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What the Riddle-Makers Have Hidden Behind the Fire of a Dragon

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Abstract

Classical mythology, folklore, and fairy tales are full of dragons which exhibit fantastic attributes such as breathing fire, hoarding treasure, or possessing more than one head. This study maintains that some of these puzzling phenomena may derive from riddles, and will focus particularly on some plausible answers that refer to a real creature that has for millennia been valued and hunted by man: the honeybee.

Additional Keywords

Dragons; Bees and bee imagery; Monsters; Riddles

WHAT THE RIDDLE-MAKERS HAVE HIDDEN BEHIND THE FIRE OF A DRAGON

LAURENCE SCOTCH

Over the centuries, all types of creepy-crawlies have infested our minds with fear. Wasps, maggots, spiders, cockroaches and worms, they all arouse a natural human reaction of disgust or distaste. (Fiennes, *Fear: Our Ultimate Challenge*, 11)

THIS STUDY LOOKS AT THE POSSIBILITY that some monsters of antiquity may have derived from actual fearful ‘creepy-crawlies’ by the way they were first described metaphorically. It may be impossible to prove this conclusively, but there are several instances of early riddle games that suggest there was a considerable delight in this charm of word play.

Closely tied with a riddle-making mind is the delight in imagining small things magnified, as in Swift’s story of *Gulliver in Brobdingnag*, who fought with some giant wasps. “These insects were as large as partridges: I took out their stings, found them an inch and a half long, and as sharp as needles” (135).



Fig.1 John Leech, “Awful appearance of a ‘Wopps’ at a Picnic”

There are nearly a hundred riddles recorded in Old English and there were riddle contests that demonstrated people's love of such clever wit. There is one found in the Viking Saga of Hervor, a contest between Gestumblindi and King Heithrek. Gestumblindi said: "What is the marvel which I have seen? It has eight legs and four eyes, and carries its knees higher than its body. Read me this riddle." King Heithrek replied: "That is a spider" (Kershaw 146). In another riddle, a dung-beetle was likened to a black boar; no creature was too small for their consideration. Aristotle was the first to attempt to classify all the kinds of animals in his *History of Animals*. He grouped the types according to their similar traits, whether they had blood or not and whether they lived on land or in water. As late as the seventeenth century Edward Topsell (1572–1625) also classified animals very differently from today. He listed a wide range of creatures under the class of Serpents because they creep low over the ground. He classed reptiles, amphibians and insects all under Serpents. He even listed several species of dragon.



Fig. 2 *Wild Life in House and Home* (Mourier & Winding 215)

Figure 2, a startling woodcut of a dragon, captures the panic of fear that a wasp might have caused as it entered a household in the nineteenth century. J.R.R. Tolkien, who was strongly drawn to dragons, thought that they were in effect, riddle creatures to which he had not yet found a solution (Roberts 41). This study proposes a solution that could be applied to some Western dragons.

From the first written accounts of myths and legends, dragons featured in many of the stories. Several elements can be discerned that were common to them all: a remote dwelling, serpentine movement, scaly body, veined or skinny wings, sharp claws, and fiery breath. David Jones, in his book *An Instinct for Dragons* (2002), thought that we have inherited a fear of snakes, big cats, and birds of prey from our primate ancestors and that dragons are a manifestation of the combined worst aspects of these animals, and so this is the reason why there is a similarity to the stories of dragons from widely different cultures. There are several other theories that people have given to try to explain why this

particular fantasy creature has endured in art and literature from very earliest times. Some point to early encounters with fossil bones of dinosaurs. For example, Adrienne Mayor in her book *The First Fossil Hunters* (2011), showed convincingly how the bones of protoceratops might have given rise to the idea of dragon-like griffins. Others have tried to show that astronomical phenomenon were responsible for the idea of dragons: parhelia, aurora borealis and comets.

There were many instances where a comet was seen as a dragon, for instance *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In the year 1177, many dragons were seen in England, perhaps a reference to a comet visible in the south as well as the north of the country. In 1274, on the Vigil of St Nicholas's Day, the people of Newcastle-upon-Tyne were thrown into terror at the appearance of a comet that they saw as a dragon. (Pennick 30)

Jacqueline Simpson in *British Dragons* noted that "there is nothing in nature, for instance, which can possibly be interpreted as evidence for the existence of huge demonic flies, yet such creatures were feared as emissaries of magicians in areas as far apart as Iceland and Sardinia. Probably the roots of all such fantasies lie within the human mind, whose irrational fears and hates find exaggerated expression in the terrifying experiences of dreams, delirium and drugs" (18). In order to describe the features of animals that had not been seen before, early explorers would resort to metaphor. Herodotus (490–415 BC) reported in *The Histories* that there were ants the size of dogs living in Asia. It was artists who then often portrayed these monster ant-dogs in medieval maps and manuscripts that kept the myth alive. Michael Peissel (1984), exploring in the Himalayas, showed that there were actually small mammals that lived like ants underground in colonies throwing up mounds that could have been mistaken for anthills. These creatures turned out to be marmots.

This discovery suggests that there may be other animals waiting to be uncovered which have been hidden behind the confusing mask of monster-as-metaphor. Riddles are puzzles that make creative use of confusion by metaphor. For example, here is a simple switch from horns to ears: "A hopper o' ditches, / A cropper o' corn, / A wee brown cow, / And a pair of leather horns! —Hare" (Taylor 132). But there is one kind of riddle that may provide a key for interpreting dragons. This kind is particularly bewildering because it describes a composite animal. Here is a good example from the Phillipines:

There is a flying thing, which stays anywhere, the forest and *layac* [dry leaves]; its face is the face of a cow, its neck, the neck of a horse, the breast the breast of a man, the wings is like the leaf of a bambu, its tail resembles a snake, and his feet look like the feet of a bird. (Starr 205)

The key to this type of riddle is to look for just one attribute of each of the parts that might match features of a real animal. In this case the target is an animal that might have horns like a cow, straight neck like a horse, pointed wings like leaves, able to shed its skin like a serpent and has clawed feet like a bird. The answer that fits all these is a grasshopper. The grasshopper's antennae are its metaphorical horns.

In Greek mythology there was a monster that was composed of different creatures in a very similar description to the grasshopper riddle. It was called the Chimera. Homer described it thus; "All lion in front, all snake behind, all goat between / terrible, blasting lethal fire at every breath" (*The Iliad* 6.213-214). Images of the Chimera began appearing on Greek pottery about 500 BCE. This terrifying monster must have derived from a widely held legend and was a creature that everyone most feared. Homer's description, however, reads very like the type of riddle about the grasshopper, quoted above. Taylor, in his book on English riddles, noted that there seemed to be a connection with this type of riddle and the description of the Chimera, though he was not able to offer a solution (569). If there is a connection, then, by treating it like a riddle and regarding just one aspect of each of the animals in turn, this study proposes to answer this riddle.

What do we get if these Chimera characteristics are combined into one living animal? If we remember that riddles use deliberately exaggerated and confusing language, the answer to such a riddle might also be one of those universally feared of insects, the wasp, hornet, or bee. Any of these insects, when disturbed, might show characteristics of the Chimera monster. They were feared because they attacked from all directions with stingers, and wings buzzing, making a roar like the lion. They have antennae on their heads like goats that have horns. They could cause havoc among humans with their venom as from a bite from the Chimera's snake-tail, and the fire-breathing aspect is a clearly a metaphorical description for the effects of the venom, that can leave hot and swollen wounds similar to burns. Someone who has made the rare connection between 'sting' and 'fire' is John Tyerman Williams in his perceptive book, *Pooh and the Philosophers*.

"ow!" [...] the bee had stung Winnie-the-Pooh's nose. Now if we ask any qualified person—in this case, anyone who has been stung by a bee—what did that person feel when stung, the answer will be, "I felt a burning sensation."

Precisely: a burning sensation. And what is the usual cause of burning? Fire. (Williams 14)

Salvador Dali painted a picture in 1944 called *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee* that captures the stark horror of being stung. It pictures a modern chimera composed of a pomegranate, fish, tiger and bayonet. (Another painting showed that he also suffered an acute phobia of grasshoppers.)



Fig. 3 *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee*, Salvador Dali

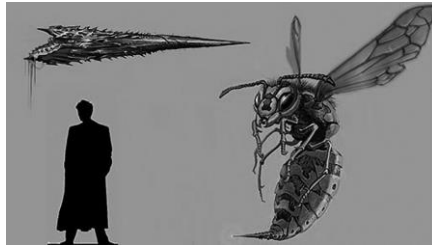


Fig. 4 *Doctor Who and Vespiform* (BBC One concept art)

The fear of bees has been the subject of numerous stories. During the First World War, in Tanzania at the Battle of Tanga, even though British soldiers were forced to retreat from their engagement with the Germans when they were suddenly attacked by swarms of angry bees. These insects, reacting like a superorganism, flew at them covering them in stings (Durschmied 221).

After the introduction of Africanized honey-bees into South America in 1956, these bees acquired the nickname Killer Bees from their especially aggressive behaviour, inspiring plenty of fear and a rash of bee-related horror films: *The Deadly Bees* (1966), *Killer Bees* (1974), and *The Swarm* (1978).

The BBC science-fiction television series, *Doctor Who*, also utilized insect phobias to scare its audience when it introduced Vespiforms in the episode "The Unicorn and the Wasp" (season 4, episode 7). "Vespiforms were a species of insectoids which resembled oversized wasps. Adults were about three metres tall [...] with large stingers which could be regrown within hours of use" ("Vespiform"). This is an unusual additional note about their stingers because real wasps can sting repeatedly anyway, unlike their cousins, the bees.

The fact that bees can use their stings once, and only once, is the subject of numerous ancient folk tales. Hilda Ransome, in her book *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore* (1937), records tales from Lithuania, Romania and

Caucasia. These folk tales dealt specifically with the subject of bees' stings and show that it was widely known about how, if a bee used its sting on humans, it would lead to its death.

When the Lord God had created the animals he gave each a weapon with which to defend itself. He asked the bee what kind of a weapon she would like to have, and she begged for a sting which should be so poisonous that it should kill anyone whom she stung. But God would not grant her request; he gave her, indeed, a sting, but it was not the man whom she stung who should die, but she herself. (Ransome 244)

Aesop (c. 620–564 BCE) says, in a fable called *Zeus and The Bee*, that when the bees asked Zeus for the privilege of having a weapon with which to kill those who invaded their honey stores, the god agreed to give them a weapon but decreed that if they used their stings against man, the bees would die (Gibbs 235).

This was an early observation about bees' stingers and this study proposes that it relates to a possible interpretation of the monster in the Anglo-Saxon poem of *Beowulf*. Bees cannot withdraw their stings because they are barbed. These barbs are microscopic but so effective that once a bee has struck at human skin, it has no alternative but to pull away leaving its stinger, poison sac and surrounding muscle ripped from its tail-end and though it can still fly, it must soon after die from loss of blood. In the first part of the poem, Beowulf was recruited to rid Denmark of a shadowy monster called Grendel that had been causing mayhem among its warriors. Grendel's loss of a limb, when he had his arm pulled from his body, matches what happens to a bee after it has used its sting but is described in metaphorical language. Could it be that the poem of *Beowulf* has at its core a riddle about tackling bees? Of course it is a very elaborate and literary version of this riddle but there are several other details that carry echoes of bee-lore hidden in the text.

To begin with, Beowulf's name seems to be a combination of *bee* and *wolf*, where the word 'wolf' stood for hunting, so the name 'bee-wolf' might have been a kenning for Bear, a hunter whose preference for honey made it a hunter-of-bees; and there is much talk in the story of mead, the alcoholic honey-drink that in those days was extremely valuable in maintaining an army of warriors. Many men were employed as honey hunters because they would have been needed to find thousands of gallons of honey from the wild nests in the forests to maintain sufficient, continuous supply. They would have been selected for their specialist knowledge and skill at handling angry bees. It was an important occupation as honey meant wealth and power in a community.

Beowulf encounters a fire-breathing dragon later in the poem (*Beowulf* ll. 2400 et seq.). A dragon's mythological ability to breathe fire has been a stumbling block to those who have attempted to track down an actual reptile. Bees do not produce flames of fire but the venom of their stings can deliver a burning sensation to the skin as though from fire, and the redness and swelling will last for several days. The dragon in *Beowulf* had been inactive for a long time, guarding its treasure. When a certain thief decided to enter the cave and steal some of the gold, we are told that he returned with a golden goblet (l. 2217). In riddle language a goblet is the perfect match for a wax cell of honeycomb. If the dragon actually stands for bees in a metaphorical way, then clearly, golden goblets would be the ideal metaphor to stand for the honey-filled cells of honeycomb, a golden treasure. Dragons in fairy tales guarded their treasures in the same reactive way as bees protecting their honeycombs.

So once pictures had been made by artists inspired by a chimera-like riddle of a creature with great veined wings, mouth pouring out fire, the dragons' mythological stature began to grow to legendary size and took on a life of its own in the fantasy decorations of manuscripts and on church walls and carvings, so becoming a symbol of dread, combining with everything evil. One of the most well-known stories of man battling the forces of evil is Saint George and the Dragon. He, in a similar manner to the myth of Perseus, was said to have freed a maid from the jaws of a monster.

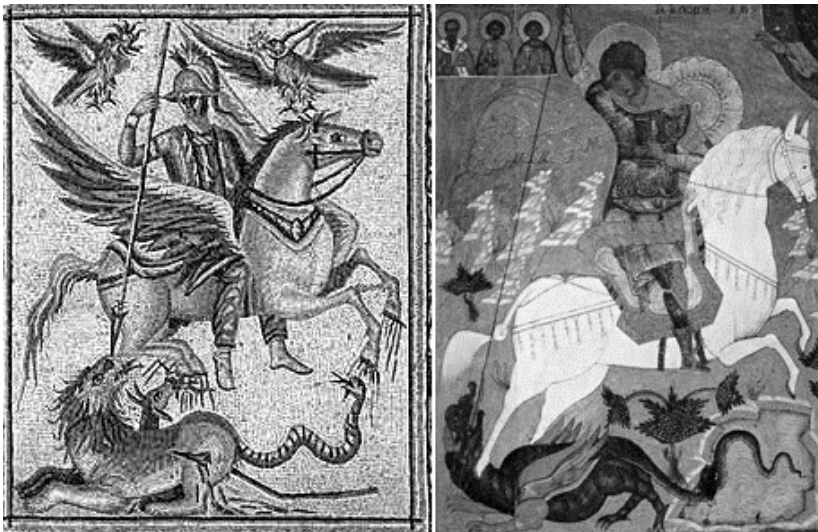


Fig. 5 *Bellerophon and Saint George compared.*

In medieval times Saint George was often depicted mounted on horseback spearing a dragon (Fig. 5, right) but an earlier Greco-Roman mosaic found in Syria (Fig. 5, left) suggests that this image was derived from the far earlier story of Bellerophon slaying the Chimera. This link from a complex riddle, to a chimera, and then to a dragon begins to create a chain of possibilities. That this vivid, reptilian, monster-dragon might have derived from a metaphorical interpretation that was forgotten or never considered.

The observation that there might be two or three similarities between dragons and bees could be taken as coincidental but this study hopes that a list of other similarities will make for a more compelling case.

The Dragon flag of Wales looks nothing like a bee pictorially and yet there are a striking number of similarities by verbal description. Bees and dragons both have: (1) barbed tails, (2) sharp claws, (3) eyes that never sleep, (4) membranous wings, (5) scaly bodies, (6) long tongues, (7) horns or antennae, (8) serpentine bodies (individual bees may not, but a swarm moves as one rippling body).

The word 'dragon' is often defined as a huge serpent or winged snake but its derivation is from a Greek word 'drakon' meaning 'to see clearly' or 'watchful.' This is exactly relevant to a theory of bee-origin because bees do have very large eyes and are by nature more watchful than reptiles. They employ individuals from the swarm to be guardians at the entrance to their hives. Bees do not have the ability to close their eyes so are permanently on watch and they are very vigilant attacking, even in winter, any unwary invaders to their hives.

Perhaps referring to bees as serpents expressed ambivalence about their unpredictable behavior. For the early honey hunters, it was a strategy for keeping people away from their precious honey-finds and for hiding the secrets of their skills and bee-lore. So the riddle maker spoke a truth cloaked in poetic language when asking questions about treasure and dragons. Artists have transformed the poetry of the riddle into images of dragon fantasy by being literal to the wording. These fiery serpents then, have taken on a life of their own from a long disassociation from any oral riddling and metaphorical descriptions.

If someone should disturb a hive of say 30,000 bees and they come pouring out of their nest, each bee will be bent on protecting the colony with their individual stinger. The unfortunate victim will be made painfully aware of the attack from all directions with stings aimed at face, head, and hands like the venomous assault of a many-headed serpent. In ancient mythologies, there were a number of many-headed creatures and some of them were also guardians of treasure: The Ladon Serpent that guarded the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, and the Dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece of Colchis.

Bees in cold regions seek out sheltered rocky places or make their nests in hollow trees, but bees in hotter climates, such as in Asia, do not need to shelter in winter months and are able to survive in the open all year round. They build their rounded combs in tall trees, fixed to the underside of branches. Some trees can support many colonies and, when seen from a distance, they can look as though they have a crop of strange golden fruit.

Fig. 6 *Honeycombs like fruit on a tree (Dangi)*



Could these be the origin of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, of Greek legend? The apples were a wedding present from the Goddess Hera to Zeus, that gifted immortality to mortals who ate them. Some people have speculated that the apples were really oranges or quince, though neither of these suggestions can explain the need for having some ‘monster serpent’ to guard them. These ‘golden apples’ were said to grant immortality, so they should be considered as metaphorical apples. In mythology it was honey-nectar rather than apples that was imbued with the necessary power of longevity, and so it was the food favored by the gods. Therefore rounded honeycombs hanging like fruit from trees make the perfect metaphorical apples. Was Hercules then also like Beowulf, a skilled hunter of honey? It was one of Hercules’ tasks to try to steal the apples, but they were guarded by the never-sleeping multi-headed dragon Ladon, who was fed, rather surprisingly, on honey-cakes.

In the legend of *The Golden Fleece* Jason also had to face a dragon. The fleece was said to come from another riddle creature, a flying ram. In the language of a riddle this ram could have been described as a gold-colored, furry creature with horns that goes daily to the meadows behaving much like a bee. Bees, referring to their pollen gathering, have been likened to grazing animals and, even quite recently, called “lilliputian livestock—fuzzy herbivores with wings” (Buchmann and Nabham 25). The Golden Fleece was to be found hanging on the branches of a tree like the Golden Fruit or like the Asian honeycombs.

Greek geographer Strabo, writing in the first century CE, proposed an explanation that was about gold panning. He reported that in the kingdom of Colchis gold was carried down by the mountain torrents, and that the barbarians obtained it by means of perforated troughs lined with fleeces that filtered out the grains of gold. The fleeces were then hung up to dry and the gold shaken out of them and that this was the origin of the Golden Fleece (xi.II.19).

Wikipedia lists eighteen other suggestions as to what the Golden Fleece may have stood for, but none of them can be made to connect with bees or make sense of the next part of the story where Jason had to sow dragon's teeth that developed into armed warriors. But if the Golden Fleece is taken metaphorically to represent honeycomb, then oblong eggs of a queen bee could represent the dragon's teeth and the warriors growing out of the 'ploughed' ground can be understood as bees' eggs developing into bees and hatching from their wax cells, fully armed with their stingers. The origin of this story might, in this way, be understood in the code of metaphor, as Jason travelling to Colchis originally to learn about the secret aspects of beekeeping lore. All that remains of these ancient tales is nothing more than a few material scraps, and many times altered over centuries of wear. Many of them have become threadbare in the retelling, but perhaps this theory can pull out some precious gold threads from the original weave.

Honey was highly valued not just as a curative medicine and ointment but also as a preservative in preparation for an afterlife. According to L.W. King, the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians made use of honey as a substance for embalming the dead (cited in Ransome 38). Real snakes were of course also the subject of myths and legends and were venerated and imbued with powers of healing and death. Their venom was feared and their ability to shed their skins probably gave rise to attributes of immortality. Many ancient civilizations seem to have worshipped snakes. Images of snakes have been found in the cultures of Ancient Mesopotamia, India, and Egypt. The Greeks also held them in great respect. Snakes do not naturally have a treasure to guard, though, and when it comes trying to make contact, bees definitely have superior communication abilities.

One of the Greek myths tells of Python, a female serpent that lived underground, and was killed by Apollo (Wilson 234). Python lived in a cave and could answer any question put to her by the oracle Sibyl, because it was believed that serpents could see into the future. When she answered a question, a priestess would interpret the hiss that she made and the answer was relayed to the questioner. As the priestess disturbed the snake at each request, hissing would have been the only sound she would have heard. But if the Python serpent was metaphorically a huge swarm, like the bees considered in this study, then 'she' might have responded to the priestess' requests with a number of

different sounds depending on the season and activity. Bees do produce a range of sounds from a contented hum, to a hungry buzzing, to an agitated roar. There is also a strident piping sound, known to beekeepers, that young queens will make as they emerge from their cells. These responding sounds have a much greater range than any snake could make and so might have helped to give the oracle belief that she was getting a considered answer to her questions or a suitably ambiguous answer for her prophesy.

In the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* (700 BCE), Apollo spoke of bee-maidens practicing divination:

There are certain holy ones, sisters born [...] gifted with wings [...] they dwell under a ridge of Parnassus. These are teachers of divination [...]. From their home they fly now here, now there, feeding on honey-comb and bringing all things to pass. And when they are inspired through eating yellow honey, they are willing to speak truth [...] enquire of them strictly and delight your heart. (Hesiod 403-405)

It is possible for expert beekeepers to tell whether a hive contains a queen or not by knocking on the hive and listening to the length of the resulting buzz. There is also a tradition in folklore of telling the bees if there has been a birth or death in a family. In 1978 Bob Burgess of Heytesbury, Wiltshire, UK, whose father had kept bees for many years, related that when his father died, he had to walk around each of the hives to tell the bees that their keeper had died (McGovern). So it seems that talking and listening to bees has had a very long history.

When explorer Paul Salopek witnessed the honey hunting of the Mbuti pygmies of the Congo he described the experience like this:

[T]he quest for wild honey is tireless, constant, almost obsessive. They have honeycomb on the brain. [...] [They will climb] 60 feet up the smooth, fat shaft of the tree to ax a hole in the trunk. [...] Within minutes [...], the combs are lowered like hunks of gold. [...] Tasting rain forest honey for the first time is an unforgettable experience. It goes quickly to the head. Its delicious perfume carries with it the suggestion of a better world. As it seeps directly from the membranes of the mouth into the bloodstream, yielding up its concentrated energy, generously radiating its stored warmth, a single word comes to mind: Yes. (Salopek)

Fig. 7 *Gathering honey, from a prehistoric cave painting (Ransome 21)*



We know from cave paintings that honey was collected in prehistoric times and mead, as an alcoholic drink, was known long before wine from grapes.

Man very early discovered that honey was good for his health, and that a sparkling, fermented drink could be made from it. So it can easily be understood that he came to regard honey as a true “giver of life,” a substance necessary to existence like water and milk. He held the bee to be a creature of special sanctity connected with those things which seemed to him so mysterious—birth, death, and reincarnation. Thus have arisen those folktales and customs relating to bees which are found among so many different peoples. (Ransome 19)

Among the ancients mead was not merely drunk as a wine, [...] but it was also partaken as something which in itself had magical and indeed sacred properties. As a result, it comes about that we find mead, its raw material honey, and even the creature which provides it, the bee, all holding high places in the sacred mythologies of olden times. (Gayre 17)

In Bulgaria, traditional dancers still perform a serpentine Bee Dance Ritual to celebrate their bees. It is interesting that the leader is called The Serpent.

The Bulgarian Bee Dance and Song is sung in the sacred geometric form of a hexagram, formed by six maidens in a front-basket hold. The woman of the home who is customarily the Beekeeper, stands in the middle of the girls with a small pot of water, as they sing and rotate around her. She is called Stopanka (literally ‘The Serpent’). They go from house to house and perform this for every household and beehive in the village. (Jana)

The mythological dragon of Western myth and folklore, and the hoard of gold that has for centuries been locked up in a riddle, can now be examined with fresh eyes. To reach the honey that bees guarded so closely gave early man the very sharpest of problems to solve. Honey's sweet taste produced in man an insatiable desire for this treasure. Research has shown that activation of the sweet receptors on man's tongue produces the strongest surge of dopamine in the brain (Haidt 112). Honey has sweetened his life, cured his ills and made him believe he would live forever.

The riddle of a dragon, with these metaphoric keys,
Can be solved quite uniquely as an angry swarm of bees.

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