γρίφους παίζειν: Playing at Riddles in Greek

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RIDDLES ARE A UNIVERSAL GENRE of folklore.[1] Although definitions of folklore are modified through the years to accommodate an ever-widening range of material and changing media of transmission, there is a consensus among folklorists to the effect that folklore is an informal process of expressive communication enacted (and re-enacted) primarily in face-to-face situations among participants in the same reference group.[2] Orality is considered an essential characteristic of folklore, especially in older discussions of verbal genres, based on material from cultures that made little or no use of writing.[3] The unofficial character of folklore as a process distinct from an elite or institutional culture is particularly stressed.[4] The oral

[1] A. Taylor, "The Riddle," *California Folklore Quarterly* 2 (1943) 129–147, at 141; cf. K. Ranke, "Einfache Formen," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 4 (1967) 17–31, at 31.

[2] See M. C. Sims and M. Stephens, *Living Folklore. An Introduction to the Study of People and their Traditions* (Logan 2005) 1–38.

[3] R. Abrahams, "The Complex Relations of Simple Forms," *Genre* 2 (1969) 104–128, at 125; D. Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971) 3–15, at 5, 8; cf. P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London 1978) 147.

[4] E.g. Sims and Stephens, *Living Folklore* 2, 3, 8, 10–12. In this respect 'folklore' corresponds to 'popular culture' as both concepts ascribe significant importance to an outlook of the culture of people irrespective of sociological factors as a dynamic process of cultural interaction distinct from and even opposed to dominant culture. See e.g. S. Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in R. Samuel, *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981) 227–240, at 238; J. Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Lon-

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circulation and widespread use of folklore genres mark their popular character, in the sense that they are known to and are potentially employed by all members of the same community.[5] Through their unaffected language and physical imagery, verbal folklore genres (proverbs, riddles, jokes, tales, curses, etc.) disclose an informal view of the world, which is tacitly acknowledged as such by the sharers of the culture. As a consequence, the utterance of such unofficial genres effects a transference from formal reality to the realm of popular culture.[6] The folklorist Roger Abrahams maintains that folklore genres, recognized as such by members of the community, generate an empathic reaction at the moment they are being uttered, thus engaging the speaker and the listener(s) in a playworld, where the normal constraints of real life do not apply: "folklore is play in its broadest sense."[7]

The ludic dimension of folklore is perhaps better manifested in no other verbal folklore genre than in riddles, also a play genre.[8] The folk character of Greek riddles is acknowledged as a matter of fact in older works that deal with the subject, but the factors reifying this quality have not been explored.[9] In this

don 1989) 24–25.

[5] Ben-Amos, *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971) 6–7.

[6] Cf. M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington 1984 [1965]) 15–17.

[7] R. Abrahams, *"Deep down in the jungle." Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Hatoro 1964) 7, 41–42, and "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968) 143–158, at 148–149. 'Play' is outlined by Johan Huizinga as a stepping out of ordinary life into a temporary sphere of non-serious activity, the time and space of which are clearly defined. In the playworld the rules of everyday life are abolished and replaced by binding play-rules: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London 1970) 19–32; similarly, Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 235, 259–260.

[8] Abrahams, *Genre* 2 (1969) 112, 114–117.

[9] J. Ehlers, *Αἴνιγμα et Γρῖφος* (diss. Bonn 1867), and *De Graecorum Aenigmatis et Griphis* (Prenzlau 1875); C. Ohlert, *Rätsel und Gesellschaftspiele der alten Griechen* (Berlin 1886); W. Schultz, *Rätsel aus dem hellenischen Kulturkreis* (Berlin

article I propose to provide a survey of the concept and function of ancient Greek riddles as a folklore genre and as play.[10] A secondary aim is to compare ancient evidence bearing on riddling to corresponding findings of folklore research.

The riddling game

The term for 'riddle', αἴνιγμα, appears for the first time in Pindar, where it is used in reference to the riddle of the Sphinx (fr.177.d).[11] αἶνος, a term used of proverbs and animal fables, is also sometimes employed to refer to riddles (Clearchus of Soli fr.95 Wehrli = Panarces a.1 West).[12] Another term, γρῖφος, appears first in Ar. *Vesp.* 20 but is rare in classical literature. Although grammarians try to distinguish between αἴνιγμα and γρῖφος, in practice both terms are used indiscriminately to refer to riddles, conundrums, charades, and any kind of word-play.[13]

The concept of riddles as play is attested in our sources, beginning with the fourth century B.C. In his book on riddles, the Peripatetic philosopher Clearchus gives a definition of the riddle as a playful contest (Ath. 10.448C = fr.86 W.):

1912), and "Rätsel," *RE* 1A (1914) 62–125; E. S. Forster, "Riddles and Problems from the Greek Anthology," *G&R* 14 (1945) 42–47. I have not been able to consult J. Kwapisz et al. (eds.), *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry* (Berlin/Boston 2013).

[10] Therefore I will not be concerned here with textual aspects of the riddle.

[11] I only mention the commoner terms for 'riddle' for the sake of clarity. Detailed discussions of ancient definitions of the riddle are to be found in Ehlers, *De Graecorum Aenigmatis*; Ohlert, *Rätsel*; Schultz, *Rätsel*.

[12] The source is Ath. 10.452C. Ath. 10.448B–459B is the fundamental ancient treatment of riddles and the primary source for much that follows in this paper.

[13] E.g. Pollux 6.107. More general terms were also used: προβλήματα, ἀπορίαι, ζητήματα, ὁμοιώματα, ἄπορα ἐρωτήματα. For a distinction between αἴνιγμα and γρῖφος see I. M. Konstantakos, "Trial by Riddle," *ClMed* 55 (2004) 85–138, at 120; for a different opinion see C. Luz, *Technopaignia. Formspiele in der griechischen Dichtung* (Leiden/Boston 2010) 139–146, who sees no difference before the time of Lucian.

> γρῖφος πρόβλημά ἐστι παιστικόν, προστακτικὸν τοῦ διὰ ζητήσεως εὑρεῖν τῇ διανοίᾳ τὸ προβληθὲν τιμῆς ἢ ἐπιζημίου χάριν εἰρημένον
>
> A *griphos* is a facetious question which requires one to use a process of intellectual inquiry to discover what is being referred to, and which is articulated with an eye to a reward or a punishment.[14]

As a game, riddling is included in the Roman historian Suetonius' work on Greek games (Περὶ παιδιῶν 3).[15] In Plutarch *Conv. sept. sap.* 148D riddles are mentioned on a par with another popular game: the philosopher Thales says that Cleobulina (daughter of the philosopher Cleobulus, one of the Seven Sages, and herself a famous riddler) "uses her riddles at any time playfully like knucklebones and throws them at chance persons" (τούτοις γὰρ ὥσπερ ἀστραγάλοις, ὅταν τύχῃ, παίζουσα χρῆται καὶ διαβάλλεται πρὸς τοὺς ἐντυχόντας). In Ath. 10.452E the phrase ἔπαιζε γρίφους ("he played with riddles") is used to refer to the habitual engagement in riddles of four accomplished fourth-century riddlers, for the most part professional artists.[16]

According to folklorists, riddles are propounded mostly in riddling sessions occurring either within the broader context of some cultural activity (rituals, initiations, weddings, wakes) or in friendly social gatherings; those riddling sessions are in

[14] All translations of Athenaeus are those offered by S. D. Olson, *Athenaeus* V (Cambridge [Mass.]/London 2009).

[15] F. Taillardat, *Suétone. Περὶ βλασφημιῶν. Περὶ παιδιῶν* (Paris 1967) 64–73.

[16] On the evidence of Clearchus (fr.93 W.) Athenaeus names Dromeas of Cos, possibly a parasite (Olson, *Athenaeus* V 166 n.236), Theodectas of Phaselis, who wrote tragic plays, Aristonymus the solo lyre-player, and Cleon, a mime-actor. Theodectas, to whom the rest are compared, included riddles in his plays (Ath. 10.451F), but, according to Hermippus fr.77 W. quoted in Ath. 10.451E, he seems to have also enjoyed engaging in riddles in social gatherings: Hermippus says that Theodectas "was quite talented at figuring out any riddle presented to him and at posing clever riddles for others."

essence contests.[17] Greek riddling is consistent with those findings, as our sources indicate that riddling took place in the context of some ritual or other regulated activity, but there are also indications that such a qualified context was not prerequisite. It is well known that riddle contests were among the recreational activities that took place during the drinking after dinner at the male symposion. Plato speaks of riddles propounded at banquets (ἐν ταῖς ἑστιάσεσι, *Resp.* 479B) and Clearchus specifically defines riddles as questions posed at symposia (fr.85 W.): γρῖφοι δὲ λέγεται τὰ ἐν τοῖς συμποσίοις προβαλλόμενα αἰνιγματώδη ζητήματα.[18] In a comic fragment we are told how the game was organized: one of the symposiasts propounded a riddle and everybody had to give an answer ἐφεξῆς ("in succession," Antiphanes fr.122.4 = Ath. 10.448F).

However, the male symposion was not the only occasion for riddles, nor was riddling an exclusively male pastime. Riddling appears to have been extensively associated with women. The two most famous riddlers of antiquity were female: the Sphinx and Cleobulina, whose riddles had reached even Egypt (Plut. *Conv. sept. sap.*148D). Many female riddlers appear in comic fragments from the fourth century B.C. Sappho proposes a riddle to an old man (as the address ὦ πάτερ suggests) in Antiphanes fr.194 (Ath. 10.450E–451B), and a woman proposes a riddle to a friendly female company (as the address φίλαι suggests) in Ath. 10.454A (= Callias test. 7.36–40 *PCG*).[19] The context of riddling in these comic fragments is not clear. But in Diphilus fr.49 (Ath. 10.451B) three Samian girls (κόραι) are de-

[17] Abrahams, *Genre* 2 (1969) 114, and "Storytelling Events. Wake Amusements and the Structure of Nonsense on St. Vincent," *Journal of American Folklore* 95 (1982) 389–414; T. A. Burns, "Riddling: Occasion to Act," *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (1976) 139–165, at 165.

[18] Cf. Pollux 6.107; Hesych. s.v. γρῖφοι.

[19] On the identity of the poet of this fragment see Olson, *Athenaeus* V 170 n.247; I. C. Storey, *Fragments of Old Comedy* I (Cambridge [Mass.]/London 2011) 166–173.

picted as propounding riddles while drinking at the festival of Adonia (γριφεύειν παρὰ πότον). Likewise, according to Plutarch (*Quaest. conv.* 717A5), on the occasion of the Dionysiac festival of Agrionia at Orchomenos in Boeotia, women propounded riddles after dinner (τοῦ δείπνου τέλος ἔχοντος αἰνίγματα καὶ γρίφους ἀλλήλαις προβάλλουσιν).[20] The last two sources afford us a glimpse of one occasion where riddling among women occurred. The setting is similar to that of a male symposion (after dinner, while drinking), but this seems to be an informal, intimate gathering. The riddling session is within the broader context of a religious festival but outside of any ritual activity (though the obscene answer given by one of the girls in Diphilus fr.49 could be considered as related to the broader context of the Adonia). A different, familiar (perhaps domestic?) setting is depicted in Alexis fr.242.6 (Ath. 10.449D–E). The conversation is between two women; the one who proposes the riddle seems to be older, as she addresses the other one as κόρη ("girl"). The younger one mildly protests at the posing of the riddle: ἀεὶ σὺ χαίρεις, ὦ γύναι, μ' αἰνίγμασι, "You always like, woman, [to puzzle] me with riddles." Arguably, and bearing in mind the limitations posed by the absence of dramatic context, "always" may point to habitual action and, therefore, show riddling as a casual pastime that could be practiced outside of any strictly defined contexts.

This inference is corroborated by the association of riddling with children.[21] Plato (*Resp.* 479C) mentions an apparently well-known "children's riddle" (τῷ τῶν παίδων αἰνίγματι), and Cleobulina herself is παιδίσκη ("a young girl"), when already famous for her riddles (Plut. *Conv. sept. sap.*148C). The riddlers who cause Homer's death by posing an insoluble riddle are

[20] Plutarch's formulation seems to imply a distinction between *ainigma* and *griphos*; cf. Konstantakos, *ClMed* 55 (2004) 120.

[21] Cf. the phrasing in Dion. Hal. *Thuc.* 48: ταῦτα γὰρ καὶ μειρακιώδη καὶ περίεργα καὶ τῶν λεγομένων αἰνιγμάτων ἀσαφέστερα, "For these things are for youngsters and strange and more unclear than the so-called riddles." Riddles are associated with childish mentality in Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 409C–D.

παῖδες ("young boys"). The circumstances of this instance of riddling are graphically described in the Herodotean *Life* of Homer (485–504):[22] Homer is ill on the shore of the island of Ios, in the company of the sailors from the ship in which he has been voyaging and some citizens, admirers of Homer, who have come from the city nearby. Some fisher-boys (παῖδες ἁλιῆες) arrive in a light boat (ἀκάτιον), get out, approach the company and challenge them to interpret their words: ἄγετε ὦ ξένοι ἐπακούσατε ἡμέων, ἂν ἄρα δύνησθε διαγνῶναι ἄσσ' ἂν ὑμῖν εἴπωμεν, "Come, strangers, listen to us, if perhaps you are able to discern what we will say to you." Here is an undoubtedly informal context, a gathering including men of low social status, out in the open, where a riddle is propounded impromptu. The orality of the genre is apparent here: the boys made up the riddle out of their immediate circumstances, as they themselves explain (500–504). Extemporary and, therefore, oral composition is also evident in Cleodorus' comment on Cleobulina's riddles, at which she plays ὅταν τύχῃ ("at any time") with τοὺς ἐντυχόντας ("chance persons": Plut. *Conv. sept. sap.* 148D).

Riddling is frowned upon by representatives of learned culture. One of the banqueters in Plut. *Conv. sept. sap.* 154B, the physician Cleodorus, quite plainly scorns the practice as a girlish pastime, similar to female handiwork and, as such, appropriate for Cleobulina and her friends but unworthy of the serious attention of men of sense: ἃ [sc. αἰνίγματα] ταύτην μὲν ἴσως οὐκ ἀπρεπές ἐστι παίζουσαν καὶ διαπλέκουσαν ὥσπερ ἕτεραι ζώνια καὶ κεκρυφάλους προβάλλειν ταῖς γυναιξίν, ἄνδρας δὲ νοῦν ἔχοντας ἔν τινι σπουδῇ τίθεσθαι γελοῖον, "[Riddles] that perhaps it is not inappropriate for her to propose to the ladies, playing and weaving them, as other girls weave girdles and hair-nets, but it is ridiculous that sensible men would make much of them." The attitude of Aesop's master, the philosopher Xanthus, is equally contemptuous,

[22] Ed. E. N. Coughanowr, *Herodoti Vita Homeri* (Villanova 1990).

when he retorts to his gardener's question about his vegetables: κομψότατε, ἀπρεπές ἐστιν ἐμὲ τὸν ἐν τοσούτοις ἀκροατηρίοις διαλεχθέντα νῦν ἐν κήποις αἰνίγματα διαλύειν, "Sir, it is not fitting for me, who delivered speeches to large audiences, now to resolve riddles in gardens."[23] Even sympotic riddling seems to be scorned by Plato who refers to riddles based on equivocation and propounded in symposia in order to make an unfavourable comparison (*Resp.* 479B).

Such disparaging remarks apparently contrast with the association that Clearchus of Soli makes between riddles and philosophy (Ath. 10.457C–F = fr.63 W.): τῶν γρίφων ἡ ζήτησις οὐκ ἀλλοτρία φιλοσοφίας ἐστί, καὶ οἱ παλαιοὶ τὴν τῆς παιδείας ἀπόδειξιν ἐν τούτοις ἐποιοῦντο, "Inquiry into riddles is not alien to philosophy, and the ancients used them to show off their education." Nonetheless, Clearchus is speaking here of the riddles in the symposia of men of old (οἱ παλαιοί), which he sharply distinguishes from those of his own day: προέβαλλον γὰρ παρὰ τοὺς πότους οὐχ ὥσπερ οἱ νῦν ἐρωτῶντες…, "For as they were drinking, they used to pose questions—not, however, as people do today, when they ask…" Clearchus gives an account of riddling in the symposia of ancient times as a demanding contest where the participants had their poetic competence and knowledge of literature rigorously tested.[24] His description explains his initial remark that "the ancients used them to show off their education" as well as his concluding remark, that "the game thus required considerable thinking and was informative about how well-educated each member of the group was." The prize was accordingly decorous and honorable: the winner received στέφανον καὶ εὐφημίαν ("garlands and congratulations"). No penalty is mentioned. In contrast to the elevated competitions of old symposia, the sympotic riddles of Clearchus' own day are trivial questions of the type "What is

[23] *V. Aesopi* W 37 Perry. This is the later *Life*, dated to the early fourth century A.D. in B. E. Perry, *Aesopica* (Urbana 1952) 22.

[24] See D. Collins, *Master of the Game: Competition and Performance in Greek Poetry* (Washington 2004) 131–132.

the most…," obscene subjects not excluded. Besides, Clearchus adds, "they reward those who answer these questions correctly with kisses that would disgust anyone of decent sensibilities, and penalize those who get their question wrong by requiring them to drink unmixed wine, which they enjoy more than the cup dedicated to Hygieia ('Health')."

Clearchus makes a point that engagement in such play is indicative of the low culture of the sort of people who enjoy reading the sex manual of Philainis and the cookbook of Archestratus (both disparaged at Ath. 8.335D). The inference may be ventured that by the fourth century B.C. popular riddles had entered sympotic entertainment at the expense of older, elevated forms of poetic competition, and it is this type of riddling, rather than the old one, that is disparaged by representatives of learned culture. This inference is substantiated by Plutarch (*Quaest. conv.* 673A), who mentions riddles in association with the banquets of "common and unliterary" men. Riddles are not the specific subject of that passage; rather, the writer is concerned with establishing the existence of distinct pleasures for the body and for the soul. He has already presented as a proof of this assumption the fact that at symposia οἱ ἀστεῖοι καὶ χαρίεντες ("men of wit and taste") turn to ideas and conversations unrelated to the pleasures of the body. Another proof he sees is the fact that after dinner "even common and unliterary people," who presumably are more drawn to bodily that to spiritual pleasures, are in the habit of taking their soul away from the body's needs by propounding riddles: καὶ οἱ φορτικοὶ καὶ ἀφιλόλογοι μετὰ τὸ δεῖπνον ἐφ' ἡδονὰς ἑτέρας τοῦ σώματος ἀπωτάτω τὴν διάνοιαν ἀπαίρουσιν, αἰνίγματα καὶ γρίφους και θέσεις ὀνομάτων προβάλλοντες. The passage implicitly draws a contrast between the *logos sympotikos* of sophisticated company and that of not-so-refined banqueters, associating riddles with the latter. Although it may be imprudent to take this piece of information as hard evidence that riddles were only practiced at the more humble banquets and not at those of the more accomplished members of society, at least the conclusion may be safely drawn that from the

fourth century onwards riddling, being a popular game, was not considered a sophisticated form of recreation.[25]

From the sources discussed so far there emerges a perception of riddles and riddling along the lines of a folklore genre. Widespread use and oral, extemporary composition are evinced. The game of riddles took place in unofficial settings and intimate gatherings among participants from the margins of the male-ordered society of the city (women and children),[26] and the lower strata (fishermen, sailors, itinerant poets). The disdain for riddling expressed by learned individuals and the connection they make between riddles and low culture indicate a concept of cultural levels associated with corresponding forms of discourse, riddles being excluded from the upper regions.[27] It is not without interest in this connection that in his apology (*Ap.* 27A–D) the Platonic Socrates disparages Meletus' accusation that he does not believe in gods (though he believes in spirits) by presenting it as a riddle intended to test and deceive his audience in jest (ἔοικεν γὰρ ὥσπερ αἴνιγμα συντιθέντι διαπειρωμένῳ … φημί σε αἰνίττεσθαι καὶ χαριεντίζεσθαι) and,

[25] In Ar. *Vesp.* 1174 ff., where Bdelycleon is prepared for his first aristocratic banquet and briefed on aspects of *logos sympotikos*, no mention is made of riddles.

[26] On the marginality of women see J. Gould, "Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens," *JHS* 100 (1980) 38–59, at 43, 45, 57, 58.

[27] This is a view of popular culture as 'residual' culture; see Z. Barbu, "Popular Culture. A Sociological Approach," in C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), *Approaches to Popular Culture* (London 1976) 39–68, at 43; G. R. Kress, "Structuralism and Popular Culture," in *Approaches* 85–106, at 88; R. Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in Ch. Mukerji and M. Schudson (eds.), *Rethinking Popular Culture. Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* (Berkeley/Oxford 1991) 407–423, at 415–416; T. Bennett, "Popular Culture: Defining our Terms," in *The Open University, Popular Culture* 1.1/2.1 (Milton Keynes 1981) 77–86, at 84–85, and "Popular Culture: History and Theory," in 1.3.2 at 9, 31; Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* 4–5, 43, 45; R. Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts* (London/New York 1992) 15; P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge 1991) 90.

therefore, as a trivial, childish game (τοῦτό ἐστι παίζοντος). Socrates is in effect saying that his accuser is wasting the jury's time with a popular pastime, inappropriate for the official occasion of the trial.

Nonetheless, riddling was also part of the male symposion, not an unofficial occasion in any straightforward sense. The presence of the popular game in what is generally considered a formal gathering is an instance of the interaction between different cultural domains, a process that Carlo Ginzburg, writing of pre-industrial Europe, named "circularity."[28] It is also a manifestation of folklore as a dynamic process transcending social division, a dimension of folklore much stressed in modern folklore theory.

The social function of riddling

One essential criterion for the definition of the riddle is that it is a question. Although it is not always cast in interrogative form, the question 'What is it?' is always pending at the end.[29] However, a riddle differs from a genuine question, whereby the questioner earnestly seeks from the recipient information on a subject. In the riddling situation the norms of interrogation are reversed, as the questioner already possesses the information that the question seeks to elicit.[30] In Greek riddles this knowl-

[28] *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (London 1980 [1976]) xii; cf. R. Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture. An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago 1956) 70; Burke, *Popular Culture* 28, 231, 270; Hall, *People's History* 227–240, at 234–235, 238. Cf. Bakhtin's conception, in *Rabelais*, of popular culture as the culture of people in their collectivity outside and against the formal order of things.

[29] E. Köngäs-Maranda, "Theory and Practice of Riddle Analysis," *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971) 51–61, at 54; W. J. Pepicello and T. A. Green, *The Language of Riddles. New Perspectives* (Columbus 1984) 17. Cf. the phrase ἄπορα ἐρωτήματα ("insoluble questions") for riddles.

[30] See e.g. A. Jolles, *Einfache Formen. Legend, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasus, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz* (Halle 1930) 129; S. Cohen, "Connecting through Riddles, or the Riddle of Connecting," in G. Hasan-Rokem and D. Shulman (eds.), *Untying the Knot. On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes* (New York/Oxford 1996) 294–315, at 295.

edge is sometimes emphasized by the use of οἶδ' ἐγώ or εἶδον ("I know/I saw") to introduce the riddle (for example, Eubulus fr.106.16 [Ath. 10.450A]; Cleobulina 1 West).[31] The riddle is then an intimidating challenge and a test to the ignorant recipient, who is placed in a passive and vulnerable position.[32] The recipient is the more disadvantaged in that the riddler is the only one to confirm the rightness of the answer, albeit—and this is crucial in appreciating the social function of riddling—within the limits of cultural presuppositions.[33] This state of affairs establishes a particular relationship between the riddler and the recipient. Irrespective of the riddler's social status in real life, his/her intellectual power puts him/her in a superior position for so long as the game lasts. Similarly, the recipient is placed in an inferior position, which may not correspond with his/her real social status.[34] Thus, playing at riddles temporarily subverts social relations, as in the playworld in which the players find that the rules of reality are displaced by the rules of the game.[35] Only the right answer will raise the recipient from

[31] This is a common device in many traditions; see M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford 2007) 366.

[32] L. Haring, "Malagasy Riddling," *Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1985) 163–190, at 178; A. Kaivola-Bregenhøj, "Riddles and their Use," in *Untying the Knot* 10–36, at 26.

[33] The answer to a 'true riddle' is culturally determined, and inherent in the question: D. C. Simmons, "Cultural Functions of the Efik Tone Riddle," *Journal of American Folklore* 71 (1958) 123–138, at 123; J. Blacking, "The Social Value of Venda Riddles," *African Studies* 20 (1961) 1–33, at 1; R. Abrahams, "The Literary Study of the Riddle," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 14 (1972) 177–197, at 182, 185; Ben-Amos, "Solutions to Riddles," *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (1976) 249–254, at 250; Pepicello and Green, *Language of Riddles* 88; Cohen, in *Untying the Knot* 298; Kaivola-Bregenhøj, in *Untying the Knot* 14. Cf. Arist. *Rh.* 1412b.

[34] The shift in power relations between riddler and riddlee is most evident in riddle contests, a feature especially of Germanic folk literature; see e.g. C. Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (London/New York 1960) 32–44; cf. the contest between the seers Mopsus and Calchas in Tzetzes' scholia on Lycophron 427, in E. Scheer, *Lycophronis Alexandra* II (Berlin 1908) 157–158.

[35] Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 235; Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* 19–32.

his/her inferior position and equalize him/her with the questioner, the initial knower. On the other hand, failure to provide the right answer proves the recipient an outsider, who is not able to relate to the cultural presumptions of the community. The whole process has been compared to an initiation, a rite of passage.[36]

Ample illustrations of the social function of riddling can be found in folktales, where the riddle is a functional equivalent to the task or test of skills.[37] Usually the initial riddler is of high social status (king, nobleman, wealthy man), or a supernatural being, while the addressee or the person who provides the answer is of low social status (poor girl, farmer, miller, fisherman). Those who solve the riddle, or retort by propounding another insoluble riddle are saved and immediately ascend in social status (e.g. by marrying a royal character), while the initial riddler is often destroyed. Those who fail to solve the riddle are destroyed physically or socially.[38] The Sphinx haunted the Thebans who could not solve her riddle, but threw herself from Mount Phicium when Oedipus answered successfully; as for himself, he won a kingdom and the queen's hand. Likewise, Homer died when he could not solve the riddle posed to him by the fisher-boys,[39] and Calchas died when defeated in a

[36] W. R. Bascom, "Literary Style in Yoruba Riddles," *Journal of American Folklore* 62 (1949) 1–17, at 1, 7; Ben-Amos, *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (1976) 253; J. Glazier and P. G. Glazier, "Ambiguity and Exchange. The Double Dimension of Mbeere Riddles," *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (1976) 191–217, at 199–204; Kaivola-Bregenhøj, in *Untying the Knot* 14; V. N. Rao, "Texture and Authority: Telugu Riddles and Enigmas," in *Untying the Knot* 191–207, at 193.

[37] R. Abrahams, *Between the Living and the Dead* (Helsinki 1980) 19.

[38] W. Anderson, *Kaiser und Abt. Die Geschichte eines Schwanks* (Helsiniki 1923) 83–87, 96–109; J. de Vries, *Die Märchen von klugen Rätsellösern* (Helsiniki 1928) 52–55, 66; Jolles, *Einfache Formen* 132–133, 144; S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington 1955–1958) H530–H899; C. Goldberg, *Turandot's Sisters: A Study of the Folktale AT 851* (New York 1993) 171–172. Cf. Plut. *Alex*. 64.

[39] Ancient biographers try to rationalize the legend by suggesting that

riddle contest with Mopsus. Further manifestations of the social function of riddling on a larger scale are found in accounts of riddling contests as tests of power between kings. Josephus says that Solomon, king of Jerusalem, and Hirom, king of Tyre, exchanged riddles on the agreement that the one who failed to solve them would pay a large sum of money to the other, and adds the claim that the money was actually paid (*Ap.* 1.114–115). An account of a similar contest between the king of Egypt and the king of Ethiopia is related by Plutarch (*Conv. sept. sap* 153E).[40]

The social function of riddling as represented in folktales is symbolically re-enacted in riddling situations in different cultures. Success in riddling earns the individual a respected position within the group, while the person who gives a wrong answer, besides the embarrassment, suffers a symbolic temporary banishment from the group into a topsy-turvy world, where the order of things parallels the relationships expressed in a riddle.[41] Riddling in the Greek symposion follows the same pattern.

Before appraising the social function of riddling in the symposion, the character of the symposion as a social gathering must be considered. It has been argued that this association of (primarily) adult males should be seen as one among various civic collective practices, participation in which was a marker of citizenship. One of the fundamental principles underlining those gatherings was the equality of the participants, emphasized by equal distribution of food and wine. Nevertheless, the status of the participants was undermined by the competitive

Homer did not die as a result of failing to solve the riddle, but was already ill at the time, or slipped and hurt himself. See Arist. fr.76 Rose; G. E. V. Gigante, *Vite di Omero* (Naples 1996). Still, his inability to solve the riddle, being an affront to his wisdom, is associated with his death.

[40] On which see Konstantakos, *ClMed* 55 (2004) 86–96.

[41] Kaivola-Bregenhøj, in *Untying he Knot* 12; D. Handelman, "Traps of Transformation: Theoretical Convergences between Riddle and Ritual," in *Untying the Knot* 37–61, at 45.

nature of sympotic entertainement: each symposiast, through participation in the *logos sympotikos*, sought the praise of his peers and, at the same time, ran the risk of being exposed to their ridicule. It has been shown that the symposion had a "disturbing dimension" as "a challenge between the participants, a confrontation with the group, a risking of the image, of the self-representation that each of the symposiasts has constructed as part of his participation in social life."[42] In view of these considerations it becomes apparent that the game of riddles undermined the principle of equality of the symposiasts from the outset, as the riddler assumed a position superior to his peers. Moreover, the right of the participants to group membership was put to the test together with their ability to relate to the underlying conceptual system hidden in the riddle.

It is noteworthy that in the several activities that formed part of sympotic discourse, and even at institutionalized contests, the unsuccessful individual suffered no humiliation other than that of having failed. Riddling, on the other hand, involved predetermined punishments for losers, besides prizes for winners. Clearchus, in his disapproving account of the riddling that took place at the symposia of his day (Ath. 10.457C–F = fr. 63 W.), cites kisses as prizes for the winners and unmixed wine for the losers: ἆθλα μὲν τοῖς νικῶσι φιλήματα … τοῖς ἡττηθεῖσιν τάττουσιν ἄκρατον πιεῖν. In Antiphanes fr.75 (Ath. 10.459A–B) a cup of brine (ἅλμης ποτήριον) is mentioned as punishment, with the addition that the loser had to put his hands behind his back and drink the cup of brine without stopping to breathe. Pollux (6.107) says that the winner was rewarded with an extra portion of meat, while the loser had to drink a cup of brine: καὶ ὁ μὲν λύσας γέρας εἶχε κρεῶν τινα περιφοράν, ὁ δ' ἀδυνατήσας ἅλμης ποτήριον ἐκπιεῖν. Athenaeus, who cites the evidence of both Clearchus and An-

[42] E. Pellizer, "Outlines of a Morphology of Sympotic Entertainment," in O. Murray (ed.), *Sympotica. A Symposium on the Symposion* (Oxford 1990) 177–184, at 183.

tiphanes, mentions a different punishment (κόλασιν) for those unable to solve the riddle, consisting in drinking a libation bowl mixed with brine (φιάλην <ἅλμῃ> κεκερασμένην, 10.457C); further on (10.458F) he repeats that they drank brine mixed with their drink (ἔπινον οὗτοι ἅλμην παραμισγομένην τῷ αὐτῶν ποτῷ). Hesychius (s.v. γρῖφος) cites a jar of water among the punishments: καὶ πρόστιμον τῷ μὴ λύσαντι τὸν γρῖφον, ἐκπιεῖν τὸ συγκείμενον, ἤτοι ἄκρατον, ἢ ὕδωρ, τουτέστι κάδον ὕδατος, "And the penalty for the one not solving the riddle [was] to drink whatever was agreed on, either unmixed [wine], or water, that is, a jar of water."

The symposiasts who solved the riddle demonstrated their capacity to understand the cultural perspectives hidden in the riddle and, therefore, proved their belongingness. This was consolidated by rewards that in effect granted the winner a prominent position among his peers and enhanced his status as a member of the male banquet. The extra portion of meat, reminiscent of honor bestowed at Homeric banquets, raised the winner to the status of a hero.[43] Kisses as rewards, whether by courtesans or beautiful boys, fitted well within the amorous discourse of the symposion, where participants competed for the favors of an *eromenos*.

Those who were not able to solve the riddle were marked as outsiders, and the punishments mentioned by the ancient writers bear this out. The well-known fact needs to be restated here, that wine was drunk mixed with water. On the other hand, drinking unmixed wine was considered incompatible with Greek culture, characteristic of barbarians and mythical monsters, and was thought to induce madness.[44] Similarly, abstaining from wine and drinking water was considered equally

[43] See P. Schmitt-Pantel, "Sacrificial Meal and Symposion: Two Models of Civic Institutions in the Archaic City," in *Sympotica* 14–26, at 18–19, 24.

[44] Cf. Ar. *Ach.* 27; Pl. *Leg.* 637D–E; N. R. E. Fisher, "Greek Associations, Symposia, and Clubs," in M. Grant and R. Kitzinger (eds.), *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterannean* II (New York 1988) 1167–1197, at 1173.

aberrant.[45] The drinking punishments inflicted on those unable to solve the riddle in effect destroyed the social self, banishing, at least symbolically, the losers from their peer group, and consequently from the citizen body, to a topsy-turvy world where wine was drunk unmixed or mixed with brine, or replaced by water or brine.[46] Moreover, putting one's hands behind one's back deprives a man of his freedom, virtually reducing him to the position of a prisoner or a slave whose hands have been tied. The physical effects of the drinking punishments should not be underestimated either: a libation bowl of unmixed wine was bound to make one very drunk very quickly, while drinking brine or a large quantity of water would probably make one ill.[47] To what purpose wine was mixed with brine is not clear; one can only make the conjecture that it had the same discomforting effects as the other drinking punishments.[48] The

[45] So much so that Athenaeus (2.44B–45A) thinks it worthwhile to give a list of ancient water-drinkers. Philocrates mocks Demosthenes as a water-drinker before the Athenians (Dem. 19.46); in Phrynichus (fr.74.2) the music teacher Lampros is mocked as ἄνθρωπος ὑδατοπότης; cf. Cratinus fr.203, ὕδωρ δὲ πίνων οὐδὲν ἂν τέκοις σοφόν, "If you drink water you will never produce something clever."

[46] In Finnish riddling contests those who fail to solve the riddle are banished to Hymylä, "a fantastic and topsy-turvy land where all the normal functions … are upside down and inside out," and made to do ridiculous things: Handelman, *Untying the Knot* 45.

[47] ἅλμη is mentioned as a clyster in Hippoc. *Diaet.sal.* 5.

[48] B. Pütz, *The Symposium and Komos in Aristophanes* (Stuttgart 2003) 260, disregards the competitiveness of the symposion, and downplays the punishment of drinking wine with brine, on the grounds that brine improved the wine's bouquet. However, no evidence is cited in support of this claim. Sea water was added to Coan wine but only during the course of vinification: see A. Dalby, "*Topikos Oinos*: the Named Wines of Old Comedy," in D. Harvey and J. Wilkins (eds.), *The Rivals of Aristophanes* (London 2000) 397–406, at 403. The wording in Ath. 10.458F (ἅλμην παραμισγομένην τῷ αὐτῶν ποτῷ) suggests that brine was added *ad hoc* at the time of punishment; ἅλμη, in this context can only be salt water or brine used for pickling (LSJ s.v. 3). A TLG search of ἅλμη showed that it is mentioned mixed with wine only in the passages that refer to the punishment of losers in the riddling

penalties that effected the symbolic elimination of the losers in the game of riddles were likely to precipitate their physical exclusion from the symposion.

The connotations inherent in the vocabulary used to refer to riddling reveal a notion of the game as something dangerous; the terms are suggestive of weaving and casting of nets: αἴνιγμα ἐμπλέκειν/διαπλέκειν ("weave"), προβάλλειν (lit. "throw before"), συντιθέναι ("contrive").[49] Riddles are propounded ἐνέδρας ἕνεκα ("as an ambush")[50] and in order to deceive (ἐξαπατήσω).[51] The etymological interpretation in the *Etymologicum Magnum* captures the aggressive essence of the game (s.v. γρῖπος): λέγονται γρῖφοι καὶ τὰ δίκτυα καὶ τὰ συμποτικὰ ζητήματα. γίνεται δὲ παρὰ τὸ ἀγρεύειν, ὅ ἐστιν ζητεῖν· ὃ παρακολουθεῖ τῇ ἄγρᾳ καὶ τῇ θήρᾳ, "Both nets and sympotic questions are called *griphoi*; this depends on hunting; which means to seek; which [is a concept that] closely follows [the idea of] the chase and the prey."[52] The riddler is a hunter after

contest and once as a remedy for diarrhea in a medical treatise of the Imperial period ([Dioscorides] *De simpl. med.* 2.54.1). οἰνάλμη is mentioned in another medical writer of the same age, as a mixture in which Germans, Scythians, and some Greeks bathe their infants after birth (Sor. *Gyn.* 2.12.1 Ilberg).

[49] Cf. Aesch. *Prom.* 610; Pl. *Ap.* 27A; Pl. *Charm.* 162B4. In Antiphanes fr. 75 (Ath. 10.459a), a slave, confronted with a question that seems like a riddle to him, says περιπλοκὰς λίαν ἐρωτᾷς,"You ask very twisted things."

[50] Antiphanes fr.122.7 (Ath. 10.449A).

[51] Pl. *Ap.* 27A.

[52] The grammarian Erotian suggests that the metaphor is taken from the fishing-net, and specifically from its twisting: γρῖφον γὰρ οἱ παλαιοὶ τὸ αἰνιγματῶδες καὶ σκολιὸν λέγουσι. καὶ γρῖφον τὸ ἁλιευτικὸν δίκτυον ἀπὸ τῆς κατὰ τὴν πλοκὴν σκολιώσεως (E. Nachmanson, *Erotiani vocum Hippocraticorum collectio* [Uppsala 1918] 100, fr.6). Cf. Pollux 6.107, ἐκλήθη δ' ἀπὸ τῶν ἁλιευτικῶν γρίφων, and Hesychius s.v. γρῖφος, who also interprets the word as τὸ δίκτυον. The term is an alternative form of γρῖπος ("fish-trap/fishing-net"): see H. Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* I (Heidelberg 1960), and P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique*[2] (Paris 1968), s.v. γρῖπος.

his prey. The riddle is not a friendly game; rather, it represents a threat to the self, albeit within the safe context of play.[53]

Riddles and Jokes

A word must be said on the connection of riddles to jokes, another folklore genre. The two genres are based on a common principle, already noted in antiquity.[54] In *Rh.* 1412 Aristotle discusses ἀστεῖα ("urbanities"), good riddles (τὰ εὖ ᾐνιγμένα), and σκώμματα ("jokes") on the same footing, as instigating a similar cognitive process and producing pleasure through metaphor, the element of surprise, and new learning. Likewise, Demetrius (*Eloc.* 3.153) uses the term γρῖφος to characterize the contradiction of sequence effected by unexpected punch lines in pleasantries (of the type in Ar. *Nub.* 149, 179).

The unexpected resolution of a difficult question, characteristic of the riddle, may result in laughter. In Plut. *Conv. sept. sap.* 154C the physician Cleodorus, who sneers at the practice of riddling and at Cleobulina's riddle posed to him by Aesop, laughs when he realizes the solution, as he, of all people, should have guessed it; the riddle ἄνδρ' εἶδον πυρὶ χαλκὸν ἐπ' ἀνέρι κολλήσαντα, "I saw a man gluing with fire bronze upon another man," refers to cupping, a form of treatment which he used most of all physicians. In such cases the borderlines between riddle and joke are blurred.[55] This is plainly seen in Ath. 10. 453A, where the riddles ascribed to the competent fourth-century riddlers mentioned above (n.16), explicitly called γρῖφοι, are in essence anecdotes depending on syntactic ambiguity:

[53] On the aggressiveness inherent in riddles see R. Abrahams, "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968) 143–158, at 150.

[54] Cf. Ian Hamnett, "Ambiguity, Classification and Change: The Function of Riddles," *Man* N.S. 2 (1967) 378–392, at 382; Abrahams, *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968) 153.

[55] Cf. Pl. *Ap.* 27D, τοῦτ' ἂν εἴη ὃ ἐγὼ φημί σε αἰνίττεσθαι καὶ χαριεντίζεσθαι, "That would be the riddle and the joke which I say you are making."

> ἀγροίκου τινὸς ὑπερπλησθέντος καὶ κακῶς ἔχοντος, ὡς ἠρώτα αὐτὸν ὁ ἰατρὸς μὴ εἰς ἔμετον ἐδείπνησεν, "οὐκ ἔγωγε," εἰπεῖν, "ἀλλ' εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν." καὶ πτωχῆς τινος τὴν γαστέρα πονούσης, ἐπεὶ ὁ ἰατρὸς ἐπυνθάνετο μὴ ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχει, "πῶς γάρ," εἶπε, "τριταία μὴ βεβρωκυῖα;"
>
> A country bumpkin ate too much and felt sick, and when the doctor asked him if he had eaten until he threw up, he said: "No; actually, I was tossing my food *down*." And when an old beggar-woman had an upset stomach, and the doctor asked if perhaps she was pregnant, she said: "How's that possible, when my belly's been empty for three days now?"

According to folklorists, when riddles become hackneyed and their solution is no longer a challenge, they become jokes, by acquiring an unexpected, odd solution.[56] This principle is at work already in fifth-century literature. The old riddle τί ταὐτὸν ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ ἐν θαλάττῃ; "What's found in the sky, on the earth, and in the sea?" (Ath. 10.453B) refers to animals that are also constellations, namely the bear (Great and Little Bear and bear-crab), the serpent (the constellation Serpens and a kind of fish), the eagle (the constellation Aquila and the ray-fish) and the dog (Sirius and the dog-fish).[57] In Aristophanes *Vesp.* 20–24, where the term γρῖφος first appears, this riddle is transformed into a joke. One of the slaves guarding Philocleon dreamed that a large eagle snatched a shield from the agora and soared away; suddenly it turned into Cleonymus (often ridiculed as ῥίψασπις) and discarded the shield. The other slave likens Cleonymus to a riddle: οὐδὲν ἄρα γρίφου διαφέρει Κλεώνυμος, "So Cleonymus is not different from a riddle," and turns the old riddle into a joke criticizing Cleonymus as a shield-thrower:[58]

[56] Ben-Amos, *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (1976) 251–252.

[57] Solution in Olson, *Athenaeus* V 168 n.245.

[58] Cf. J. H. Brunvand, "As the Saints Go Marching By: Modern Jokelore Concerning Mormons," *Journal of American Folklore* 83 (1970) 53–60.

προσερεῖ τις τοῖσι συμπόταις λέγων,
"τί ταὐτὸν ἐν γῇ τ' ἀπέβαλεν κἀν οὐρανῷ
κἀν τῇ θαλάττῃ θηρίον τὴν ἀσπίδα;"

Someone will address his fellow-drinkers saying, "What creature threw away its shield likewise on land, in the sky, and in the sea?"[59]

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