
AN OLD ENGLISH RIDDLE

The poetic riddle is a common form of primitive art, though a form that puts very definite restrictions upon the word "primitive"; for while riddles are apt to occur in the earlier stages of various cultures, they are also apt to be remarkably sophisticated expressions, ironic, witty, and imaginative. The surviving riddles of Old English, almost a hundred in number, are a most distinguished, if textually difficult, collection, of which *The Bow* is a characteristic example. Riddles at their best bring into being a complexity of metaphor, especially when they use the device of personification found in many old English riddles; and complex metaphor in turn expands and deepens one's perception of reality. The Old English kenning, which calls the sea "the swan's-road" or "the whale's-path," is a riddle in small; and later medieval allegory is in a very real sense a riddle in large.

The Bow¹

AGOB² is my name turned backwards. I am a curious creature, made for conflict. When I bend and a poisonous sting sticks out of my bosom, I am all ready to sweep that deadly evil far from me. When the master who devised that torment for me lets go my limbs,³ I get longer than before, until I spit out, in a deadly mixture, the all-fell poison that I swallowed earlier. Nor does anyone at all pass away easily from what I speak of here if what flies from my belly touches him so that he buys forcibly the deadly drink, with his life pays surely for the cup-mead.⁴ Unbowed I will not obey anyone unless I am cunningly bound.⁵ Say what I am called.

1. This prose translation is in general based on the text as given in F. Tupper's *Riddles of the Exeter Book* (1910).

2. *Boga* (Old English, "bow").

3. I.e., the tips of the bow.

4. A sweet drink.

5. I.e., strung.