

## The function of riddles: Transcript

### Nicholas Perkins

Can you tell us any more about what function a text like a riddle might have been thought to have in this early medieval culture? So we're used to riddles perhaps being taught to children, or being sort of part of a playful textual environment. Do we know if riddles were used in teaching in those days?

### Harriet Soper

So interesting! Yes, I think we do know that there are connections with teaching. I kind of mentioned the language side of things, so they're very helpful for that. And there's a very rich Latin tradition of riddles kind of hovering behind these English texts that we're looking at.

### Nicholas Perkins

Some of the Old English riddles seem to be translations or versions of actual Latin riddles that we know about as well, don't they?

### Harriet Soper

Exactly, so some of them are very close to Latin riddles. Some of them just kind of riff off a Latin riddle that that survives as well. And in the Latin riddles there's a lot of focus on things like vocabulary learning. So lots of different words for the same thing crop up in the same poem and in a kind of funny puzzly kind of way, like 'How many words can you think of for the same thing?' So you can kind of see the vocabulary elements there. But also, I think riddles were considered an excellent way to kind of tap into the mysteries of things. So they're a kind of way to crack open a kind of sense of wonder, especially a sense of wonder in creation. And I think we can see this in some of the riddles that you've selected, like 'the fish and the river', which... I'm referring to 'the fish and river', but it's down as 'soul and body' and that's kind of the paradox, right? Sometimes something that seems super *natural* and to do with Creation – actually, once you crack it open, you can learn about things like the soul. So yes, kind of a way into mysteries and puzzles.

### Nicholas Perkins

Yeah, that's really interesting. So that riddle in itself, different readers, different scholars have taken a different view about, if you like, the core meaning of the riddle and the alternative meaning. 'Cause so many of these riddles don't only have one simple solution; they might have several. And there might be one solution, like in the case of the dough rising, a kind of rude riddle where like one of the meanings is kind of unspeakable, or you shouldn't say it, but it's kind of lurking around in the imagination.

### Harriet Soper

Yes, absolutely. And I think that partly we have all these conversations about what the solutions could be because they don't travel with solutions, they're not recorded with solutions in the manuscript. So they're kind of still a puzzle for us to work out even now. But I think the dough one is really, really helpful, that dough riddle, because it also shows us how often these poems, which have what's sometimes called a misleading metaphor within them, so they kind of, they seem like they're talking about one thing – in this case, a sexual meaning – but actually they can also be speaking about another thing. I love that idea of them having a metaphorical focus that maybe is more obvious, that strikes you at first and then you have to kind of work your way through the metaphor, past the surface imagery and kind of work out what the comparison is at the heart of the poem.