

EXETER BOOK

RIDDLE 29

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ABSTRACT

A translation of the Exeter Book's Riddle 29. This creative translation goes beyond the literal, offering a more poetic interpretation that plays into and extends the themes and ideas of the original Old English version. Accompanying the riddle and its translation is a short introduction to the Exeter Book for historical context.

INTRODUCTION

The Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501) is a unique look into Old English, as it is one of only four known poetic manuscripts written in the language—the other three being the Beowulf, Junius, and Vercelli manuscripts. Of these four, the Exeter Book is the largest, best preserved, and likely the oldest. It was written around the year 970 by a single scribe before being gifted to the Exeter Cathedral by Bishop Leofric, who died in 1072. The book contains several long religious poems and short verses, as well as 95 riddles—though the count and numbering of certain riddles has been debated. The translation below is of Riddle 29, as numbered by Kevin Crossley-Holland in “The Exeter Book Riddles,” though the transcription I used is from Peter Baker’s “Introduction to Old English,” where it is labeled “Riddle C.” Baker’s listed solution to the riddle is “Moon and Sun;” my looser translation suggests the more abstract solution of the day/night cycle as a whole, as represented by two creatures, instead of the physical celestial objects.

RIDDLE C (PETER BAKER'S INTRODUCTION TO OLD ENGLISH)

Ic wiht ġeseah	wundorlice
hornum betwēonan	hūþe lædan
lyftfæt lēohlic	listum ġegierwed
hūþe tō þām hām	of þām heresīþe:
wolde hire on þære byrig	būr ātimbran,
searwum āsettan,	ġif hit swā meahte.
Ðā cwōm wundorlicu wiht	ofer wealles hrōf
(sēo is eallum cūð	eorðbūendum);
āhredde þā þā hūþe	ond tō hām bedrāf
wreccan ofer willan;	ġewāt hire west þonan
fæhpum fēran,	forð onette.
Dūst stonc tō heofonum;	dēaw fēol on eorþan;
niht forð ġewāt.	Nænig siþþan
wera ġewiste	þære wihte sīð.

CREATIVE TRANSLATION

I saw a wonderful creature,
gilder of the star-bright sky-vessel,
spill stolen spoils
between horns,
bringing the luminous wealth
to the home
of war.
She sought sanctuary
in that city of silver,
to construct herself
a chamber with skill,

if she so could.
Then came over
the summit of that structure
a second creature
(she who was known
to all earth-dwellers)
spiriting away
that illicit gleaming glory,
winging westward home,
awakening without her will;
the feud-flight sustained
endlessly onwards.
Dust rose to the heavens;
dew fell to the earth;
night departed forth.
We watchers below
are left in darkness
about the journey
above.

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