EARLY AMERICAN WORD PUZZLES (PART 2)

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With the close of the Revolutionary War in 1783, both American literature and American puzzledom experienced tremendous growth. Scores of new magazines and newspapers were started, and people began to show more interest in puzzles and all of the arts. One typical new literary periodical was the Boston Magazine, first published in October, 1783. In the opening issue, the editor referred to the United States as "a new country, just emerging from the calamities of war, in the dawn of public literature," a country in which the people, "at a season of greater leisure, might employ their pens upon literary subjects, and afford speculations equally instructive and amusing."

The word puzzles at the end of the eighteenth century were more varied in type than ever before. Two types -- acrostic rebuses and charades -- were actually originated prior to the Revolution, but in this period both enjoyed great popularity. In the acrostic rebus, readers were asked to solve versified clues to get words whose initial letters would spell a final word or name. The May 1784 issue of The Gentleman and Lady's Town and Country Magazine contained a typical acrostic rebus of the period:

"A thing whereon all Princes lie,
And as we all express a sigh,
An Indian weed whose leaf is thin,
A wood by kings esteemed much,
The part of speech when naming such:
The Initials join'd declare
A town where friendly people are."

The first six lines were answered by the words Bed, Oh, Sin, Tobacco, Oak, and Noun, and the initial letters of the words spelled "Boston", the name of the city where the magazine was published.

Charades and charade-type puzzles also became very popular during this period, appearing in such periodicals and newspapers as the Boston Magazine, the New-Jersey Magazine and Monthly Advertiser, the Gentlemen and Ladies' Town and Country Magazine, and the Massachusetts Centinel.

Although charades had been published as early as the 1740s in England, the term "charade" itself did not come into use until there the late 1770s or early 1780s. In America, the first known use of the term...
"charade" was in the Massachusetts Magazine for February 1789. It was also there that for the first time in America the two parts of the keyword were designated "my first" and "my second".

Charades soon started appearing in many magazines and eventually surpassed even the enigmas in popularity. In the New York Magazine; or Literary Repository for March 1790 three charades from the hand of Harriet Cassandra were published. One of them read:

"My first the ear doth oft delight,
With music sweet both morn and night:
My next is very useful found
As good manure for the ground:
Unto my first, my whole's a snare
Which youthful hands oft place with care."

The answer was "birdlime". In style, the poetry of the puzzle was mediocre at best, and the enigmatic element was not greatly developed. Even so, the verse was not much below the rest of the original poetry appearing in American magazines at the time, and it did entertain a great many people.

Other types of word puzzles were new to American readers. One type of puzzle to gain popularity in the United States during the 1790s was the transposition. In this puzzle, clues were given in verse for two or more words, all of which contained the same letters. A clever example appearing in the July 16, 1796 issue of the Weekly Museum, a New York magazine, under the name of "Matilda":

"An insect of the smallest kind
If you transpose, you soon will find
That from all mortals I do quickly fly;
When gone, my loss in vain they'll mourn,
In vain will wish for my return,
Tho' now to kill me, ev'ry art they try."

The puzzle, an original one, was answered by the words "mite" and "time". Early transpositions nearly always involved short words.

Various other word games appeared from time to time in women's and family magazines. One familiar type of puzzle, known as the enigmatical list, was very common in magazines from the 1780s through the first decade of the nineteenth century. Enigmatical lists consisted of names of birds, fruits, vegetables, gems, trees, towns, etc., enigmatically expressed. An enigmatical list on "six beautiful young ladies" of Baltimore appeared in the Baltimore Weekly Magazine for May 17, 1800. It read:

"1st. Three fourths of a swift and timid animal, and three fourths of a hazard.
2nd. The epicure's favorite domestic.
3rd. Two thirds of the first and fairest of women and one half of a reply."
"4th. The front of an army and the center of a candle spelt with the sixth vowel instead of the third.
"5th. Two fifths of twice four, half a small piece of wood, a German river, a letter whose sound makes a helping verb, and one half of a native of a modern empire.
"6th. Three fourths of what is neither present or future, the crown of a cap, and a letter which names the ladies' favorite beverage."

The answers to Nos. 1 and 3-6 were "Harris", "Evans", "Van Wyck", "Eichelberger" and "Pascault". Enigmatical lists were one of the most popular types of puzzles of the period, probably because they were so easy to make and because people enjoyed playing with letters.

Another type of word game that appeared in the 1790s was called Eccentrical Queries. These were questions in quiz form for which the solver had to think of words to answer. One eccentrical query was "What word is that in which all the six vowels are used in grammatical order?" The answer that was given was "abstemiously". Other eccentrical queries were simple illustrated rebus, which gained popularity in the 1800s. One question which asked "What is the signification of Pot ooooooo?" was answered by the word "potatoes" (i.e., pot + eight o's). Another question, asked by "Toby" in the February 13, 1796 Philadelphia Minerva:

"What is the signification of $m$?"

was answered by the word "effeminacy" (i.e., fm in a c). The popularity of word games like these shows the interest there was in playing with words, and shows also that people were looking for new types of puzzles.

The poetry of the word puzzles of the 1780s and 1790s ranged from very poor to excellent. Many puzzlists evidently spent little time on their verse, and the material they turned out was waste from a poetic standpoint. Other puzzlists wrote excellent poetry that compared well with the best in American magazines and newspapers of the period.

The subjects with which puzzles dealt were often ones common in the other popular verse of the period. Acrostic rebus frequently relied on mythological and Biblical references in their clues, a practice common in poetry of the late 1700s. Patriotic verse was also very popular after the Revolutionary War, and word puzzles were frequently based on patriotic names and ideas. A rebus in the November 1783 Boston Magazine was based on the word "America", and another rebus in the Gentlemen and Ladies' Town and Country Magazine for January 1790 was based on the name "John Hancock".

We know that puzzles were quite popular in the United States during the late 1700s for a number of reasons. Exactly how popular they were, however, is impossible to tell. One gauge of the popularity of puzzles is that a number of people were accustomed to publish the word puzzles after a year or so. One good example was indeed a puzzlist's magazine.

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puzzles is the number of people who submitted answers to magazines which printed enigmas, charades and rebuses. Magazines had the practice of withholding solutions of their puzzles to the following issues, and then printing versified answers sent in by readers.

In an age when letter-writing was not so common as it is today, a surprising number of people did send in solutions to puzzles. One puzzle in a 1790 issue of the Massachusetts Magazine was followed by this note from the editors in the next issue: "Solution to the Puzzle in last Magazine by a Dartmouth Sophomore, aged 15, by E. P. H., Lavinia, Cassius and several others, are gratefully acknowledged."

Not only can we measure the popularity of puzzles from the number of people who sent in answers, but we can also measure it by the number of magazines which published puzzles and how long they continued to publish them. Most of the literary and women's magazines did publish puzzles at one time or another. Some discontinued use of them after a year or two, but others such as the Ladies' Weekly Museum published puzzles periodically for a decade or more. Word puzzling was indeed a popular amusement.

We can get a fair idea of the types of persons who made and worked word puzzles from the types of publications in which they appeared. Puzzles were frequently printed in literary magazines such as the New York Magazine; or, Literary Repository, the Massachusetts Magazine, and the Boston Magazine. Puzzles were also found often in women's magazines such as the Ladies' Magazine and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge, published in Philadelphia, and the Ladies' Weekly Museum, published in New York City. General interest or family magazines like the Philadelphia Minerva also printed word puzzles.

There were some types of magazines in which puzzles were almost never found. Religious magazines, periodicals devoted to news, and magazines serving narrow interests generally avoided entertainments of all types, particularly puzzles. Also, magazines and newspapers published outside of the main cultural centers -- Boston, New York, Philadelphia and New Haven -- were less apt to print puzzles; however, a few good puzzles did appear in the New-Hampshire Mercury and General Advertiser during 1788, and even in the Kentucky Gazette during 1789.

Despite the varied types of publications in which puzzles were printed, it can be said that puzzles were far more popular among women than among men. Enigmas were frequently addressed "To the Ladies" and women were often referred to directly in the stanzas. A rebus in the December 16, 1786 Boston Gazette began "I am, dear ladies, your good friend ..." Another puzzle in a March 1786 issue of the New Haven Gazette, and the Connecticut Magazine started with the line "Ladies, attend, while Wonders I rehearse ..."

One of the most interesting puzzles of the whole period was an enigma that appeared in the Philadelphia Minerva for November 26, 1796, titled "Enigma, in Praise of Woman". When the poem was read
straight through, it described women as a worthless burden to men. The trick was to read every other line of the poem to get the real meaning. No one ever wrote a puzzle like this for men:

"Happy that man must pass his life,
If freed from matrimonial chains,
Who is directed by a wise,
Is sure to suffer for his pains.

"What tongue is able to unfold,
The falsehoods that in woman dwell?
The worth in woman you behold,
Is almost imperceptible.

"Adam could find no solid peace,
When Eve was given for a mate,
"Till he beheld a woman's face,
Adam was in a happy state.

"For in the female race appear,
Hypocrisy, deceit, and pride,
Truth -- darling of a heart sincere,
In woman never can reside.

"They're always studying to employ
Their time in malice and in lies,
Their leisure hours in virtuous joy,
To spend ne'er in their thoughts arise.

"Destruction take the man I say,
Who makes a woman his delight,
Who no regard to woman pay,
Keeps reason always in his sight.

The most direct evidence we have of the popularity of puzzles with women comes from a letter a female reader wrote to the Boston Magazine in January of 1784. "Susanna" said, "It is well known that our sex have long been the admirers and framers of enigmas ... No part of the production, believe me, has been more read and applauded. I visit in almost every family in town, genteel and vulgar, and from lady ---- down to Dorothy my maid, every female understanding has been exercised in the discovery of those which you have published."

Despite this apparent popularity of word puzzles, public opinion concerning them was divided, much as it is today. Several readers of magazines and newspapers wrote to editors, asking that the puzzles be discontinued. Four days after the Massachusetts Centinel published an enigma, an angry reader named "Philosophos" wrote in the issue of July 21, 1784 "I hope your paper, which has yet appeared with so much reputation, will not degenerate into riddles, rebus's and conundrums."

That small note, however, was only a jab at word puzzles compared to what "Obi 1783. He was not merely concerned about the moral implications, as the following letter to the Boston Magazine illustrates:

"Many people enjoy word puzzles, but they are often more interested in the challenge they present. A word puzzle may be a simple anagram or a complex crossword, but in either case, it requires the solver to think critically and creatively. The ability to decode a word puzzle is a useful skill in many areas of life, from business to academics."

Yet many people maintain that word puzzles are simply word games, designed to entertain rather than to challenge the mind. As one reader put it, "I don't see how a word puzzle can be considered a 'serious' activity. It's just a way to pass the time."
Many persons evidently looked upon enigmas, charades, and rebus as childish amusements, and that fact is not very surprising. Riddles and word games were indeed popular with children. Even more important, however, was the fact that a large proportion of the word puzzles published for adults were poorly written in rhyme and meter, or lacked good imagery, or did not develop the enigmatic element, or were based on words that were improper for the type of puzzle in which they were used. Sometimes puzzles contained all four of these flaws. It was no wonder that many people looked upon puzzles as junk.

Even so, many excellent puzzles were published, and they had devoted fans everywhere. One puzzle enthusiast wrote an essay for the Massachusetts Magazine in 1789 on "The Antiquity and Dignity of Riddles". Quite a few magazine readers wrote letters to editors saying how much they enjoyed puzzles.

Some puzzlers were clearly defensive in upholding their pastime. One person wrote in a letter adjoining a rebus he was submitting to a magazine, "The Giants of Literature, who can scarcely deign to read anything beneath an Epick Poem, perhaps may sneer (for they are apt to sneer) at a trine of this kind; but the suffrages of the Fair, will, we hope, be more favourable. A rebus will not pretend to immortality, but may amuse for a moment; and if it cannot claim the reward of instruction, neither can it be reproached with the guilt of corruption." A lukewarm support of puzzledom, this was written by "Septimus" and appeared in the May 1789 issue of the Massachusetts Magazine.

"Fenelon" was not so defensive in upholding the art of puzzling in the January 1784 issue of the Boston Magazine, calling the pastime "a necessary relaxation from the fatigue of attending to domestic concerns (and also) an amusement for leisure hours." In the same issue of this journal, "Susanna" called riddling a species of wit as important as alliteration or the other poetic techniques involving letters and sound, all used by the best writers of the period. Still another reader expounded on the mental improvement aspect of word puzzling. In the February 1789 Massachusetts Magazine, "Q.S." declared "I doubt not, in time, that this occult art, ... when its utility, dignity and antiquity is thoroughly investigated, will be introduced in our University in lieu of Logick. Indeed I can bring an author of great estimation, and indubitable acumen, who avers that riddle writing affords the easiest and shortest method of conveying some of its most useful principles." Of even greater importance, though, was the fact that this reader looked upon word puzzling as an art worthy to be studied by
all educated persons.

Perhaps the most significant development in the field of word puzzling between 1780 and 1800 was the publication in the United States of the first known book of puzzles. The title of the book is uncertain, but appears to have been The Little Puzzling-Cap; Being a Choice Collection of Riddles in Familiar Verse, with a Curious Cut to Each. It was published in 1787 in Worcester, Massachusetts by the printer Isaiah Thomas. No copy of the book is known to exist today.

The book was obviously a popular one because new editions of it, under various titles, soon were published in a number of cities in New England. Most editions dropped, added and interchanged a number of puzzles from earlier editions, but they all were essentially the same. The first edition for which copies are extant is the one published in Boston by N. Coverly in 1792. Another edition is believed to have been published in Boston the following year. Two editions were published in Worcester, in 1793 and 1797. Another was printed in New York in 1800, another in Philadelphia in 1805, and another in Hartford in 1806. Still more editions appeared in these and other cities through the 1800s.

Most of the riddles in The Puzzling Cap were based on material objects well known to the people of the day. Subjects such as an oyster, a pair of spectacles, a watering pot, a melon, or a man in a pillory were ones with which the readers could relate. Abstract subjects, like love, hope, time, and death, were not to be found. The puzzles were evidently written and published to appeal to the popular audience.

A person reading The Puzzling Cap today is still likely to find the riddles entertaining. Many were quite cleverly done. The standard enigmatic technique used in the riddles was to describe various aspects of an object in paradoxical ways. The following enigma on "a watering pot" is a good example of the type of puzzle in the book:

"Can you the name of me devise?
My mouth is formed like a bow,
A nose I have, and many eyes,
From whence my tears do often flow;
I seldom weep in winter time,
Although the weather's ne'er so cold;
But when gay Flora's in her prime,
My tears you often may behold."

This appeared in the 1793 Worcester edition of the book. The following three enigmas all are found in the 1792 Boston edition:

"My habitation's in a wood,
And I'm at any one's command;
I often do more harm than good,
If once I get the upper hand.
I never fear a champion's frown,
Stout things I often times have done:
Brave Soldiers I have oft laid down, 
I never fear their sword or gun."

"My strength is powerful & great,
'Tis true, altho' it seemeth strange.
I carry many a thousand weight,
With which I many miles do range.
Whene'er I reach my journey's end
With all my speed I hasten home;
And tho' I often man befriend,
I sometimes also seal his doom."

"May I, ye ladies, now prevail
Upon you to declare my name?
My head is round & so's my tail,
And saith my body is the same.
I oft am bound & beaten too,
And none there are who pity take;
Those who my heavy drubbings view
Are pleased by the noise I make."

The answers for these three riddles were "a barrel of beer," "the tide" and "a drum," respectively.

With so many editions in so many cities, The Puzzling Cap must have reached a wide audience. The number of editions itself speaks for the book's popularity.

PALINDROMIC POETRY

Readers of Word Ways who are interested in palindromic poetry and its ramifications may want to subscribe to Circle, a quarterly journal with a circulation of approximately 200, edited by Mrs. J. M. Gates, P.O. Box 176, Portland, Oregon 97205. Circle is exclusively dedicated to poetry readable, line by line, either forwards or backwards, with a minimum length of eight lines. (H.P.)