

The Ladies' Diary, 18th Century English Almanacs, and One Frustrating Enigma

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In the November 2011 *Word Ways*, Jim Puder points out that the solution I found in the 1783 *Ladies' Diary* for Eliza Hurst's riddle ("an oven") could not be correct—not only did it make no sense in the

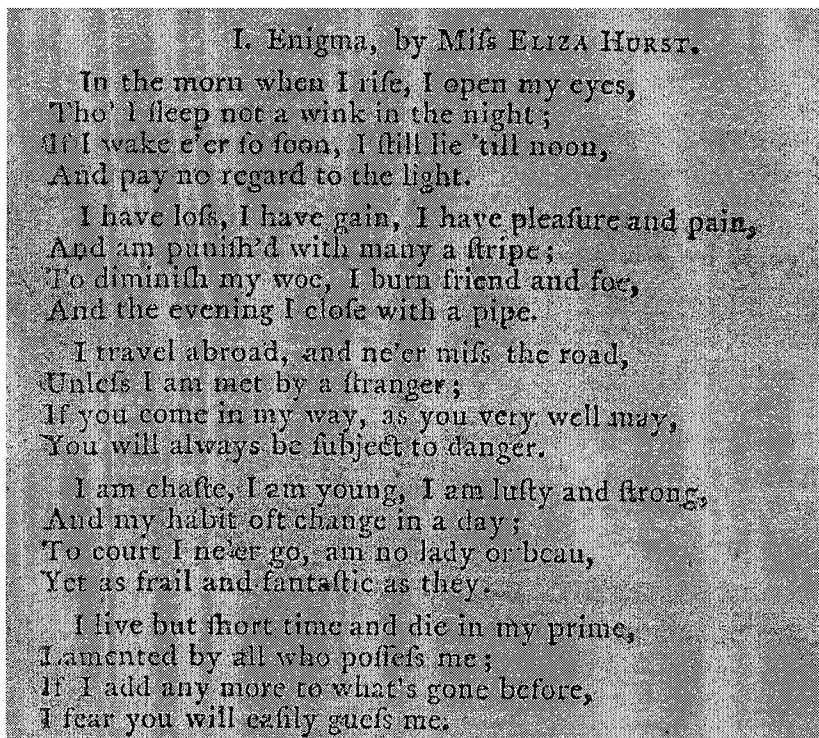


Figure 1: the riddle, from Carnan's 1782 *The Ladies' Diary*

context, but the number of answers given did not correspond to the number of questions asked in the 1782 *Ladies' Diary*. Jim is absolutely correct.

Happily, the correct answer has now been found, but in the process I learned a fair amount about 18th-century British almanacs, some of which strikes me as being worth sharing.

First, to understand why my answer was wrong, you need to realize that there were actually two entirely different almanacs called *The Ladies' Diary* at the time. One was *The Ladies' Diary: or Woman's Almanac* (edited by Charles Hutton), which had been published by the Stationers' Company annually since 1704 (and would continue until 1841). The other was *The Ladies' Diary* (edited by Reuben Burrow), published by Thomas Carnan from 1776 until 1786 (titled *The Ladies' and Gentlemen's Diary* until 1780). The 1782 cover of *The Ladies' Diary* (containing Eliza Hurst's riddle) is shown as Figure 2. The 1783 cover of *The Ladies' Diary: or Woman's Almanac* (containing the erroneous answer "oven") is shown as Figure 3 (the woman pictured, incidentally, is Queen Charlotte). I trust you will all forgive

my assumption that they were two successive editions of the same almanac. This mistake seems to be fairly common—many collections of almanacs from the period seem to have only one or the other of these almanacs for a given year.



Figure 2
The Ladies' Diary
 (published by T. Carnan)



Figure 3
The Ladies' Diary: or Woman's Almanac
 (published by The Stationers' Company)

If you are thinking that Thomas Carnan was just doing a knock-off of an established product, you have hit the nail on the head. (There is actually an interesting, but not at all germane, story: King James I had given the Stationers' an extremely lucrative monopoly on publishing almanacs in return for an annuity to be paid to fund the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. When the Stationers' Company sued Carnan for publishing his own almanacs they lost—the court overturned the Crown's right to grant monopolies for lay publications—resulting in both the emergence of modern copyright law and the public funding of the Universities. Carnan's knock-off almanacs had an impact far greater than one would expect).

Most British almanacs at the time offered astrological forecasts (for example, from *ΕΦΗΜΕΡΙΣ, or a Diary { Astronomical, Astrological, Meteorological } for the Year of our Lord 1760* by John Gadbury, Student in Physic and Astrology: “July: The late *Opposition* of *Saturn* and *Mars* is not wanting in shewing its Effects in dividing the Councils of those Nations and Courts of Princes, where they have Debates and Consults about publick Business and the rather because of the two malefick Planets have lately been in *Square* to the *Sun* from these we shall hear of some violent Actions either by Sea or Land, if not both, and this in the *Low Countries, Flanders, Italy, Sicily, Portugal, or the Frontiers of France.*”)

The Ladies' Diary (either version), on the other hand, reads like nothing so much as an 18th-Century version of Martin Gardner's Mathematical Games columns. It was begun as a women's alternative to *The Gentleman's Diary or the Mathematical Repository* (which claimed to offer “many useful and entertaining Particulars peculiarly adapted to the ingenious Gentlemen engaged in the delightful Study and Practice of the Mathematicks”). From what I can tell—I have been unable to find any of the very early copies—*The Ladies' Diary* began by offering things that the publisher assumed would be more of interest to women—recipes, housekeeping tips, etc., but within a few years had shifted to essentially replicating the format of *The Gentleman's Diary*—offering a number of riddles, puzzles, and mathematical and scientific questions to be answered by the readers. Despite what reads as a very patronizing subtitle to modern readers, “Designed for the *Use and Diversion* of the Fair-Sex,” it does not appear to talk down to its readers at all—it is difficult to discern anything that distinguishes the content suitable for *The Ladies' Diary* from content that would be published in *The Gentlemen's Diary*. I suspect that pretty much everybody who would buy the one would also buy the other. (Many people bought multiple almanacs in a year; some bought every almanac and had them bound together into annual collections.)

The quality of the wordplay of the puzzles is not what we would consider interesting today; for example, from *Ladies Diary* (Stationers' version) 1788, Rebus 2:

One seventh of a dame that we oft times invoke,
With the name of a beast that belongs to the yoke,
Produces a person in Britain well known,
Whose fame stands unrivaled, his enemies own.

This is almost trivial even today when nobody remembers that someone named Charles James Fox was ever a leading politician [solution: one of the seven letters from Fortune, plus “ox”].

The mathematical questions, on the other hand, seem astoundingly complex for a lay readership. From the same issue, Mathematical Question 5: “What must be the length of a pendulum vibrating seconds at the distance of 4 radii from the earth's center?” This was answered the following year as follows:

The lengths of pendulums are as the forces of gravity, and the squares of the times of their vibration. If, therefore, the times be constant, the lengths will be simply as the forces. And as gravity decreases in the inverse ratio of the square of the distances from the earth's center; therefore its force at the distance of 4 radii, will be 1/16 of that at the surface, and consequently the length of the pendulum 1/16 of its length at the surface = 1/16 of 39 1/8 = 2.445 inches, or 2 4/9 nearly.

Granted, this lacks Gardner’s flair, but I could certainly imagine him including a pendulum question in one of his 9 *Questions* columns. (In case the 18th-century language is too unfamiliar, “as the forces” simply means “directly proportional to the forces”).

The enigmas tend to have answers that are what Susan Glass once termed “nounly nouns”—answers like “a saddle” or “a bell” are far more common than more amorphous nouns like “hope” (though all three are answers to riddles from 1787).

What originally followed in this space was a discussion of the answers we had come up with up to now, from which I concluded that Jim Puder had the best answer (“a honeybee”) but that I didn’t think it was the intended answer, largely because I did not believe people who possess them would lament them—honeybees are very valuable, do not attack humans unprovoked, are insignificant as individuals (nobody would notice a single honeybee’s death, let alone lament it).

However: in January, while in a mad panic to get this written and submitted before the deadline for the February *Word Ways*, I noticed a reference in my notes to Kansas University’s Rare Books Library possibly having a copy of Carnan’s 1783 *Diary*. I contacted Elspeth Healey, a librarian at Kansas, who did some research on this and within a few hours located a copy at the University of Illinois Rare Book and Manuscript Library. I contacted them, and heard back the following day from Felipe Castillo, a Graduate Assistant at the Library who responded:

Thank you for contacting the Rare Book & Manuscript Library with your question. We always welcome questions related to our collection. I had a good time reading the riddle and trying to figure out the answer myself.

I’m sorry to say that “honeybee” is the incorrect answer. According to the 1783 edition of *The Ladies Almanac*, “A Candle” is the answer to the riddle.

Needless to say, I am immensely grateful to Elspeth Healey and Felipe Castillo for their assistance (and not a little chagrined to realize that what I couldn’t track down in a year of looking, librarians were able to find in a matter of hours).

The answer “candle” works reasonably well, though there are some parts that I simply cannot make fit:

- I do not understand why a candle “rises” in the morn—very few people woke before dawn in the 18th century, so candles would usually not be used except in the evenings. And the people who did rise before dawn were generally not wealthy, and candles were a luxury item (in Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Mrs Elton tries to persuade Jane Fairfax to go work as a governess for Mrs Bragge: “...she moves in the first circle. Wax-candles in the school-room! You may imagine how desirable!”)
- I do not understand the line “If I wake e’er so soon, I still lie ‘till noon.” The only things I can think of that “waking” a candle could metaphorically refer to are being lit (in which case it would be extinguished long before noon—candles used in the morning would likely be extinguished as soon as dawn was bright enough to see by); or it could refer to the candle’s being taken out of the cupboard and placed into candlesticks for later use (in which case they would

not be lit until well after noon—they would be lit at night). I cannot think of anything at all that would be done with candles at noon.

- I do not know what a candle’s “eyes” are. I have a speculation (and it is no more than that): if the hole in a candlestick was called “the eye,” and if the wax from the previous night was removed by lighting the next day’s candle, melting a little wax and inserting the candle and then withdrawing it, pulling the old wax away, then that could well have been termed “opening the eye.” That would explain why the candle is rising in the morning, why it is opening its eyes, and why it then sleeps again. But it still doesn’t explain why it’s only sleeping until noon. And I have been completely unable to find any reference to “opening the eye” of a candlestick.
- I do not understand why a candle misses the road if it meets a stranger.
- I do not see how the line “to court I ne’er go” can possibly apply to candles. The King was very wealthy and his court would be lit with more candles than would commonly be used. It is literally true that candles do not “go” to court—they are inanimate and so are “brought,” but given that the whole riddle starts by anthropomorphizing candles into the thing that is asking the riddle, that seems an unlikely conceit.

On the other hand, the rest of the verse makes reasonable sense: candles don’t sleep at night (they are lit), they have loss (they shrink), they have gain (you can see at night, a gain for you), they have pleasure (you can do things you enjoy, like read) and pain (if you burn yourself). They are striped (wax drips down the sides), they burn friend and foe alike, and they are used to light tobacco pipes in the evening. They are used when traveling abroad (in carriage lights, for example), and you are subject to danger (of being burned) if you encounter them. They are chaste (in the sense of simple and pure), and young (old candles are used up and gone), the flame is lusty and strong. A candle’s habit (appearance) changes as it is being used—it becomes shorter and drippier. They live a short time, die while they are putting out as much light as they ever did (their prime), and the owners all lament them when they die (because the owners are now in the dark, and because they then need to use a new candle, which is expensive).

I suspect most readers are not happy with this answer—many of the rationales for how a candle fits the riddle are stretches, and the parts that do not fit are many. The entire first stanza reminds me of nothing so much as the old joke:

Q: What is it that hangs on a wall, is green, wet, and whistles?

A: I don’t know

Q: A herring!

A: But a herring doesn’t hang on a wall

Q: Nu, so hang it there

A: But a herring isn’t green

Q: What’s to stop you from painting it green?

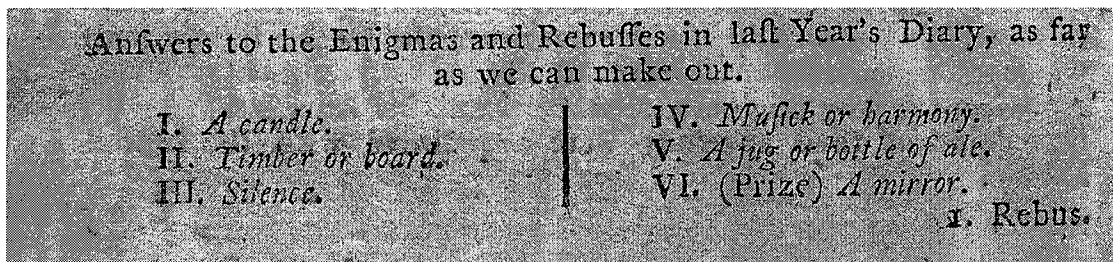
A: But a herring isn’t wet

Q: If you paint it, it will be wet

A: But a herring doesn’t whistle.

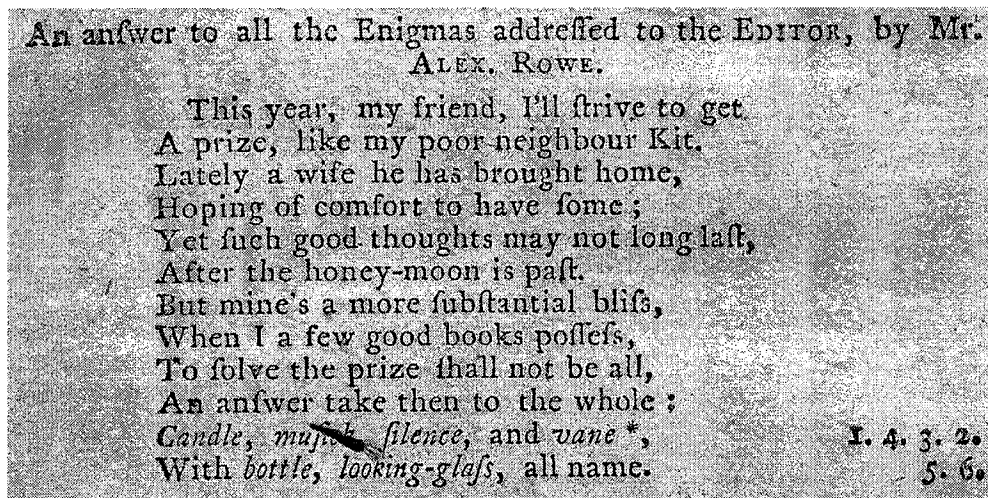
Q: I know. I just put that in to make it harder

It is interesting to note the wording Burrow gives when introducing the answers in 1783:



The “as far as we can make out” comment is not present in 1782, which suggests strongly to me that he does not actually know what the correct answer was supposed to be for at least one of the riddles.

It was usual for readers to send in solutions to either all the enigmas or only the prize enigma in verse, some of which were published along with the answers. In 1783, there are three solutions to multiple riddles published; the first two (“An answer to all the Enigmas (except the first) in an imitation of the 10th Ode of Horace, book the 4th by Mysticus” and “An answer to all the Enigmas (except the 1st) by Mr. William Swift of Stow, near Lincoln”) offer solutions only for riddles two through six. Only the third answer attempts answers for all the riddles:



The word “vane” in the above answer is footnoted (by the publisher, I assume) as “Alluding to timber or board.” The problem is that “vane” doesn’t actually mean that, and never has. The Oxford English Dictionary only shows meanings for “weathercock” (with a figurative and nautical definitions), a 16th-century meaning of a metal plate in the form of a banner with a coat of arms, a sail of a windmill (or anything else that makes a wheel turn), a fan, a surveying instrument, and the web of a feather. There is simply no meaning having anything at all to do with “timber” or “board.”

Why would Burrow publish these three flawed answers? I think the answer is clear—they were the best he received. Had he received better, he would have published the better ones. He did not save off the answers to the riddles when he published them (or perhaps it was not customary to submit solutions with riddles), and he was stuck with a riddle that only one person actually managed a credible answer for. But that person got one of the other answers wrong; to avoid having to admit that his circulation

was small enough that not a single reader was actually able to manage a complete (not something that would have happened with the long-established Stationers' Company's *Ladies' Diary*), he glossed the wrong answer as having been a poetic allusion to the correct answer.

So "a candle" is the correct answer, in that it is the answer that Burrow published; but it could well be that he only took it to be the correct answer because it is the answer Alex Rowe submitted—had Rowe submitted "honeybee," that might well have been published as correct. I do not think we can be certain what Miss Eliza Hurst intended the answer to be—if she ever told Burrow, I think he forgot it by 1783.

That said, "a candle" seems to me to be more likely the intended answer than "a honeybee," even though it requires ignoring an entire stanza. The *feel* of the riddle seems more consonant with candles than honeybees to me, but I will be the first to admit that that is a highly subjective measure.

I find it amusing to consider that someone in the late 1820s must have come across an old copy of the Carnan 1782 *Ladies' Diary* and found Eliza Hurst's riddle extremely frustrating. Being unable to locate a 1783 *Diary* to learn the solution, she wrote to a publication read by like-minded people (*The Drawing Room Scrap Sheet*) and had the riddle published under the heading "For Which a Solution is Required." Some 150 years later, Faith Eckler came across this riddle in *The Drawing Room Scrap Sheet* and found it extremely frustrating. Being unable to locate a solution, she wrote to a publication read by like-minded people (*Word Ways*) and had it published under the heading "Kickshaws."

Perhaps in 2150, some unfortunate woman will come across a copy of *Word Ways* containing this riddle, get very frustrated with herself for not being able to solve it, and write to some publication of the future which will be read by like-minded people...

Well, Faith, that was easy. Ask us another.

