Chapter Four

MANY OF THE RIDDLES we have examined thus far are dependent upon oral transmission for their effect. Riddles like 1 and 2, for example, lose much of their witty element when written, in that concessions to spelling conventions must be made in order to reveal the answers.

1. What's black and white and red (read) all over? A newspaper.

2. What kind of ears does a train have? Engineers.

There also exists, however, a realm of folk traditions that depends, at least in part, on the written word, for example epitaphs, autograph book rhymes, and graffiti. Although such forms may be transmitted orally, they frequently depend upon a type of visual stimulus or the recognition of a cognitive fit between language and a specific real-world context that goes beyond mere utterance. Many of the principles in this type of folk tradition are realized in riddles, and the specific strategies involve the exploitation of various formal aspects of the roman alphabet and the roman and arabic numeral systems, such as the shapes of the constituent elements of the systems and the names of the elements.

In dealing with riddles that employ such strategies, we shall define the endpoints on a continuum of riddle strategies. At one endpoint are riddles like those discussed in chapters 2 and 3, which depend upon oral transmission; at the other end are riddles that, as we shall show, depend
primarily on orthography or visual stimuli to be effective. In the latter category, we count a variety of types that, although transmitted orally, require visual confirmation of the fit between the question and answer, or at least a mental (i.e., a covert, or internalized) recognition of this fit. In the types to be examined, recognition of this fit depends upon a knowledge of English spelling and orthography; the structure of our orthographic system and our spelling conventions are exploited in the formulation of such riddles.

Consider, for example, a riddle like:

3. What makes a road broad? The letter B.

This riddle is impossible to render without recourse to orthography. Moreover, such a riddle exploits the fact that words, in addition to being semantic units, are bundles of letters, the referents of which can be changed by the insertion, deletion, or rearrangement of the components of these bundles, e.g., the addition of a b to road to produce broad.

Riddles of this type should be of interest to us because they clearly demonstrate that literacy, rather than leading to the atrophy of traditional forms, may provide the folk with additional devices for verbal play. We shall return to this point in more detail later in this chapter. For now, let us relate the verbal play found in sight and spelling riddles to the type of play found in traditional riddles that exploit linguistic structures at the oral level.

With the introduction of orthographic representations of language, we may observe the addition of another level of confusion to those already employed in the act of riddling. We shall now examine how considerations of spelling and orthography can add another dimension to traditional verbal enigmas. We shall define three types of such riddles: (1) those that exploit the names of letters of the alphabet, (2) those that exploit the relationship between letters of the alphabet and the speech sounds they represent, and (3) those that exploit the shapes of letters and numerals.

The first category listed plays on the fact that the letters of our alphabet (called graphemes) have names, as well as phonetic values (i.e., pronunciations). Most letters of our alphabet, in fact, may stand for more than one sound, e.g.,
the letter \( c \) may be pronounced /s/, as in *cite*, or /k/, as in *cat*. Each letter has a unique name, however, by which we may unambiguously refer to that letter independently of any phonetic value (e.g., the letter \( c \) is called /siy/). A number of riddles exploit the fact that names of certain letters, when pronounced in sequence, are homophonous with actual English words, although the sequence of letter names does not itself constitute a word. Thus, we find riddles like:

4. What do the letters \( x, p, d, n, \) and \( c \) spell? *Expediency.*

5. Spell *enemy* in three letters. *NME.*

In these cases the sequences of letter names are homophonous with English lexical items. Confusion, the block element, is caused by the fact that, according to orthodox English spelling convention, the sequences of letters in 4 and 5 are semantically empty.

The riddler's strategy here is apparently to induce the riddlee to spell (i.e., to construct according to standard spelling convention) the word in question. Spelling, however, is primarily a visual operation and, thus, a miscue. The proper strategy in this case is to list the names of letters, rather than to spell, for the riddler in these examples is not dealing with the visual-orthographic fit of letters to words, but with the names of letters vis à vis homophonous, but orthographically correct lexical items. Example 4 is a straightforward example of this device.

Example 5 adds another source of confusion for the riddlee. It asks for a combination of three letters having *enemy* as a semantic referent. In this case an answer that conforms both to the constraints of the riddle and to English spelling convention is possible: the word *foe*. The riddler, due to the inherent traditional authority of his role, may reject this synonym for *enemy* as incorrect if he can provide an apt alternative. According to his as yet undisclosed rule for the solution to this riddle, he can provide an even more apt solution. He requires, as with the previous example, letters assembled according to their names, rather than to the dictates of standard spelling. The synonym *foe*, then, by his rules, is incorrect because the sequential listing of letter names *NME* /en + em + iy/ is demanded. This, of course, is
impossible to produce without treating the letters as orthographic units with individual names, rather than as orthographic units representing certain phonemes that are combined to form written words. Like 4, then, this example operates by posing a question about language at the visual, written level, and by creating answers by exploiting the phonological values of letters vis à vis the names we give to these orthographic symbols.

A riddling strategy closely related to that just described is seen in riddles like:

6. What are the most sensible letters? Y's (wise).
7. What letters are most provoking? T's (tease).
8. How many P's (peas) are in a pint? One.

In these cases the plurals of names of letters are exploited for their homophony with actual words. This type of riddle, as the type represented in 4 and 5, depends upon oral transmission for the same reasons as examples 1 and 2. However, unlike 1 and 2, these riddles depend upon more than simple lexical or morphological ambiguity.¹ In these cases the wit of the riddles depends in part on reference to a nonverbal, visual representation of speech. Thus, although such riddles do not require direct visual confirmation of the fit between the questions and answers, they do rely on reference to a visual medium and so are more visually oriented than riddles like 1 and 2.

The second strategy listed above plays upon the conventional orthographic representations of words in English. In such cases the riddler asks for a clarification or specification concerning a word, or the relationship between two words. The answer in such cases turns out to be a letter of the alphabet, thus revealing that the riddle question concerns orthography, i.e., a metasystem, rather than the real world, as the riddlee is led to believe. Thus we find riddles like:

9. What is the end of everything? G
10. What changes a lad into a lady? Y
11. What changes a pear into a pearl? L

These riddles exploit the fact that whereas words are semantic entities (i.e., they are things that refer to concepts, objects, etc.) on the orthographic level, they are also things
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with a discrete existence (i.e., they are assemblages of letters that have a distinct material reality apart from the concepts to which they refer). This double nature is manipulated to create ambiguity in riddle questions, and, thus, to create a block to solution by the riddlee.

In example 9 the block element results from the fact that we are dealing with two separate lexical items that have identical phonological forms, *everything* /evriyθIn/. On the one hand, this word refers to a concept; on the other it is an orthographic construction. Thus we have an example of simple lexical ambiguity manifested in enigmas that do not play with orthography, such as:

12. What has an eye that never closes? *A needle.*
13. What has a mouth but does not eat? *A river.*

The ambiguous lexical items in 12 and 13 (eye and mouth), like that in 9 (*everything*), have identical phonological forms, are the same parts of speech, and differ only by semantic features. However, riddle 9 differs from 12 and 13 in critical ways.

Examples 12 and 13 operate strictly on the oral level. The ambiguity results from the phonological identity of various lexical items. They operate on the level of utterance, since with the oral riddle words are ephemeral entities without a separate material existence. With the introduction of another level of complexity, viz., written representation, an additional device for confusion emerges. Example 9 simply does not work without reference to orthography. The aptness of the answer must be visually recognized (either overtly or covertly). The wit of the riddle is not based, then, on the recognition of homophony, but on the treatment of words as bundles of graphemes, discrete and separable from the semantic representations of lexical items. It is only with the introduction of writing as a strategy that such riddles can come into existence.

Examples 10 and 11 also deal with words as bundles of letters. They do not pose questions in the same direct fashion, however. These riddles exploit syntax in order to confuse the riddlee. This, of course, is not permissible in ordinary, utilitarian speech, where distortions of syntax are
considered mistakes. In circumscribed enactments, however, such play with grammatical rules is not only permitted, but encouraged. Let us see now how the riddler uses syntax, in addition to spelling exploitations, to outwit the riddlee.

Example 10 is, strictly speaking, a grammatical utterance, but it is misleading. The riddler is actually asking, "What changes (the word) lad into (the word) lady?" Confusion is created by the use of the indefinite article a. Because of this use of a, the riddlee's attention is directed to the class of things referred to by the terms lad and lady. That is, he seems to require information about the orthographic representation of the words. Example 11 involves a similar strategy, again with the use of the indefinite article, so that the syntax of the riddle question misleads the riddlee in his search for a referent.

In normal speech the two conceptual structures in each of 10 and 11, i.e., the ones referring to semantic entities and the ones referring to orthographic forms, would be rendered differently at the surface level. Usually, the omission of the indefinite article in the realization of the latter conceptual structures would suffice to distinguish the two. In cases like 10 and 11, then, the block element results not from the orthodox application of normal syntactic rules as described earlier for oral riddles, but from the riddler's power to willfully manipulate language.

Another strategy closely related to that just described is seen in riddles like:

14. What occurs twice in a moment, once in a minute, but never in a thousand years? M.

15. What part of London is in France? N.

16. What is always in fashion, yet always out of date? F.

Here the information sought from the riddlee is apparently to be derived from the real world, but is in fact based on spelling conventions, i.e., these riddles are questions about the written code itself, rather than about the message it carries.

These last two strategies discussed are more visually oriented than those involving letter names discussed earlier.
Note, for instance, that these riddles, although they are usually delivered orally, work just as well in a written medium. When written, the effective wit of the riddle is reinforced in that the visual fit of the answer to the question is overtly present in the riddle itself. That is, such riddles, when they are written, always contain their own answers.

At this point we must discuss another strategy that contrasts spelling conventions with pronunciation in English. In these cases, however, the exploitation involves sequences of letters, rather than single letters, as in 9–11 and 14–16. Consider, for example, riddles like:

17. What tune does everyone know? Fortune.
18. What ants are the largest? Giants.
19. What age is served at breakfast? Sausage.

At first such riddles appear to be members of the category that includes riddles like 20 and 21, which employ pseudomorphemes to confuse the riddlee.

20. What is the key to a good dinner? Turkey.

However, a close look at 17–19 reveals that these riddles operate differently from 20 and 21. Although 17–19 do indeed play upon what appear to be pseudomorphemes (tune, ants, age), the strategy in these riddles also contrasts spelling with pronunciation. Thus the orthographic sequence tune is pronounced /tu:n/ in the riddle question in 17, but is pronounced /'con/ in the answer, fortune /'fowrčan/.

It is thus the sequence of written letters that is central to the wit of the riddle. The same is true of the orthographic sequences ants and age in 18 and 19, respectively. Thus we have age /eɪdʒ/ contrasted with /ədʒ/ in sausage /'sæsədʒ/, and ants /ænts/ contrasted with /ænts/ in giants /'dʒænts/.

This last type of riddle is much more visually oriented than any of the previously discussed types, and in fact may be considered to be completely dependent upon a visual solution. That is, the riddle depends crucially on the covert recognition of the fit of graphemes to phonemes, or on an overt recognition of this fit, the latter situation occurring when the riddle is presented in a visual medium, i.e., in writing. This type is thus at the opposite end of the contin-
uum described above from the orally-oriented riddles seen in 1 and 2. We can see here a transition from riddles that are oral in nature, to those that function either in oral or visual form, to those that are exclusively visual in nature.

Let us turn now to the final strategy listed above, that which exploits the shapes of letters and numerals. Here we find three subcategories, the first of which is exemplified by riddles like:

22. What state is round on both ends and high in the middle? Ohio.
This riddle exploits both the shape of the letter o and the homophony of the orthographic sequence -hi- with the adjective high. The confusion in this example is created by the fact that the riddlee is led to the supposition that this is a description of the state's physical characteristics. In this case, -hi- is a pseudomorpheme.

A related strategy plays on the homography of roman numerals with English letters. Thus we find riddles like:

23. What plant stands for the number four? IV (ivy).
Actually, this riddle employs a double strategy. First, it plays upon equivalencies between roman and arabic numerals (four = 4 = IV). It then plays upon the fact that the roman numeral is conventionally written in English with the letters we call i/ay/ and v /viy/, which when pronounced in sequence are homophonous with the noun ivy /ayviy/.

A similar example is seen in:

24. What must you add to nine to make it six? S (IX).
Here we find that the strategy involves not only a correspondence of a roman numeral to a pair of English graphemes, but also the pronunciation not of the names of the graphemes, but rather of the conventional phonetic values of the graphemes. Another case of this strategy is seen in:

25. Add ten to nothing and what animal does it make? OX.
Here we find yet another subtle twist. First, the riddle uses a combination of arabic and roman numerals. It then exploits the fact that this particular combination of numerals is homographous with the English word ox, since the arabic zero and the letter o correspond, as do the roman ten and the
letter $x$. Finally, the riddle exploits the phonetic pronunciation of this combination of graphemes. Riddles 22-25 are quite clearly visual in nature, since the fit of the answer to the question must either be envisioned by the riddlee (covertly) or shown to the riddlee in an overt, written form.

A final type of exploitation of shape is seen in riddles like:

26. Why is the number nine like a peacock? *Remove its tail and it is nothing.*

27. What increases its value by half when turned upside down? *6.*

Example 26, beyond the simile it creates to compare the number nine to a peacock, exploits the homography between part of this number’s shape and the arabic numeral $0$. It thus operates on the visual level much as the pseudomorphemic riddles discussed above act on the grammatical level. That is, example 26 treats the numeral 9 as if it is composed of two constituents: one a tail and the other a circle, the latter of which is homographous with an arabic zero. This, of course, is not a legitimate analysis of 9, and so must be treated as a “pseudoanalysis.”

Example 27 merely plays on the fact that a 9 turned upside down becomes homographous with the numeral 6. The confusion in this case results from the fact that the riddler appears to be asking about some object in the real world, when in fact he is asking about a formal aspect (viz., the shape) of constituents of the arabic numeral system.

This strategy is rare, since homography of arabic numerals, or of numerals and graphemes, is rare. The same is not true of homophony between numerals and English words (e.g., *one-won; two-too; eight-ate*); however, we have encountered few riddles that exploit such homophony. Riddles that exploit shape fall at the visual end of the continuum of riddles that we have delineated.

In earlier chapters we saw that oral riddles exploit each linguistically relevant level of language (viz., phonology, morphology, and syntax). We have now seen that similar types of exploitations exist involving various aspects of orthography. These exploitations involve not only the conventional phonological values of graphemes, but also formal
or metatheoretical aspects such as the names of the graphemes and their shapes. In this way riddles exploit lan-
guage visually by artfully manipulating the written
medium, just as they manipulate formal aspects of spoken
language to create wit. We have seen further that some of
this manipulation of written language interacts with oral
strategies of riddling, whereas other forms of orthographic
play are more properly visual in their focus.

Neither the varieties of spelling and sight riddles, nor the
parallelism between manipulation of language at the oral
and written levels is surprising when taken in light of the
notions of word resiliency and intensification through inver-
sion found in Abrahams 1972 and 1973. In the first
instance, word resiliency is as properly applied to written,
visual language as to spoken language, so that it is not any
more surprising to find that orthography is playfully manip­
ulated than it is to find spoken language used in playful
performance. Further, the type of confusion generated by
inversion in the riddle forms we have analyzed serves to
reinforce orthographic norms by allowing us to rehearse not
only our command of the orthographic system, but by
allowing us to demonstrate in a performance context various
ways in which we are incompetent in our command of the
system.

Throughout our discussion we have used the term visual
to mean both a mental, covert recognition and a material,
over demonstration of the fit of answer to question in the
riddle. The riddles we have analyzed all involve the former
and may be reinforced by the latter, as has been mentioned.
Let us consider for a moment, in an admittedly preliminary
manner, the relationship between sight and spelling riddles
and other forms that incorporate graphic representations
into their performance strategies.

Obviously, on the level of enactment the oral performance
of sight and spelling riddles makes them quite different from
those genres that are realized only in writing, such as graff-
iti, autograph book rhymes, and the like. That is, whereas
the former play on the literacy of the folk group, they are
intended to be uttered as speech, unlike the latter, which
exist only as written communication. The following example, a traditional autograph book rhyme, is of interest since it explicitly indicates the relationship between such forms and writing:

Some write for pleasure,
Some write for fame,
But I write simply,
To sign my name.

Although the riddles that we have discussed do rely on the ability to read and write, it is important to note that, unlike the written forms just mentioned, they are not required to be rendered in tangible visual form. The sight on which the wit of such riddles depends is a type of envisionment, an imagination of their orthographic forms. They are thus dependent upon, yet independent from, written language.

Further, this class of riddles differs from other forms that actually employ drawings or the written word, such as "droodles" or "over and under sentences." The two following examples represent the class of traditional puzzles that are bound to actual graphic representation.

28. once
4 P.M. = once upon a time

29. r/e/a/d/i/n/g = reading between the lines
Sight and spelling riddles differ from these forms in another critical way. The former rely on a solution that is in one way or another visual. This is especially apparent in our third type of riddle, although it is a strategy in the other two classes, as well. On the other hand, examples 28 and 29 and other puzzles involving drawings or positional clues present visual clues that require an oral translation. This clearly reverses the situation involved in sight and spelling riddles.

The existence of sight and spelling riddles should be of interest to the folklorist for another reason. For most of the history of the discipline, folklorists have considered their domain to be verbal art, the oral forms of expression in society. Although it is true that few would exclude graffitti, epitaph verse, or other written forms from study, these genres have frequently been dismissed as exceptions to the general rule that folk expression is primarily oral and exists
apart from literacy. Perhaps few would go so far as Coffin and Cohen 1974, who define the “folk” as those who “express themselves artistically without recourse to reading and writing” (1974:xxvii). Nevertheless, there is yet to come an exact determination of the relationship between literacy and traditional expression among the folk. The examination of sight and spelling riddles should serve to illustrate that what really exists is not two separate avenues of expression, the oral and the written, but a continuum (in the present instance, at least) between those forms that play with language strictly on the oral level and those that incorporate the knowledge of orthography acquired by literacy into the service of wit.

1. Technically, examples 4 and 5 involve lexical ambiguity, since the names of letters are nouns, and correspond when spoken in sequence with actual English nouns; examples 6–8 involve morphological ambiguity in that it is the addition of the plural morpheme to the names of letters that makes these names homophones with actual English words (which are not plurals).