

Riddling



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Symphosius (c. 4th century)

- ▶ 100 tercets in dactylic hexameter
- ▶ Northern Africa
- ▶ Supposedly for entertainment at the Saturnalia
- ▶ Solutions included

Bern Riddles (c. 7th century)

- ▶ 63 sestets in hexameter
- ▶ Lombardy–Mediterranean origin
- ▶ Solutions included

Aldhelm (d. 709)

- ▶ 100 *enigmata* in Latin hexameter (variable number of lines)
- ▶ Influenced by Symphosius
- ▶ Extensive overlap with the Bern riddles
- ▶ Intended to demonstrate poetic principles; survive as part of metrical treatises
- ▶ Focus on didactics, not riddling
- ▶ Solutions included

“Judging by the large number of extant manuscripts, Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* were widely disseminated both in early England and on the continent, often circulating independently of his metrical treatise. In Anglo-Saxon England, they triggered a vogue of riddle-making.”

(Bitterli 23)

Tatwine and Eusebius (early 8th century)

Tatwine (d. 734)

- ▶ Archbishop of Canterbury 731–734
- ▶ Wrote 40 acrostic riddles in Latin hexameter
- ▶ Influenced by Aldhelm
- ▶ Embodies the theology of creation
- ▶ Solutions included

Eusebius

- ▶ According to Bede: Hwætberht, Abbot of Monkwearmouth–Jarrow (d. 740s)
- ▶ Added 60 riddles to Tatwine's set to complete it
- ▶ Solutions included

Boniface (d. 754)

- ▶ 20 acrostic *enigmata* in dactylic hexameter
- ▶ 10 on virtues, 10 on vices
- ▶ For edification
- ▶ Solutions included

Old English Riddles

- ▶ Exeter Book riddles: c. 94 items of variable length in a single manuscript
- ▶ Leiden Riddle: external witness to Exeter Book riddle 33 (Aldhelm's *lorica*)
- ▶ 2 Winchester prose riddles in London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius E.xviii
- ▶ Apollonius of Tyre

Latin *Enigmata* and Exeter Book Riddles in Comparison

Latin *Enigmata*

- ▶ In sets of 100
- ▶ In hexameter
- ▶ Solution given outright
- ▶ No invitation to solve
- ▶ Traditional riddles, known authors
- ▶ Medieval specimens shared an educational purpose

Exeter Book Riddles

- ▶ A single set approaching 100
- ▶ No solutions given
- ▶ Invitation to solve
- ▶ Traditional riddles, unknown author(s)
- ▶ ? Educational purpose

Were the Old English Riddles a Guessing Game?

“The likeness between the kenning and the riddle lies, in fact, not in mystification, but in the opposite. Both are structures with the ostensible purpose of mystification; both give a pleasure that rests on the opposite of this purpose, on recognition.”
(Harleman Stewart 135)

Context: Monastic Education

- ▶ **Oblates** and novices attended school
- ▶ Vowees had daily reading time
- ▶ The **divine office** involved a lot of reading, especially the **Night Office**
- ▶ Other routines, such as eating, could be accompanied by reading

Context: Lay Literacy?

Absence of evidence:

- ▶ One Latin chronicle by a lay aristocrat (Æthelweard), but he may have had it translated
- ▶ Vernacular literature commissioned by lay aristocrats (notably Æthelweard) may have been read to them
- ▶ Frankish sources instruct priests to hold school, but no evidence of this happening in England

Evidence in favour:

- ▶ The convention that oblates could choose to return to society suggests there must have been sporadic lay literacy.
- ▶ ? King Alfred of Wessex

Context: Why *Vernacular* Literature? 1/2

- ▶ Homilies to be read to the general population
- ▶ Religious poetry as an edifying alternative to secular song
- ▶ Charter bounds because they involved the illiterate
- ▶ Saints' lives for religious communities and pious lay(wo)men
- ▶ Biblical content for religious communities and pious lay(wo)men
- ▶ Laws because . . . ?
- ▶ Riddles because . . . ?

Context: Why *Vernacular* Literature? 2/2

From Ælfric's Latin preface to his *Grammar*:

“Now I know that many will blame me because I have desired to occupy my mind in such studies, namely turning the art of grammar into the English language, but I intend this text to be fitting for ignorant boys, not for their elders.” (Wilcox 130)

→ Riddles may likewise have served a didactic purpose!

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. . . but surely then the collection would not have been as bawdy as it is?

Apollonius of Tyre

Antiochus's Riddle

Swa hwilc man swa minne rædels riht aræde, onfo se mynre dohtor to wife, and se
ðe hine misræde, sy he beheafdod.

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Scylde ic þolige, moddrenum flæsce ic bruce.

Ic sece minne fæder, mynre modor wer, mines wifes dohtor and ic ne finde.

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Apollonius's Solution

Ymbe þæt þu cwæde þæt þu scilde þolodest, ne eart ðu leogende on ðam — beseoh to ðe silfum; and þæt þu cwæde “moddrenum flæsce ic bruce,” ne eart ðu on ðam leogende — beseoh to þinre dohtor. (Goolden 6)

A Latin Context Even Here

Gehir nu þone rædels, “Scelere vereor, materna carne vescor.” þæt is on englisc: ‘Scylde ic þolige, moddrenum flæsce ic bruce.’ Eft he cwæð: “Quaero patrem meum, meae matris virum, uxoris meae filiam nec invenio.” þæt is on englisc: ‘Ic sece minne fæder, mynre modor wer, mines wifes dohtor and ic ne finde.’ (Goolden 6)

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