The Old English Riddles of the *Exeter Book*

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The Exeter Book

Codex Exoniensis:

largest single collection of Anglo-Saxon poetry
donated to Exeter Cathedral in the 11th century by Leofric, Exeter’s first bishop
one of four major surviving manuscripts of Old English poetry
The Exeter Book

- varied collection of Old English poetry
- authorship and dating of the riddles unclear; probably several authors or copied from other sources
- contains poems, prayers, epigrams, experimental works and the famous riddles
- includes several of the best-known anthology pieces of Old English poetry

The Riddles

What are riddles?
• short, metaphorical poems
• describe an object, animal, natural phenomenon or process in a mysterious and sometimes playful way and challenge the reader to identify what it is
• often anthropomorphic
• very popular in Middle Ages
• common form of instruction and literary entertainment
• *neck-riddles*
The Riddles

two kinds of Old English riddles:

• first-person riddles of personification
  – narrator pretends to be the cryptic object while describing it in human terms

• third-person riddles of description
  – narrator observes the object
The Riddles of the Exeter Book

- almost 100 riddles
- solution not given in the title; no answer key
- language: mainly West Saxon
- four-stress lines with at least two of the stresses alliterated
- contain many metaphorical descriptions and compound words
Riddle #27: Old English Version

Ic wiht geseah
hornum bitweonum
lyftfæt leohtlic
huþe to þam ham

5 Walde hyre on þære byrig
searwum asettan,
Þa cwom wundorlicu wiht
seo is eallum cuð
ahredde þa þa huþe,

10 wreccan ofer willan-
fæhþum feran,
Dust stonc to heofonum;
niht forð gewat.

wera gewiste

wundorlice
huþe lædan,
listum gegierwed,
of þam heresiþe.
bur atimbran,
gif hit swa meahte.
ofer wealles hrof
eorðbuendum;
ond to ham bedraf
gewat hyre west Þonan
forð onette.
deaw feol on eorðan;
Nænig siþan
Þære wihte sið.
Riddle #27

1 Ic Pronoun, nominative, singular
wiht Noun, accusative, singular, feminine
geseah Verb (preterit), first person, singular
wundorlice Adjective, accusative, singular, female

2 hornum Noun, dative, plural, masculine
bitweonum Preposition
huÞe Noun, accusative, singular, feminine
lædan, Verb (infinitive)
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>lyftfæt</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>leohhtlic</td>
<td>Adjective, accusative, singular, neuter</td>
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<td></td>
<td>listum</td>
<td>Noun, instrumental, singular, female</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gegierwed</td>
<td>Verb (past-participle)</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>huþe</td>
<td>Noun, accusative, singular, female</td>
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<td>to</td>
<td>Þam</td>
<td>Preposition</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pram</td>
<td>Pronoun, dative, singular, male</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ham</td>
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<td>Preposition</td>
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<td>heresiþe</td>
<td>Noun, dative, singular, male</td>
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Riddle #27: Translation

I saw a strange creature with booty between its horns, a shining air-vessel adorned with skill, carrying the booty towards its home from this raid.

It desired to construct a chamber, built with skill, within its dwelling – if it could do so.

Then came a wonderful creature across the top of the hills which is known to every man; it then recaptured that booty and drove the wanderer towards home against his will – he departed westwards thence travelling with feud, hurrying forth.

Dust rose to heaven; dew fell upon earth; the night went forth.

Then no man knew this creature’s course.
Solving the Riddle: Group Work

Task: in groups of 2 to 4 people
	ry to find a solution to the riddle

(we will show the translation to you during group work)
I saw a strange creature with booty between its horns, a shining air-vessel adorned with skill, carrying the booty towards its home from this raid. It desired to construct a chamber, built with skill, within its dwelling – if it could do so.

Then came a wonderful creature across the top of the hills which is known to every man; it then recaptured that booty and drove the wanderer towards home against his will – he departed westwards thence travelling with feud, hurrying forth.

Dust rose to heaven; dew fell upon earth; the night went forth.

Then no man knew this creature’s course.
Solving the Riddle: Mystification

• First creature: “hornum”, “huþe lædan”, “heresiþe” and “ham”

• “lyftfæt” means “ball of air” (we use the translation “air-vessel”).

• The object desires to establish a “bur” in its “byrig”.

• When the second object appears it “ahredde” the booty.

• The plunderer is driven away “of er willan” by the new-comer which causes him to leave with “fæhþum.”
Solving the Riddle: Hints (1/2)

- “hornum”
- Booty is stolen by the first creature and recaptured by the second.
- “lyftfæt”
- “leohtlic”
- The second creature “cwom […] ofer wealles hrof”.
- “eorðbuendum”
Solving the Riddle: Hints (2/2)

- “bedraf”, “forð onette” and “wreccan”
- “west”
- Line 12: dew covers the ground and “niht forð gewat.”
- In the last line, nobody knows where the plunderer hides during the day.
- “gif hit swa meahte” shows that a permanent home at the firmament is a wish of the object, but one that is quite unlikely to become true.
- “to […] ham” underlines then that the raider disappears during the day and only leaves this “home” at sunset.
Solving the Riddle

First creature: Moon
Second creature: Sun

The full-stops indicate different sections of the text:
1. Moon = plunderer of light
2. Moon wants to build a chamber in the sky
3. Sun is a just fighter: claims back the light and expels the moon
4. Moon is gone (westwards) and a new day begins
5. No one knows where the moon hides at day
Solving the Riddle:
Possible Solutions

- Solution(s):
  - Moon and Sun
  - Cloud and Wind
  - Bird and Wind
  - Wolf and Man
  - Bee and Man
Bibliography

Primary Text:

Secondary Literature:
Bibliography

Pictures:

The End

Thank you for your attention!