

**Exeter Book
Riddle
45/47:
Bookworm**

trans. Maryann Corbett

The tenth-century manuscript known as the Exeter Book is one of the richest collections of Old English poetry to come down to us. It was probably copied in a Benedictine monastery, and it was certainly owned later by a bishop named Leofric, who left it to Exeter Cathedral in 1072. Among its many texts are over ninety riddles, in the tradition of Latin poets like Symphosius and Aldhelm but composed in Old English alliterative verse. They treat subjects of every kind, spiritual and earthly, learned and low, and some—such as those usually solved as “dough” and “onion”—are full of ribald double-entendre. The manuscript does not give solutions for the riddles, and some of the proposed solutions are still disputed. Many are quite clear, though, like this one, which is among the most popular and most often translated.

There are different opinions about where one riddle ends and the next begins, thus the two numbering systems.

Moððe word fræt. Me þæt þuhte
wrætlicu wyrd þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,
þæt se wurm forswealg wera gied sumes,
þeof in þystro þrymfæstne cwide
ond þæs strangan stapol. Stælgjest ne wæs
wihte þy gleawra, þe he þam wordū swealg.

A moth ate myth. A marvel, I thought—
a fine bit of lore!— when first I learned
that a bug had swallowed some bard's song,
a cheat in darkness chewed on the glory
of a poem's power. The pilfering guest
was no whit wiser for wolfing it down.