BRITISH WORD PUZZLES (1700-1800)

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A rebirth of popularity in enigmas and word-play occurred in Europe during the Renaissance period. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, numerous collections of riddles and word puzzles were published, including Demaundes Joyous (1511), A Little Book of Riddles (1540), The Booke of Merry Riddles (prior to 1575, and mentioned in Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor), Wit's Academy (1656), and many others. Men of all walks of life riddled and puzzled during idle hours.

Even by the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, very few types of puzzles were in existence. Most popular were riddles and enigmas, which men had been making and solving since antiquity. Anagramming had come into vogue during the 1600s, and the making of acrostics had been practiced for many years. But besides these elementary puzzle forms, almost no other types were known.

A popular London magazine of the early 1700s, entitled Delights for the Ingenious, or, A Monthly Entertainment for the Curious, contained an extensive puzzle department in each issue. The enigmas and word-games that were printed in the magazine provide us with valuable insights into word-puzzling of the period. Indeed, the February 1711 issue of Delights for the Ingenious presented an article on all of the forms of word-play in vogue at the time.

Most frequently found in the magazine's puzzle department, almost to the exclusion of all other types of puzzles, were the enigmas. William Walsh defines an enigma as "a description, perfectly true in itself, but so ingeniously couched in metaphorical language that the sense is not obvious, so that when put in the form of a question it shall stimulate the curiosity and yet baffle the would-be interpreter" (William S. Walsh, Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities, Philadelphia, J.P. Lippincott Co., 1892, p. 293). The editor of Delights for the Ingenious wrote in one issue, "A well-penn'd Enigma, artfully contriv'd, where-in Truth walks in Masquerade, and where a Delicacy of Thought and Beauty of Expression shines throughout, is one of the most agreeable and delightful entertainments that I know of; and no less pleasant is the Explication, when it falls into the Hands of an ingenious Answerer" (Delights for the Ingenious I, January 1711, p. 25).

An example of an enigma of the period is the following:
"I'm thick, I'm thin, I'm short and long,
And love'd alike by Old and Young;
I make Diseases, and I heal,
And know what I shall ne'er reveal.
The fairest Virgin, fraught with Pride,
No Beauty from my View can hide.
I rack the Miser, cure the Sot,
And make, and oft detect a Plot:
No lover that would happy be,
Desires his Mistress more than me:
Yet tho' a Thousand Charms I have,
Next step from me is to the Grave."

And its explication, also in verse:

"A Bed may be little or great, short or long,
The Strong it makes weak, and the Weak it makes strong;
Opprest with his Load, the Sot there finds Relief,
And the Miser is rackt with the Fears of a Thief:
The Lady's there gentle, and free to her Lover,
And what might it not, cou'd it tell us, discover!
There Plots are oft hatch'd, and as often detected,
And things well contriv'd that are never effected:
There dreaming of Peril and Pleasure we lie,
Are wretched and happy, we are born and we die."
(Delights for the Ingenious I, January 1711, p. 25)

Most enigmas, such as the previous one and the one which follows, rely on the paradoxes in the nature of their subjects to arouse the curiosity of the reader. This enigma is another good example from the early 1700s:

"In young and old I do excite
Painful Sensations, and Delight.
All Men me as their Servant prize;
But when I rule, I tyrannize:
I can be seen, and heard, and smelt,
Yea, more, I'm at a distance felt,
I'm never bought nor sold; but yet,
I am maintain'd with Charges great.
For me, and that is to be drown'd."
(Delights for the Ingenious I, July-August-September 1711, p. 266)

The answer, of course, is "fire".

Most other word-play of the early 1700s was not designed to puzzle the reader, but simply to entertain him. Some of these forms of word-play, however, were later developed into types of puzzles. Examples include acrostics, anagrams, echo verses, and chronosticks. One recreational form known at the beginning of the eighteenth century appears to be the forerunner of the charade. The fact that it appeared...
as early as 1711 is very interesting, in view of what Isaac D'Israeli, an authority on the subject, wrote 170 years later: "The charade is of recent birth, and I cannot discover the origin of this species of logogriphes. It was not known in France so late as in 1771" (Isaac D'Israeli, Curiosities of Literature, Volume I, New York, A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1881, p. 389).

The origin of the term "charade" itself is an enigma. Some people attribute it to the inventor of the puzzle. Others believe that it comes from the Spanish word charrada, meaning "speech of a clown." Still others are convinced that it comes from the Italian word schiarare, meaning "to disentangle" or "to clear up." The word "charade" did not come into usage until the 1770s and 1780s, but the puzzles were known quite a few years earlier. The February 1711 issue of Delights for the Ingenious contained the following "rebus":

"From the Mate of the Cock, Winter-Corn in the Ground,
The Christian Name of my Friend may be found:
John the song of a cat, to the Place Hermit dwell in,
Gives the Sirname of him who does Music excell in."

It was explained as follows: "Here the Mate of a Cock is a Hen: The Winter-Corn is either Wheat or Ry; but because it is to make up a Name, it is the latter that is meant: so the Christian Name is Henry. Then the Song of a Cat is what we call the Pur of a Cat; and the Place a Hermit dwells in is call'd a Cell; so the sirname is Purcell: So that this Rebus is upon the Name of M. HENRY PURCELL, the late famous Master of Music, perhaps the best that ever England bred"

(Delights for the Ingenious I, February 1711, p. 69).

During the 1700s, word puzzles appeared in books, magazines, and almanacs of all kinds. Even the highest-class literary journals printed occasional enigmas, acrostics, and miscellaneous puzzles. Such magazines included Town and Country Magazine, Gentleman's Magazine, the Agreeable Companion, and The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure.

Perhaps the leading magazine which carried recreational verse was the London Magazine, which printed three to eight puzzles per year. The puzzles were evidently quite popular, as many solutions in verse were contributed by readers.

The following successive beheadment, with enigmatic qualities, was written by "Philocrypticus" and printed in the October 1748 number of the London Magazine:

"Not like the diamond and gold,
Which some few happy countries hold,
In ev'ry clime more common I
With stones and sand promiscuous lie:
So chang'd I am, since rais'd from earth,
That strangers could not guess my birth.
My frame is delicate and nice,
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But may be alter'd in a trice.
With gentle usage and fair wearing,
I last for years without repairing.
The sciences I much promote,
And truths discover of great note:
Astronomy and optics too
Would, but for me, have little new. . .
My foremost letter set aside,
Leaves one that longs to be a bride;
And if you can the pretty maid
Her letter first to drop persuade,
You'll find, with pleasure, after all,
A meek and harmless animal."

(London Magazine XVII, October 1748, p. 471)

The solution is "glass-lass-ass".

Acrostics were also popular during the 1700s. Quite often the puzzles were based upon ladies' names, as this acrostic from a 1762 issue of London Magazine illustrates:

"A place of confinement, as dark as the night;
What's us'd as a token when persons unite;
That part of the day, when the sun disappears,
And leaves us surrounded with numerous fears;
What the heart ne'er enjoys when the mind's void of rest;
A word often us'd to deny a request.
These initials, when properly placed, you'll find,
The name of a damsel, that's constant and kind;
With modesty grac'd, and with beauty adorn'd;
With wisdom endued, and to virtue conform'd."

(London Magazine XXXI, November 1762, p. 619)

The five words reading across are "Grave", "Ring", "Evening", "Ease" and "No", and the initial letters, which form the acrostic, spell Miss GREEN.

Rudimentary charades appeared in the London Magazine as early as 1749. For many years the puzzles were based solely on the names of men and women or the names of places. The very crude example which follows was published in November 1750:

"The serum of milk, and where Noah's ark rested
Denotes a fair lady for virtue respected."

(London Magazine XIX, November 1750, p. 520)

The solution was printed in the next month's issue:

"The serum of milk must be -- Whey,
In obedience to God's command
The waters were drained away,
And Noah's ark rested on -- Land."

(London Magazine XIX, December 1750, p. 567)
This charade, printed in the year 1752, is based on the town of Portsmouth:

"To places where ships are safe from a storm
Add that which makes part of your face;
And when these two are together, they'll form
The name of a very brave place."

(London Magazine XXI, February 1752, p. 86)

Along with the magazines and almanacs which printed puzzles, quite a few books were published containing enigmas and riddles, both new and old. A few titles are these: Thesaurus Aenigmaticus; or, A Collection of the most ingenious and diverting Aenigmas or Riddles (1725), The Puzzle; being a choice collection of Conundrums (1745), The Edge Taken Off, or the conundrums and home-clinches of the whetstone unriddled (1745), Youthful Amusements in Verse (1757), and The Young Lady and Gentleman's New Riddle Book (1794), among many others.

As can be seen from the titles above, puzzles were popular with the common folk of England during the eighteenth century. Puzzles were also very popular, however, with the intellectuals of the period. Numerous writers, poets, and statesmen, noted for their more serious works, made and solved enigmas for their own entertainment.

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), author of Gulliver's Travels, was not averse to writing enigmas for amusement. He wrote in his Works that, around 1724, "some ingenious gentlemen, friends to the author, used to entertain themselves with writing riddles, and send them to him and their other acquaintance; copies of which ran about, and some of them were printed, both here (Dublin) and in England. The author, at his leisure hours, fell into the same amusement; although it be said that he thought them of no great merit, entertainment, or use. However, by the advice of some persons, for whom the author hath a great esteem, and who were pleased to send us the copies, we have ventured to print the few following, as we have done two or three before, and which are allowed to be genuine: Because we are informed that several good judges have a taste for such kind of compositions" (Walter Scott, The Works of Jonathan Swift, D.D., Volume XV, Edinburgh, Archibald Constable and Co., 1814, p. 3).

The first enigma, a very clever one, was written by one of Dr. Swift's friends:

"Because I am by nature blind,
I wisely choose to walk behind;
However, to avoid disgrace,
I let no creature see my face.
My words are few, but spoke with sense;
And yet my speaking gives offence:
Or if to whisper I presume
The company will fly the room.
By all the world I am opprest:
And my oppression gives them rest..."
(The Works of Jonathan Swift, D. D., Volume XV, p. 9)

The solution is "the posteriors".

This second enigma was written by Dr. Swift himself, and was originally communicated to Oldisworth, who published it in the Muse's Mercury:

"From India's burning clime I'm brought,
With cooling gales like zephyrs fraught.
Not Iris, when she paints the sky,
Can show more different hues than I;
Nor can she change her form so fast,
I'm now a sail, and now a mast.
I here am red, and there am green,
A beggar there and here a queen.
I sometimes live in house of hair,
And oft in hand of lady fair.
I please the young, I grace the old,
And am at once both hot and cold.
Say what I am then, if you can,
And find the rhyme, and you're the man."
(The Works of Jonathan Swift, D. D., Volume XV, p. 31)

The answer is "a fan", which a lady holds in her muff.

The great English actor, theatrical manager, and poet, David Garrick (1717-1779), was also known to engage in puzzling for entertainment. One enigma of his is particularly interesting, for it revolves around a situation rather than an object:

"Kitty, a fair, but frozen maid,
Kindled a flame I still deplore;
The hood-wink'd boy I call'd in aid,
Much of his near approach afraid,
So fatal to my suit before.

At length, propitious to my pray' r,
The little urchin came;
At once he sought the midway air,
And soon he clear'd, with dextrous care,
The bitter rellicks of my flame.

To Kitty, Fanny now succeeds,
She kindles slow, but lasting fires:
With care my appetite she feeds;
Each day some willing victim bleeds,
To satisfy my strange desires.

Say, by what title, or what name,
Must I this youth address?"
Cupid and he are not the same,  
Tho' both can raise, or quench a flame --  
I'll kiss you, if you guess."  

The enigmatic quality of Garrick's enigma is excellent, for many of the lines of the verse have double meanings. The puzzle makes complete sense when the reader views it as being "written by a lady whose maid had set her chimney on fire".

Horatio Walpole (1717-1797), the English politician and man of letters, is noted for the three enigmas which appear in his works. One was on "A Looking-Glass", and another on "A Sun-Dial". His third enigma is this:

"Before my birth I had a name,  
But soon as born I chang'd the same;  
And when I'm laid within the tomb,  
I shall my father's name assume,  
I change my name three days together,  
Yet live but one in any weather."  

The enigma is answered by "to-day".

The very popular English poet of the eighteenth century, William Cowper (1731-1800), was also fond of word puzzles. In a letter written to the Rev. John Newton in July of 1780, Cowper included the following enigma, which is filled with paradoxical statements:

"I am just two and two,  
I am warm, I am cold,  
And the parent of numbers that cannot be told.  
I am lawful, unlawful -- a duty, a fault,  
I am often sold dear, good for nothing when bought;  
An extraordinary boon, and a matter of course,  
And yielded with pleasure when taken by force."  

The answer is "a kiss".

Numerous other Britshers of note composed word puzzles during the eighteenth century. Thus, puzzles were more than just a juvenile amusement. Puzzling of the 1700s involved more than the riddles and conundrums so popular with young people and common folk. If puzzles were not universally looked upon as an art form, they were at least viewed as an innocuous amusement that was of interest to the intellectual as well as the average man. The 1797 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica wrote of charades, which had become popular only a number of years before, "The exercise of charades, if not
greatly constructive, is at least innocent and amusing. At all events, as it has made its way into every fashionable circle, ... it will be scarcely deemed unworthy of attention".

Evidently, however, the puzzles printed in the 1700s were not always of the highest literary quality, and already they were under attack for being childish. The above article went on to say about the charade, "The silliness indeed of most that have appeared in the papers under this title, are not only destitute of all pleasantry in the stating, but are formed in general of words utterly unfit for the purpose. They have therefore been treated with the contempt they deserved" ("Charade", Encyclopedia Britannica III, 1797, p. 340).