

Panther, Whale, Phoenix, and the Exeter Book Riddles
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ENGL 3335
Ancient and Medieval Literature

The Exeter Book

- Exeter, Cathedral Library (Dean and Chapter), MS 3501, s. x² (Conner - 950-970)
- Miscellany - various types of poems in the MS
- Probably used as a repository for material for use in preaching
- First known mention is 1170 in a catalog of books that Bishop Leofric left for the monastery
- Allegory – a text that is meant to be interpreted as a substitute for another very specific meaning
- Riddle – a short, often humorous, work that presents a puzzle for the reader to solve

Physiologus

- Greek text that gives the actual or mythical traits of beings and then interprets them allegorically
 - Probably Alexandria, third or fourth century; between 40-48 chapters
 - no surviving Greek MSS
 - many late classical and Latin versions and translations; foundation for many medieval bestiaries
- *Whale, Panther, Partridge* in Exeter Book
 - *Partridge* is only 16 lines or so; a page is missing, so we only get the beginning and maybe the end.

Phoenix

- Some texts of *Physiologus* describe the phoenix, some don't
- This version is drawn from Lactantius, *Carmen de Ave Phoenix* (attributed)
 - c. 250-325 – Christian apologist and author
 - *Divine Institutes, On the Works of God, On the Wrath of God, On the Deaths of the Persecutors*
 - A lot of eschatological speculation
- much more in depth than *Physiologus* - draws on Job and other nature texts as well as Christian allegory

The Riddle Game

- Riddles have been a part of many cultures from classical times to the present
- Greek/Roman mythology
 - Oedipus and the Sphinx is the most famous
 - the various oracles are ambiguous in many instances
- Germanic mythology - the *Halsrätsel* (neck-riddle) - tell a riddle to save your life
 - Norse mythology - Odin vs. Vaf̆r̆udnir the Jötun, and Alvis the dwarf vs. Thor in the Eddas
 - Tolkien in *The Hobbit*: Bilbo vs. Gollum

Early medieval riddles

- Latin riddles - solution given in title - works by getting a person to see an ordinary thing in an extraordinary way
 - Symphosius - 5th century
 - Riddlers with connections to early medieval England: Boniface (d. 755), Tatwine (d. 734) Eusebius (Hwætberht of Wearmouth/Jarrow, d. 747), Alcuin of York (735-804)
- Aldhelm (d. 709) – Abbot of Malmesbury and bishop of Sherborne; well-reputed for his learning and his Latin style
 - Prose and poetic works on chastity
 - several letters to kings and scholars survive
 - several works on Latin poetry and meter
 - poetry on travel in England, *tituli* for several churches
 - *Ænigmata* – collection of 100 riddles

The Exeter Book Riddles

- Craig Williamson - leader in the field, most recent edition of the riddles themselves
- ASPR, Krapp and Dobbie - the Exeter Book
- Bernard Muir - most recent edn. of the Exeter Book
 - 95-100 riddles, depending on where you think they begin or end
 - no title or solution given - reader has to narrow down a huge range of possibilities to one correct solution
 - reverse of Latin riddles
 - Also, a number of double entendres - several phallic riddles