

The Riddle Game – a look at the Exeter Book Riddles

By Oswyn of Baðon

While many sources of Anglo-Saxon history and literature have not survived through the years, there is one very remarkable piece that has – the Exeter Book. This book dates from my own time, the 10th century. It contains epic poems like *The Wanderer*, the lives of St Guthlac and St Juliana, some traditional secular poems, and more than 90 riddles.

The Anglo-Saxons had a long tradition of riddles. We see evidence of it in Germanic epic poems that make up the common heritage of the Northern Germans, including the Angles and Saxons. We see it in *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon poems. We see it in kennings, the extended metaphors that often appear in the sagas and poems. We know from Tolkien's writings that he drew inspiration for his riddles from these same sources. Douglas Anderson in the *Annotated Hobbit* tells us that the *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, the *Second Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn*, and traditional British nursery rhymes were the source of Tolkien's riddles.

We are not 100% sure who developed these riddles. Scholars believe that many of them are traditional. There have also been individuals named as the authors or compilers of groups of riddles: Aldhelm of Malmesbury (7th c cleric); Tatwine, archbishop of Canterbury (8th c); Hwaetberht, Abbot of Wearmouth (8th c); or possibly Bede himself (8th c).

The subject matter of these 90+ poems are varied. Some are religious, some are mundane, and some are lewd. According to one scholar, the lewd riddles were designed to challenge one's thinking. They were specifically crafted to make one think of the lewd answer. Part of the challenge was to resist that temptation to see the true answer. Given that these were likely recited during a feast, drinking probably made it even harder to resist the trap. Few are about humans in particular though many depict animals and objects in human terms. In short, these were a cross-section of riddles that were known by these churchmen. Even today, we love word-play: riddles, jokes, puns, etc.

In the Meadhall, there were men called *hleahtorsmiðs*, 'laughter-smiths'. Given the love of language that has come down to us through the ages, riddling was certainly one of tools in the *hleahtorsmið's* arsenal.

What follows is a selection of the riddles in the Exeter Book. The answers to the riddles were not preserved. Either the answer was expected to be known (these were traditional) or obvious. Or, the answer was expected to be guessed at. That being said, I do have what is commonly accepted as the answer to these riddles at the end of the document. And since some riddles were intended to have double-meanings, I will give both.

Sources:

- 1) The Exeter Book Riddles translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland
- 2) The Exeter Book: An Anthology of Anglo-Saxon Poetry Presented to Exeter Cathedral by Loefric, First Bishop of Exeter (1050-1071)
- 3) The Mead-Hall: The Feasting Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England by Stephen Pollington

I'm by nature solitary, scarred by iron
 and wounded by sword, weary of battle.
 I often see the face of war, and fight
 hateful enemies; yet I hold no hope
 of help being brought to me in battle
 before I'm cut to pieces and perish.
 At the city wall sharp-edged swords,
 skilfully forged in the flame by smiths,
 bite deeply into me. I must await
 a more fearsome encounter; it is not for me
 to find a physician on the battlefield,
 one of those men who heals wounds with herbs.
 My sword wounds gape wide and wider;
 death blows are dealt me by day and by night.

15

Whereas my neck is white, my head
 and sides are brown; I move swiftly
 and bear a battle-weapon; hair covers my back
 and my cheeks as well; two ears tower high
 above my eyes. I step on my toes through
 the green grass. Grief is ordained for me
 if any fierce creature should catch me
 in my hole where I have my house and children;
 should I stay there with my offspring
 after this guest comes knocking
 at my door, they are doomed to die.
 I must bravely carry my infants
 far from our house, and save them by flight,
 if that creature still follows me.
 He advances on his breast. I dare not await him
 in my hole . . . that were not a wise plan at all.
 I must burrow through the steep hillside
 with my two forefeet as fast as I can.
 I can save the lives of my loved ones
 with ease, once I've guided them out
 by a secret way through a hole in the hill.
 Then, if it comes to blows and battle,
 I feel no fear of this murderous foe.
 If he still gives me chase
 through that narrow hole I've just made in the hill,
 I will not fail to fight him fiercely.
 Once I've tunnelled my way to the top,
 I will angrily batter my enemy,
 that hateful foe from whom I long fled.

Silent is my dress when I step across the earth,
 reside in my house, or ruffle the waters.
 Sometimes my adornments and this high windy air
 lift me over the livings of men,
 the power of the clouds carries me far
 over all people. My white pinions
 resound very loudly, ring with a melody,
 sing out clearly, when I sleep not on
 the soil or settle on grey waters – a travelling spirit.

23

Wob is my name, if you work it out;
 I'm a fair creature fashioned for battle.
 When I bend, and shoot a deadly shaft
 from my stomach, I'm very eager
 to send that evil as far away as I can.
 When my lord (he thought up this torment)
 releases my limbs, I become longer
 and, bent upon slaughter, spit out
 that deadly poison I swallowed before.
 No man's parted easily from the object
 I describe; if what flies from my stomach
 strikes him, he pays for its poison
 with his strength – speedy atonement for his life.
 I'll serve no master when unstrung, only when
 I'm cunningly notched. Now guess my name.

25

I'm a strange creature, for I satisfy women,
 a service to the neighbours! No one suffers
 at my hands except for my slayer.
 I grow very tall, erect in a bed,
 I'm hairy underneath. From time to time
 a good-looking girl, the doughty daughter
 of some churl, dares to hold me,
 grips my russet skin, robs me of my head
 and puts me in the pantry. At once that girl
 with plaited hair who has confined me
 remembers our meeting. Her eye moistens.

An enemy ended my life, took away
 my bodily strength; then he dipped me
 in water and drew me out again,
 and put me in the sun where I soon shed
 all my hair. The knife's sharp edge
 bit into me once my blemishes had been scraped away;
 fingers folded me and the bird's feather
 often moved across my brown surface,
 sprinkling useful drops; it swallowed the wood-dye
 (part of the stream) and again travelled over me,
 leaving black tracks. Then a man bound me,
 he stretched skin over me and adorned me
 with gold; thus I am enriched by the wondrous work
 of smiths, wound about with shining metal.
 Now my clasp and my red dye
 and these glorious adornments bring fame far and wide
 to the Protector of Men, and not to the pains of hell.
 If the sons of men would make use of me
 they would be safer and more sure of victory,
 their hearts would be bolder, their minds more at ease,
 their thoughts wiser; they would have more friends,
 companions and kinsmen (true and honourable,
 brave and kind) who would gladly increase
 their honour and prosperity, and heap
 benefits upon them, holding them fast
 in love's embraces. Ask what I am called,
 of such use to men. My name is famous,
 of service to men and sacred in itself.

29

I saw a strange creature,
 a bright ship of the air subtly adorned,
 bearing away plunder between her horns,
 fetching it home from a foray.
 She wanted to build a bower in the stronghold,
 construct it with cunning if she could do so.
 Then a mighty creature appeared over the mountain
 – his face is known to all dwellers on earth;
 he seized the treasure and sent home the wanderer
 against her will; she went westward,
 vowing revenge, hastening forth.
 Dust lifted to heaven; dew fell on the earth,
 night fled hence; and no one knew
 thereafter where that creature went.

Favoured by men, I am found far and wide,
 taken from woods and the heights of the town,
 from the downs and the dales. During each day
 corbiculars carried me through the bright sky,
 with care they brought me to a safe shelter.
 Then men bathed me in a tub. Now I bind
 and chasten them, at once throw a young man
 to the ground, sometimes an old churl too.
 He who struggles against my strength,
 he who grapples with me, will find
 he must hit the hard floor with his back
 unless he forgoes such a foolish fight.
 Robbed of his strength, but not of his tongue,
 he has no say over his mind
 or his hands or his feet. Who knocks
 young men stupid, and as his slaves binds them
 in broad, waking daylight? Yes, ask me my name.

31

This world is adorned in diverse ways,
 decorated with rare ornaments.
 I saw a strange thing singing in a house;
 nothing on earth looked in the least
 like this creature, her shape was so odd.
 Her beak pointed upwards, her feet
 and talons were those of a bird,
 yet she cannot fly nor even move much,
 though eager to start she sets to work
 with her singular skills; often and again
 she goes the rounds at gatherings of men,
 she sits at the feast and awaits her turn –
 it comes soon – to prove her prowess
 in the halls of thanes. But there this creature
 never partakes of what makes men merry.
 Daring, eager for fame, she stays dumb;
 and yet in her foot she has a fine voice,
 the glorious gift of song. It is so
 strange that this creature makes sense only
 with her dangling foot, richly decorated.
 When she holds her hoard, proud of her rings
 yet naked, she bears her brothers on her neck –
 a mighty kinswoman. Even a canny poet
 will be hard put to name this creature.

I saw the creature: his stomach stuck out behind him,
 enormously swollen. A strong servant
 waited upon him. What filled up his stomach
 had travelled from far, and flew through his eye.
 He does not always die in giving life
 to others, but new strength revives
 in the pit of his stomach; he breathes again.
 He fathers a son; he's his own father.

I'm told a certain something grows
 in its pouch, swells and stands up,
 lifts its covering. A proud bride grasped
 that boneless wonder, the daughter of a king
 covered that swollen thing with clothing.

I saw a tree with splendid branches,
 towering in the wood; the timber grew,
 a joyous growth. Both water and earth
 fed him well, but when he grew old
 his whole life became a misery;
 sorely wounded, and silent in his chains,
 his front was fettered with sombre trappings.
 Now with brute force his butting-head
 opens up the way for his owner,
 a vile enemy. Often in the storm
 have they plundered the treasure hoard together.
 The man was swift and tireless if the first,
 his comrade, was cornered and in danger.

A strange thing hangs by a man's thigh,
 hidden by a garment. It has a hole
 in its head. It is stiff and strong
 and its firm bearing reaps a reward.
 When the man hitches his clothing high
 above his knee, he wants the head
 of that hanging thing to poke the old hole
 (of fitting length) it has often filled before.

On earth there's a warrior of wondrous origin.
 He's created, gleaming, by two dumb creatures
 for the benefit of men. Foe bears him against foe
 to inflict harm. A woman often fetters him,
 strong as he is. If women and men
 provide for him in the proper manner
 and often feed him, he'll obey them
 and serve them well. Those who succour him
 win themselves pleasure. But this warrior savages
 the man who lets him become proud.

A young man made for the corner where he knew
 she was standing; this strapping youth
 had come some way – with his own hands
 he whipped up her dress, and under her girdle
 (as she stood there) thrust something stiff,
 worked his will; they both shook.
 This fellow quickened: one moment he was
 forceful, a first-rate servant, so strenuous
 that the next he was knocked up, quite
 blown by his exertion. Beneath the girdle
 a thing began to grow that upstanding men
 often think of, tenderly, and acquire.

I was in a room where I watched a piece
of wood, a shuttling beam, scathe
a struggling creature; it sustained battle-wounds,
savage gashes. Spears were the bane
of this creature, and with skill the beam
had been fixed securely. One of its feet
stood firm, and the other strived busily,
pumped up and down, scraped the ground.
A tree stood nearby hung with bright
leaves. When the spears had done their work,
I saw the leavings brought before my lord,
carried across the floor where warriors caroused.

60

I sank roots first of all, stood
near the shore, close by the dyke
and dash of waves; few men
saw my home in that wilderness,
but each dawn, each dusk,
the tawny waves surged and swirled
around me. Little did I think
that I, mouthless, should ever sing
to men sitting at the mead-bench,
varying my pitch. It is rather puzzling,
a miracle to men ignorant of such arts,
how a knife's point and a right hand
(mind and implement moving as one)
could cut and carve me – so that I
can send you a message without fear,
and no one else can overhear
or noise abroad the words we share.

Quick; quite mum; I die notwithstanding.
I lived once, I live again. Everybody
lifts me, grips me, and chops off my head,
bites my bare body, violates me.
I don't bite a man unless he bites me;
there are many men who bite me.

66

I stretch beyond the bounds of the world,
I'm smaller than a worm, clearer than the moon,
swifter than the sun. Swelling seas,
and the lap of the earth, the green fields,
are within my clasp. I cover the depths,
and plunge beneath hell; I ascend above heaven,
highland of glory; I stretch across
the region of angels; I fill the earth
with myself – this whole middle-earth
and the ocean streams. Say what my name is.

95

I am noble and known to warriors,
and often rest; renowned amongst men
(high and humble), I range far and wide,
and plunderers' pickings are mine if I,
once estranged from friends, can but win
success and shining reward in halls.
Now clever men greatly welcome
my presence; I'll reveal wisdom
to many people; no one on earth
speaks a word. Although sons of men,
livers on land, now eagerly watch
for some sign of me, I sometimes
hide my tracks from all humankind.