



## Old English Riddles

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In this new and revised edition of a popular Anvil Press classic, Michael Alexander presents a selection of these ingenious and enigmatic poems—with possible “solutions” given in an appendix—in versions that capture their peculiar, often ribald, suggestiveness and vigor.

The riddles survive through the *Exeter Book*, a manuscript dating back to the year 1000, left to Exeter Cathedral by its first bishop, Leofric. Yet the poems, drawn as they were from an earlier tradition, predate the *Exeter Book* perhaps by centuries. Although scholars once believed them to be the work of one eighth-century poet, Cynewulf, the variety of styles, subject matter, and levels of literary sophistication make it likely that they were the work of many authors over many years. They provide invaluable insight into life in Anglo-Saxon England, reflecting the everyday concerns and attitudes of an essentially agricultural and pious society. Some refer to the natural environment, animals, and the climate; others describe household objects or farming implements, even weaponry. In their expressive concision, the riddles are striking poems.

Michael Alexander was, until his recent retirement, honorary professor of English at St. Andrews University in Scotland. Educated at Oxford, Perugia, and Princeton universities, he is the author of three Penguin Classic titles, *The Earliest English Poets*, *Beowulf*, and *The Canterbury Tales: The First Fragment*. His other works include *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* (1981) and *A History of English Literature* (2000). His latest work, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England*, was published by Yale University Press in 2006.

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