

LOOK BACK!

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Over the years Word Ways has displayed a varied logological corpus. In this column I revisit forgotten ideas, connect seemingly-disparate concepts, and suggest further investigations.

In his magisterial book *Dictionary of Riddles* (Routledge, 1990) Mark Bryant defines a *riddle* as “a question or statement intentionally worded in a dark or puzzling manner, and propounded in order that it may be guessed or answered.” Dave Morice’s *The Dictionary of Wordplay* (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2001) says much the same thing, “...a question with its answer described in metaphor, personification, or other forms of wordplay.” Morice notes that a riddle in the form of a pun is known as a *conundrum*, and a riddle in verse, an *enigma*. Riddles date back to the earliest civilizations; Bryant describes Greek, Roman, Sanskrit and Norse examples, as well as ones from the Old Testament and the Talmud.

Riddles have occasionally appeared in *Word Ways*. In the May 1977 issue, Paul Remley presented “Gamenung Mid Wordum”, describing the beginnings of English-language wordplay. The first masterwork of wordplay is a collection of nearly one hundred riddles found in the seventh-century Exeter Book (Codex Exoniensis). Alas, no answers were provided, providing bedevilment for generations of scholars. Remley amusingly describes a reversal riddle:

In fact, one of the riddles bluntly begins “AGOF is min noma eft onhwyrfed” (AGOF is my name turned around again). This riddle, like the others, is narrated by its solution, personified by means of prosopopoeia, a device used elsewhere by the Anglo-Saxons. This device allowed, among other things, a treatise on marital fidelity to be narrated by a hunk of wood. After its AGOF opening, the riddle goes on to define its answer skirtingly in oblique allusions. This seems altogether unnecessary, as the first line makes it clear that the answer is FOGA, the reversal of AGOF. One wishes that the practitioners of Old English word-deviltry would have been so lucid, as the word FOGA does not exist in Old English. However, the puzzle-poser probably knew that in an earlier orthography overworked scribes were wont to write their B in the form of an F. The correct resolution, then, is BOGA (bow). That this riddle may have been told oftentimes to a highly-absorbent crew around a roaring fire surely added to its perplexity. A.J. Wyatt, an early commentator, envisioned the scene much like this:

“My Wyrð, you shoddy *scop*! Man-Wife-Horse [another riddle from the Exeter Book] was bad enough! What excuse can you make for your AGOF ðing?”

“Take it easy, you heathen illiterate!” rejoined the poet, “What we once wrote F we now write B. Got it?”

After several moments of grunting cogitation, a retainer suggests “We put B for F—BOGA. *Huru!* That’s a wicked one!”

Many historical enigmas (versified riddles) can be found in Will Shortz’s “British Word Puzzles” in the Aug-Nov 1973 *Word Ways* and “Early American Word Puzzles” in the Aug 1974 to May 1975 issues. The earliest-known American enigmas appear in Samuel Danforth’s *An Almanack for the Year of Our Lord 1647*, published in Cambridge Massachusetts. The one for July is:

The wooden Birds are now in sight,
Whose voices roar, whose wings are white,
Whose maws are fill'd with hose and shoes,
With wine, cloth, sugar, salt and newes,
When they have eas'd their stomachs here
They cry, farewell until next year

The “wooden birds” were ships bringing yearly supplies to the colonists.

The Feb 1991 issue of Word Ways contains an article entitled “The Letter Conundrum”. The following samples appeared in various books and magazines from the 1850s to the 1920s:

Why is A like a honeysuckle? Because a B (bee) follows it
Why is B like a hot fire? Because it makes oil boil
Why is C like a schoolmaster? Because he forms lasses into classes
Why is D like a squalling child? Because it makes Ma mad

In “More Letter Conundrums” in May 1991, Vernon MacLaren suggested modern counterparts:

Why is A dehumanizing? It makes men mean and the best a beast
Why is B like Miss Manners in Moscow? It makes a Red well bred
Why is C habit-forming for mathematicians? It makes an addiction of addition
Why does D go nowhere? It is a dead end

In Feb 2001, Paul Maxim in “Ten Riddle-Poems” challenged readers to solve ten riddles, offering a prize of ten dollars to the first person solving at least seven. Inexplicably, no one mailed in a solution. His riddles were of two types. One enigmatically described individual alphabet letters:

A muddy river-bottom, and four snakes crawl through it;
Four reeds grow there as well, since five might overdo it,
Both pairs of snakes lie coupling, which binds them close and tight—
So if you're squeamish, quint—those snakes could screw all night!
Two bailing-pots on sticks stand upright in the mud,
As if left over from some prehistoric flood,
While one McDonald's Arch bends double on parade:
Now guess my name, and end this puerile escapade!

The snakes are Ss, the reeds are Is, the bailing pots on sticks are Ps, and the McDonald arch an M, leading to MISSISSIPPI. The second type featured transpositions and transadditions of the answer:

From friendly and sheltering, I become, after some scrambling, ay, a slum
Whose outskirts comprise, from first to last, a substance to shrink from, underpassed.
Some strange Greek M, that mauls a “Y”, inhabits my precincts on the sly,
And gamblers would rather lay a sum than hazard my ignominium.
In Biblical times, I hid Saint Paul, and David addressed me as “my Saul”,
But lately, what tends to make me sick is being described as lunatic.

ASYLUM is found in “ay, a slum”, “lay a sum”, “mauls a ‘Y’” and “my Saul”. The answers to all ten riddles, not previously published in Word Ways, are facetiously, syzygy, catenary, Toronto, asylum, cerement (or recement), Mississippi, scrotum (twice), and asseverations.

I close with my favorite, the (phonetic) charade riddle. According to my diary, I first heard one on Apr 27 1947 when a friend of my father's challenged me with "Mad about money my name might suggest, but good taste about nothing describes me the best." The answer, of course, is dough-nut. Nearly a half-century later, I constructed thirty of these riddles which were published in Mary Hazard's monthly newsletter of the 1990s, The Ag Mine. Here are a dozen:

"Scandal: Montana" this word might suggest, but foul-mouthed invective describes me the best
Cat abuse? dog abuse? my name might suggest, but fleet-footed canine describes me the best
A diamond? a fake! my name might suggest, but symbol of Ireland describes me the best
"Unconscious unconscious" my name seems to say, but it's clear I am neither cloudy nor gray
"This little piggy" my name might suggest, but unproven story describes me the best
Instructions for Brutus my name might suggest, but Jewish philosopher tags me the best
"Girl with bikini" my name might suggest, but Biblical reading describes me the best
"Reagan campaign slogan" I might suggest, but in nuclear orbit I'm never at rest
"Anticipate speeches" this word might suggest, but televised ballplayers show these the best
"Query relations" my name might suggest, but post-midnight carriage describes me the best
"Country of beavers" my name might suggest, but consignment to Sheol describes me the best
"What golfers do first" my name might suggest, but a spot for sitting describes me the best