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ENGIMAS AND RIDDLES IN LITERATURE

How do enigmas and riddles work in literature? This benchmark study investigates the literary trope of the riddle, and its relation to the broader term “enigma,” including enigma as large masterplot. Cook argues for a revival of the old figure of speech known as “enigma” from Aristotle to the seventeenth century by demonstrating its usefulness. The opening chapter surveys “enigma personified” as sphinx and griffin, resuscitating a lost Graeco-Latin pun on “griffin” used by Lewis Carroll. The history and functions of enigma draw on classical and biblical through to modern writing. Wide-ranging examples concentrate on literature in English, especially modern poetry, with three detailed case studies on Dante, Lewis Carroll, and Wallace Stevens. An important contribution to studies of poetic thought and metaphor, this anatomy of the riddle will appeal particularly to readers and scholars of poetry, modern American and comparative literatures, rhetoric, and folk-riddles.

ELEANOR COOK is Professor Emerita, Department of English, University of Toronto. She writes mainly on poetry and poetics, especially modern, as well as on questions of allusion, the English Bible and literature, and the riddle. Her books include studies of Robert Browning and Wallace Stevens, as well as a collection of essays, *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play* (1998). Her essays have appeared in many books and journals, including *American Literature*, *Daedalus*, *ELH*, *Essays in Criticism*, and *Philosophy and Literature*. She has served as President of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, and is a Guggenheim Fellow, a Senior Killam Research Fellow (Canada Council), and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

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[More information](#)

*For Jay and Peggy
riddle-masters both
and for Graeme
who knows the mysteries of birds*

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvi
<i>A note on the references</i>	xviii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xix
Introduction	I
1 Enigma personified: the riddling beasts, sphinx and griffin	7
2 Enigma as trope: history, function, fortunes	27
3 What is the shape of the riddle? Enigma as masterplot	64
4 Case study I. Enigma in Dante's Eden (<i>Purgatorio</i> 27–33)	92
5 Questions of riddle and genre	110
6 Riddle as Scheme: a case for a new griph-class	139
7 Case study II. Mapping riddles: Lewis Carroll and the Alice books	160
8 Figures for enigma	181
9 Case study III. The structure of reality: enigma in Wallace Stevens's later work	210
10 From protection to innocent amusement: some other functions of enigma	226

Cambridge University Press
0521855101 - Enigmas and Riddles in Literature
Eleanor Cook
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii

Contents

Afterword: enigma, the boundary figure	244
<i>Appendix: Enigma, riddle, and friends among the lexicographers</i>	257
<i>Select bibliography</i>	266
<i>Index</i>	287

Illustrations

- | | | |
|----|--|----------------|
| 1. | “Oedipe et le sphinx” (Vatican, Museo Gregoriano), from <i>Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines</i> (1877). Courtesy of the Robarts Library, University of Toronto | <i>page</i> 10 |
| 2. | Frontispiece from Athanasius Kircher, <i>Oedipus Aegyptiacus</i> (Rome, 1652). By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University | 11 |
| 3. | Gold-guarding golden griffins, Toronto heritage building, 320 Bay Street, originally built for the Canada Permanent Trust, 1928–30. Photograph by Markham Cook | 21 |
| 4. | Title-page, Claude-François Ménéstrier, <i>La Philosophie des images énigmatiques</i> (1694). Courtesy of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto | 133 |
| 5. | Lewis Carroll’s drawing of the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle, <i>Alice’s Adventures under Ground</i> (London, 1886). Courtesy of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library (Brabant Carroll Collection), University of Toronto | 164 |
| 6. | John Tenniel’s drawing of the sleeping Gryphon, Lewis Carroll, <i>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland</i> . Courtesy of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library (Brabant Carroll Collection), University of Toronto | 165 |
| 7. | Labyrinth design, Lucca, from John Ruskin, <i>Works</i> , vol. XXVII, p. 401. Courtesy of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto | 194 |

Cambridge University Press
0521855101 - Enigmas and Riddles in Literature
Eleanor Cook
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

x	<i>List of illustrations</i>	
8.	Pilgrim in a labyrinth, from Herman Hugo, <i>Pia Desideria</i> (1632 edn.), p. 148. Courtesy of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto	197
9.	Frontispiece titled “The Solution of a Riddle” from Peter Puzzlewell, <i>A Choice Collection of Riddles, Charades, Rebusses, &c.</i> (London, 1792). By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University	237

Preface

This book grew out of general curiosity about the words “riddle” and “enigma.” (The specific impetus is another story, to be found in the Introduction.) How do “riddle” and “enigma” function, especially in good writing? Sometimes they are used of a specific, circumscribed problem whose answer has clear implications. Sometimes they are used of a generally puzzling situation, with no clear implications for a possible answer, though this is unusual. Sometimes the word “enigma” (less often “riddle”) is used of the mystery of great art or of religious mystery, which in turn evokes wonder. Enigma in St. Paul’s famous text “For now we see through a glass, darkly” presents a special case. (“Darkly” translates Greek *en ainigmati*, “in an enigma.”) Mostly, the words “riddle” and “enigma” pass by unexamined, as if we all knew quite well what they mean.

“Riddle” in the popular sense is simply a joke that turns on some incongruity, a throwaway gag. Riddles and enigmas in imaginative writing are much more interesting. Even a small conundrum can have a role to play. A large enigma may seem worlds away, and, in one sense, it is. Riddles do tend to be either very small in duration and apparent use or else very large – sometimes so large as to constitute everything, the enigma of the universe. When and how are little conundrums and large enigmas linked? One answer lies in the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx. There are countless examples of riddles and enigmas in many different contexts: Old English riddles and riddle poems, imitated to this day. Riddles that start off an adventure story, as in *Greenmantle*. Riddles that govern the structure of a work, as in *Pericles*. Riddling styles like James Joyce’s, and so on. Yet literary scholars and critics seem oddly incurious about how the words “riddle” and “enigma” work.

Literary studies of the riddle are few and far between. There are studies of the remarkable Old English riddles. There are studies of riddles in specific authors: Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Joyce, Pynchon. It is

possible to explicate small riddles within writers like Hopkins, and to connect such riddles with the over-arching enigma of all human life from Hopkins's perspective. This leads to studies of individual authors, but it does not advance our general knowledge of enigma and riddle, even if it is illuminating for specific instances. General and pertinent remarks about the workings of riddle, or about the words "riddle" and "enigma," remain scarce.

By contrast, folklorists have been studying riddles for well over a century, while anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, and psychologists also find them interesting. The lack of literary studies is all the more surprising because the riddle is an ancient literary form, whether generically as a riddle-poem or rhetorically as a figure of speech. There are fine entries on the riddle in learned studies by eminent Renaissance and seventeenth-century scholars like Joachim Camerarius and Gerardus Joannes Vossius. The collectors of riddles over the centuries have passed on accumulated knowledge about them. The Greeks delighted in them, whether as a focal point for tragedy (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*) or as dinner-party amusement (Athenaeus, *The Learned Banquet*). Today, we have excellent introductory books to riddles in general, such as Mark Bryant's *Dictionary of Riddles* (1990), or, casting a wider net, Tony Augarde's *Oxford Guide to Word-Games* (1984). But very few literary scholars and critics have taken up questions of riddle and enigma in general, though these do include writers of the stature of Northrop Frye, Dan Pagis, and Richard Wilbur. The theorists Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov have also thought about these questions, though only in passing.

This book will try to remedy such a lack.

How might a literary scholar and critic as distinct from a folklorist or anthropologist speak about riddle and enigma, both generally and in specific works? How might we think of them chiefly in relation to an imaginative context rather than a social context? How might we account for riddles that go on generating meaning, even after they are solved? What light could a literary study shed on riddles that are embedded within a larger work, including familiar mimetic writing? What could it tell us about Jane Austen's riddles in *Emma* – say, the riddle that Mr. Woodhouse cannot fully remember? Are riddles themselves ever poetry? Not very often. Yet Frye found the kernel of one type of poetry in ancient riddles, and folklorists interest themselves in the affinities of poetry and riddles. Once we read by means of some literary focal points, it becomes clearer why some riddles remain fascinating, while

Preface

xiii

others cause groans. Work on some key writers has suggested several such focal points, on which see the Introduction.

Throughout, I have treated the words “enigma” and “riddle” as virtual synonyms. So they are in English, on the whole – not quite identical twins, but close enough to be called fraternal twins. The Appendix briefly traces kinds and degrees of meaning in dictionaries over the years. Elsewhere, use of one word more than the other is governed by context. Thus the word “enigma” is prevalent in chapter 2 on enigma as figure of speech, while “riddle” dominates the discussion of genre in chapter 5.

I have not concentrated on any one historical period, though many examples come from modern and contemporary work, especially poetry. Most examples are in English. This book is meant to speak to readers at large, and also to teachers and students of all historical periods. My own interest is rhetorical, because I think rhetorical knowledge is the *sine qua non* for reading literature. But I have occasionally suggested some questions that historicist or cultural critics might find interesting. Teachers of rhetoric might find chapter 2 helpful for introducing students to a little rhetorical history. I have included some classical material, introduced with a little trepidation and much admiration. Classicists might at the least enjoy one Graeco-Roman pun I have re-discovered, a pun that Lewis Carroll made use of in *Alice in Wonderland*. The book is indebted to work done by folklorists, and I hope they too find some matters of interest here.

In one sense, this book opens a new area, offering a rhetorical basis for thinking about enigma and riddle in different contexts. It offers re-readings of specific uses of enigma and riddle in a number of writers. It could provide the basis for a course in riddle and enigma, variously shaped. Its widest objective is to encourage more thought about our use of the words “riddle and “enigma.” How we resolve the riddles of our lives, our history, and our planet depends partly on how we conceive of “riddle” and “enigma” in the first place. We all look at ourselves and our world as an enigma, to some degree. The world presents itself as a riddle. “Here is what I am like,” it says to us. “What am I?” Willy-nilly, we choose an answer to this riddle. Perhaps we wrestle with it, perhaps we divide it into manageable portions, perhaps we let others decide for us. Good writers help.

The book has also been a pleasure to write. It has drawn me into the largest and the smallest questions. It has lit up some of the best writing available. I hope others find some enjoyment in it too.

I am happy to acknowledge the invaluable gift of time provided by a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and a Killam Research Fellowship from the Killam Foundation (Canada Council). The Connaught Committee of the University of Toronto put at my disposal a research fund, given in connection with an honorary Connaught Fellowship.

This work could not have been done without the fine collections and staff of many libraries, especially the Beinecke and Sterling Libraries, Yale University; the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; the British Library; the Houghton and Widener Libraries, Harvard University; the Huntington Library; the National Library of Scotland; and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book and Robarts Libraries, as well as the library of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, University of Toronto.

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0521855101 - Enigmas and Riddles in Literature
Eleanor Cook
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xv

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Eleanor Cook
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Acknowledgments

xvii

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A note on the references

Works on riddle and enigma in the Select Bibliography are chosen for their general usefulness, whether large or small. In the text and footnotes, such works are referred to in short-title form. Works not generally pertinent for riddle and enigma appear in the footnotes in full and are indexed under the author's name. The Select Bibliography also includes editions of literary works cited. Collections simply listed by title are not included; most appear in chapter 10.

Abbreviations

AV	Authorized (King James) Version of the English Bible (1611). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the English Bible are from this translation.
Lewis and Short	<i>A Latin Dictionary</i> , comp. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879).
Liddell and Scott	<i>A Greek–English Lexicon</i> , comp. Henry George Liddell and Robert T. Scott, new edn., ed. Henry Stuart Jones, suppl. 1968 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940).
NPEPP	<i>The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics</i> , ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
OCD	<i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> , 3rd edn., ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
OED	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i> , 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).
Vulgate	<i>Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementiam</i> , 6th edn. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1982). (Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Latin Bible are from this edition.)