 122r, but only two manuscript lines fit on this leaf, with the rest of the poem appearing on 122v, where a burn mark obscures a few words. The poem ends 11 manuscript lines down on 122v, where the next poem, Riddle 30b, begins with a decorated initial I. Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records editor Elliott van Kirk Dobbie admits in his commentary that “there is nothing in the manuscript to indicate that this poem is a fragment, and it might be regarded as complete in itself,” but he and George Philip Krapp nevertheless identify it as a fragment because of the “incomplete development of the theme of the Nativity in the closing lines.” However, as Joseph Wittig points out, Dobbie, who is drawing upon the tradition of minor incidental commentary on the poem by W. S. Mackie, Peter