Introduction

My own specific interest in riddles began some twenty years ago, thanks to Wallace Stevens, St. Augustine, and Northrop Frye in that order. Wallace Stevens because of his riddling language, his occasional riddle poem proper like "Solitaire under the Oaks," and his late work with the word "enigma." Once I began to unknot some of Stevens's riddling effects, I became absorbed in both his specific wit and wisdom, and the literary forms he worked with so expertly. Augustine, because I first learned from him that *aenigma* was known as a figure of speech, a trope. He works out the implications in a masterly discussion of St. Paul's text "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then, face to face." Augustine also, because he made me think about enigma in its widest scope – the enigma of life, history, the earth, the universe, or what I have called "enigma as masterplot." Frye, because his essay "Charms and Riddles" helped at the start more than any other criticism. It traces traditions of both riddle poetry and charm poetry, outlining their ways of behavior. In Stevens, Augustine, and Frye, small riddles can also embody or point toward the largest enigmas of all. In the poets, whose business is with tropes, enigmas both small and large can be crucial. Thus from Sophocles down through Dante to Dickinson and Stevens.

In a 1983 essay on Stevens, I traced some of his riddling effects, linking them with an over-arching sense of riddle in his work. Only later did I find the word "masterplot" in Terence Cave's *Recognitions* and realize that this term described the area in which I was working. Stevens's wonderful sense of humor also began to come clearer, as I unearthed some of the buried puns and jokes and ripostes in his work. I began to ask myself what really qualified as a riddle poem or a riddle within a poem. This in turn led to questions of genre, for example, the difference between a riddle proper and riddling effects. Chapter 5 offers some suggestions about the practical application of this difference. As for a riddle within a poem,

I simply thought of it in those terms until I read Augustine. Chapter 2 is, in part, the story of Augustine the great teacher of rhetoric, and how useful he can be to this day.

This book suggests that we reinstate the figure of speech known for centuries as *aenigma*. It also suggests that literary critics and scholars and theorists stop being so sloppy in our use of the words "riddle" and "enigma." The word "riddling" would cover some effects, while more general terms should be found for other ones. One further suggestion stems from a nineteenth-century French writer: that we re-introduce the obsolete word "griph" to cover some comic riddle effects that take the form of schemes.

For those who are not literary specialists, some working definitions of "scheme" and "trope" follow. (For Renaissance and earlier specialists, I should note that I am using the term "figures of speech" in a modern sense, as including schemes and tropes.) Schemes are those figures of speech that devise surface patternings for words. This is the oldest meaning for "scheme" in the Oxford English Dictionary; it survives today in general use in the phrase, "rhyme scheme." Beyond rhymes, schemes include alliteration, chiasmus (an a–b–b–a pattern), and so on. Schemes do not overtly change the ordinary meaning of words. Rhyming "moon" and "June" does not change their meaning, at least in the first instance. (It might do so in context. And it does say other things. It says: this is a dim-witted writer or a satiric writer or possibly a courageous writer.) Tropes form a different class. They are figures of speech in which ordinary meaning is overtly changed or turned.[1] (Not that ordinary meaning is all that ordinary either, but the definitions hold nonetheless.) Metaphor was sometimes a synonym for the entire class of tropes, and it remains easily the best-known and most crucial trope, though we need to watch its definition. Synecdoche and metonymy also belong to this class. "All hands on deck" changes the ordinary meaning of the word "hands," unless some spooky or loony effect is wanted. We routinely accept that saying because the synecdoche is so familiar. Poems by definition work with schemes, but tropes are the *sine qua non* of poetry. Greeting-card verses use schemes too, but they are rarely poems. On the other hand, a good writer can turn even the slightest scheme into poetic gold.

This book might be thought of as one of those single-word studies like Terence Cave's 1990 study of the word "recognition" or Leo Spitzer's

1 The Greek etymon for "trope" means "turn."

earlier study of the word *Stimmung* (harmony).[2] As such, it belongs broadly in the history of ideas. More precisely, it belongs in what John T. Irwin calls that "branch of the history of ideas best designated as the history of the critique of figuration" (*The Mystery to a Solution*, p. xvii). Or, as I myself would call it, rhetorical criticism – rhetorical more in the Aristotelian analytical sense than the Ciceronian instrumental sense. "Rhetoric" once had a much wider meaning than our usual meaning nowadays. It was one of three basic subjects taught in advanced schooling, the other two being grammar (also with a wider meaning) and logic or dialectic. We cannot bring back the schools of Shakespeare's day, with their rigorous training in verbal use, a training that reads more like an undergraduate curriculum today. But of late, students have become increasingly interested again in what has always interested readers at large: how writing works, that is, rhetoric.[3] Rhetoric, as defined by Gerard Manley Hopkins, consists of "all the common and teachable element in literature." Just so. For him, rhetoric is to poetry (or imaginative literature) as grammar is to speech:

> [The] rhetoric [about poetry] is inadequate – seldom firstrate, mostly only just sufficient, sometimes even below par. By rhetoric I mean all the common and teachable element in literature, what grammar is to speech, what thoroughbass is to music, what theatrical experience gives to playwrights.[4]

Wallace Stevens once wrote that "hypotheses relating to poetry, although they may appear to be very distant illuminations, could be the fires of fate, if rhetoric ever meant anything" (*The Necessary Angel*, p. 81). That ought to be enough to hearten rhetorical critics, even nowdays.

The first chapter provides an entryway by means of two legendary creatures, one obviously associated with riddle, the other much less obviously. The first is the Grecian Sphinx, and the second is the Griffin or Gryphon, best known from *Alice in Wonderland*. Both are familiar in

2 Leo Spitzer, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word "Stimmung"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963); see also, e.g., William Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951).

3 This is, in fact, what Jonathan Culler has recently advanced as a new focus for English studies. In effect, he is reclaiming something of the age-old experience of teaching advanced rhetoric. See his "Imagining the Coherence of the English Major," *Profession* (Modern Language Association, 2003), 85–93.

4 Hopkins in 1886, quoted by Christopher Ricks, *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 311.

sculpted forms, now chiefly decorative rather than symbolic. But their history in its riddling aspect is lively. This chapter offers a short survey of these riddling beasts, including a Graeco-Latin pun on "griffin" that Lewis Carroll introduced *sotto voce* into his great book.

The second chapter looks at the history of enigma as a figure of speech, and develops an argument for its reinstatement. Years ago, Augustine's passing remark that *aenigma* is a trope leapt off the page for me. He took for granted that this was common knowledge, and so it is for historians of rhetoric, but I had never heard of it. When I began to investigate, enigma as a trope proved to be a constant in the rhetoricians. It goes back to Aristotle and comes over into Latin with Cicero and Quintilian and others. Most important, it appears in Donatus, the great grammarian and rhetorician whom Dante places in the Circle of the Wise in heaven. Donatus wrote what would become the standard Latin school-text for centuries, in the days when Latin was the *lingua franca* of Europe and taught to all schoolboys and a few schoolgirls too. The trope of *aenigma* was part of their training. Chapter 2 traces the history and functions of this trope from its Greek beginnings through its Latin life into English and down to the seventeenth century, when this use of "enigma" died out.

Such a history helps provide a working definition of the trope of enigma. It also offers questions, cautions, and appreciation of this figure of speech. Many remain constant to this day. What is at stake when we use "enigma" – or indeed, use any figure of "similitude" – is laid out with exemplary clarity in Augustine's work. Why did this trope finally die out? The answer belongs to a larger history of the fortunes of figures of speech. The nub of this chapter's argument comes at the end, in a discussion of *similitudo* ("likeness" or simply "as") and why this matters so much in all uses of language.

The third chapter offers a proposed taxonomy of enigma as masterplot, a taxonomy expanded from my 1983 outline. There, I was working with three basic riddle plots; I now think that five masterplots make better sense. This is to work at the large end of the scale of enigma and riddle. Not riddle as a small puzzling conundrum or even a famous uncanny enigma, but as the riddle of everything. Stevens, Augustine, and Frye led very naturally to thinking about possible typic shapes of the enigma or riddle, and eventually of an anatomy. So it was that I became interested in mapping kinds of enigma, where it is considered as masterplot or an end-directed plot. I am mindful of the fact that all taxonomies are interpretive, that they are "theories of order, not simple records," to quote Stephen Jay Gould. I am also mindful of the hazards of synchronic argument.

Chapters 4, 7, and 9 offer case-studies on the work of Dante, Lewis Carroll, and Wallace Stevens respectively. These short studies necessarily focus on limited aspects of these writers: one passage (Dante) or one aspect (Carroll) or one time in a writer's work (Stevens). The case-studies are meant to show in practice how useful rhetorical criticism can be. Recognizing kinds of riddle and enigma can help to open out what a writer is doing, widening and deepening our sense of possible riches in a work.

We routinely classify writing in genres, sometimes quite unaware that we are doing so. Nobody (we hope) reads *Alice in Wonderland* as realistic fiction. What kind of genre is the riddle? Chapter 5 centers on this and related questions. Critics like André Jolles and Frye and Alastair Fowler argue that it is a genre, but they differ about how it behaves. What can we say of the single riddle as genre? How does the riddle behave within a larger work? In this chapter, I argue that riddles may usefully be thought about as generic and sub-generic types. It also helps a great deal to note when riddles are functioning as modes rather than genres. Otherwise, far too much is dubbed a "riddle," more for fancy effect than accuracy. Other matters are mentioned more briefly: relations with other genres, hierarchies of genre. Some suggestions for modern genre studies end the chapter.

Chapter 6 presents an argument about literary schemes, as distinct from tropes. It begins with the vexed and fascinating history of lesser forms of enigma and riddle like "charade" and "rebus" and "logogriph." It then suggests that many of these forms now be classified as griph-type schematic riddles. Riddles that turn on living metaphors continue to absorb us, even after we have answered them. Thus the ongoing life of the Sphinx's riddle: "What walks on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?" A riddle shaped into the verbal artefact that we call art becomes an enigma, for the good reason that it uses the trope of enigma well. But literary works can also enjoy the fun and games of riddle-schemes. Readers appreciate them. So might literary critics, who are all too often solemn creatures, hardly knowing what to do with *jeux d'esprit*.

There are a number of standard figures for the riddle, such as knots or labyrinths, and they often indicate what kind of riddle is in play. Chapter 8 looks at common tropes for riddle and enigma. Not the workings of enigma as a trope, but specific figures of speech for riddles and enigmas themselves. Such figures can point toward the type of solution or the assumptions within a riddle. The words for solving riddles are just as

interesting in their figurative implications, for, as Irwin puts it, there may be *The Mystery to a Solution*. The chapter includes an overview of an object and a trope closely associated with enigma, the mirror, especially in the phrase, "through a glass, darkly." It ends by looking at the crucial trope of inside and outside.

While this book concentrates on the literary workings of riddle and enigma, chapter 10 glances at some other functions of riddles. Ancient riddles like ancient charms were used as practical magic, and no doubt still are. Riddling was also once a diplomatic language, and political riddles are a constant. Riddles have been associated with dreams since the time of Joseph, and North American natives have an old and rich dream-lore that includes riddles. Riddles also flourish in social contexts. This chapter also looks briefly at collections and collectors: the best-known collections, who collected riddles, what aims the collectors had (or said they had), and so on. A full study could be made of riddle collections as popular art, and even so, the collections would have to be limited by language or country or date or more. Imaginative literature allows for representation of all these possible functions of the riddle.

This is a literary study, so that it concentrates on a literary reading of riddle and enigma, chiefly on figuration and on fictive constructs. But of course, writing speaks to actual life, as actual life speaks to writing. The Afterword looks at the behavior of riddle and enigma at large. It looks at riddle or enigma, the boundary figure, as embodied in enigma as trope and masterplot and elsewhere, and as hovering over the crucial crossing-places of our lives.

CHAPTER I

Enigma personified: the riddling beasts, sphinx and griffin

"What Do You Want To Be Inscrutable *For*, Marcia?"
(James Thurber[1])

Sphinxes and griffins are riddling in the general sense of mysterious and odd, perhaps menacing. They belong to a legendary world, and their hybrid forms, like those of sirens, chimaeras, harpies, centaurs, and other fabulous beasts, have intrigued humankind for centuries. (They intrigued Borges enough that he compiled an introductory dictionary of them, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*.) A primitive Egyptian griffin from about 3000 BCE is shown in Heinz Demisch's fine study, *Die Sphinx*.[2] The Egyptian sphinxes, those huge wonders of the ancient and modern world shaped with the body of a lion and the head of a man or god, date back to 2600 BCE. Various early forms of sphinxes (human head and animal body, usually a lion) and griffins (bird head, usually an eagle, and animal body) go back to the fifteenth to thirteenth centuries BCE. One elegant fourteenth-century sphinx comes from Megiddo in present-day Israel. Ancient sphinxes and griffins sometimes appear together, and sometimes appear flanking a tree of life – an unexpected conjunction. Yet it is logical enough, by way of contraries, for both beasts are sculpted on ancient Greek and Roman gravestones and sarcophagi.

In her classic Grecian form, the sphinx is tripartite, so that Ausonius claims her as one example in his *Griphus ternarii numeri* (Riddle of the Number Three, ll. 38–40). She possesses the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of a bird. Sometimes she is called double-natured, as in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, but this refers to her combination of human and animal natures. The griffin, as he evolved in Grecian art,

1 *Men, Women, and Dogs*, in Thurber, *The Thurber Carnival*, p. 351.
2 Demisch, *Die Sphinx*, plate 5, pp. 16–39 ("Die ägyptische Sphinx"), plates 107–12, plate 112, and plates 107, 110, 198–9, 204 (tree of life motif).

became defined as a creature with the foreparts of an eagle and the hindparts of a lion. The Grecian sphinx is virtually always a "she." Some examples of sphinxes with bearded male heads are known from the archaic period (OCD, "sphinx"), but they appear to have had no influence on the tradition. The griffin in literature is male. Both are fierce creatures, just what you want to guard the bones of your cherished dead. Both have other iconographic functions beyond tomb-guarding. Both have survived continuously for centuries in sculpted, carved, painted, and other forms, sometimes only as decorative motifs, sometimes as more. Both are associated with riddles, the Grecian sphinx famously and the griffin in its very name, though this piece of lore depends on a Graeco-Latin pun that was last heard in English by Lewis Carroll, as far as I know.

THE SPHINX

The sphinx as riddling beast is the Grecian sphinx and not the Egyptian, though possibly the Grecian sphinx began in Egypt. Or it may have been adapted from Mesopotamia, the other source of sphinxes dating back to the mid-third millennium BCE (OCD, "sphinx"). The Grecian sphinx, as it developed, came to differ markedly from the Egyptian sphinx in form and in function. Ancient sculpted Grecian sphinxes guarding tombs appear to be protective of the dead, and probably apotropaic in warding off evil. The Egyptian sphinx is also protective, but its scope is wider. It is known as "guardian of the gates of the Underworld on the eastern and western horizons" (Edwards, *The Pyramids of Egypt*, p. 140). As such, it points toward the mystery of death and presumably the hope of an afterlife. It is indeed enigmatic in a general way, especially to us who are so far from its original world.

But the great Egyptian sphinx does not enter into riddle stories. If riddles are associated with it, this is a later Greek addition. Plutarch knew the tradition: "They [Egyptian priests] place sphinxes appositely before the shrines, intimating that their teaching about the gods holds a mysterious wisdom. At Saïs the seated statue of Athena, whom they consider to be Isis also, bore the following inscription: 'I am all that has been and is and will be; and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle'" (*De Iside et Osiride* IX.354c). The editor of Plutarch, J. Gwyn Griffiths, observes that "no suggestion of mystery or enigma [is] attached to it [the Egyptian Sphinx]. Such a suggestion seems to have arisen first in the Theban

(Greek) legends of a king's riddle-contest with a sphinx."[3] Clement of Alexandria adapted it to his own purposes:

> It is for this reason that the Egyptians place statues of sphinxes in front of their temples, in order to show that discussion about God is enigmatic and obscure; perhaps they also did it because one must love and fear God at the same time – love him as favoring and benevolent to the devout, fearing him as inexorably just to the impious. So also the sphinx enigmatically shows the image of a savage beast and of a human being at the same time.
>
> (*Stromate* v.v.31; *Les Stromates*, pp. 76–7).

Clement also connected the enigmas of the Hebrew Bible to the hidden mystery of the Egyptian sphinxes (ibid., v.vi.32). He was a syncretist by temperament, and he rejoiced in the opportunity for melding that symbolism offered him. Mysteries he especially liked.

Riddle in general or in particular has been attached to the Egyptian tradition ever since. The American painting *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (1863), by the young Elihu Vedder, shows a man kneeling and pressing his ear to the stone lips of an Egyptian sphinx, buried in sand to the neck; a human skull lies nearby. Vedder, like many others, has transferred the Grecian sphinx's riddle into enigma as masterplot (unspecified), whose answer only the Egyptian sphinx knows. Jay Macpherson makes of the inscription of Isis a wickedly apt riddle-poem ("Isis"):

> I'm Isis of Saïs,
> If you'd know what my way is,
> Come riddle my riddle-mi-ree.
> It's perfectly easy
> For those who're not queasy –
> Say, am I a he or a she?
> There's no-one shall wed me
> And least of all bed me,
> In fact, no-one loves me but me:
> Aha, you don't know? you
> 'd prefer me to show you?
> The answer will slay you, you'll see!

Comparisons of the Greek and Egyptian sphinxes can be straightforward and without preference. But the differences can be read in other ways. Guy de Tervarent, in his *Attributs et symboles dans l'art profane*

3 Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, pp. 130–1, 283. Griffiths adds that "Rose, *Gk. Myth.* 188 thinks there may be Minoan-Mycenaean prototypes for the story."

Figure 1. "Oedipe et le sphinx" (Vatican, Museo Gregoriano), from *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, ed. Charles Daremberg and Ed Saglio (Paris: Hachette, 1877), vol. IV.2, p. 1437

1450–1600, lists the attributes of the two sphinxes, which the Renaissance seems to have happily intermingled, at least in its iconography.[4] For him, these are distinguished as mysterious thought and voluptuousness. Mysterious thought is associated with the Egyptian sphinx, while voluptuousness is associated with the Grecian, at least in some later manifestations (cols. 363–4). On the other hand, Athanasius Kircher, in the frontispiece to his "Oedipus Aegyptiacus" (1652), places the Grecian sphinx high on a rock, her accustomed spot, but with an Egyptian background complete with pyramids, obelisks, temple and palm trees. For good measure, her hair is adorned with an Egyptian headband. Her features are placid and benign, and she is clearly a Wisdom figure, a female counterpart to the Egyptian sphinx.

4 Chastel calls the sphinx as used in the fifteenth century an ambivalent symbol. Sometimes it indicates hidden mysterious wisdom for initiates, sometimes bestial and culpable ignorance. He moves without distinction between Egyptian and Greek sphinx forms ("Note").