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*Neck-riddles (AT 927): the two faces of the scapegoat*

Summary Ph D Utrecht University 1998 *Rechtterraadsels of De twee gezichten van de zondebok* (Maastricht: [Shaker Publishing](#), 1998). ISBN 90-423-0040-X.

This study discusses folktales in which condemned prisoners who had propounded a riddle their judge could not answer, are acquitted (AT 927). This subject, at a crossroads of various disciplines, has not been widely researched in the Netherlands; in folklore studies such riddle tales are known as neck-riddles. Research into these folktales started in mid-19th century Germany, when people discovered that European story-tellers had placed traditional riddles within a judicial frame. Initially, they were called *Verbrecher-Räthsel*, later: *Halslösungsrätsel*. The research soon raised numerous questions, however.

An eye-catching characteristic of the riddles that the condemned prisoners propounded, is that they cannot be guessed. This is due to the fact that the solution is based on experiences unique to the condemned person. An example of such a riddle runs as follows:

Love I sit

Love I stand;

Love I hold

Fast in hand.

I see Love

Love sees not me.

Riddle me that,

Or hanged I'll be.

The judges could not guess, so she was acquitted. Then she gave them the explanation. She had a dog, called 'Love'. She had killed it, and with its skin had made socks for her shoes - on these she stood; gloves for her hands - and these she held; a seat for her chair - on that she sat; she looked at her gloves and she saw Love; but Love saw her no more.

There are researchers who regard neck-riddles as unreal riddles, while others claim that they are essential to the genre. Not only in their insolubility lies a difference with the way in which we, in our culture, regard riddles, but also in the fact that, with us, riddles belong to the domain of childish entertainment, whereas the neck-riddle belongs to a serious one.

To be able to better place the neck-riddle, I have first developed how our concept of riddles lies to that of different cultures and times (chapter 2). My argument is that we have to guard against taking our own concept of riddles as the starting-point for our definition of the

riddle genre: historic contemplation shows that obscure riddles were quite common in history and were still accepted in the language community till the end of the previous century. The ancient riddle contests to be found in various narrative traditions, show that insolubility was an acceptable characteristic of riddles. Meanwhile, the meaning of the word has been split up in two: on the one hand, we know the riddle as more or less synonymous with mystery, paradox, and secret; on the other, it has a place in the speech situation in which somebody challenges a conversation partner to find a solution. In its first meaning it has disappeared from linguistic usage, in its second meaning it can be further specified as opposed to informative and test questions. In this chapter I also present an overview of riddle-related customs that present the speech situation of the research tradition in the ethnography of speaking. Comparisons with data from other cultures and traditions show that the state of affairs as presented in the neck-riddles is less strange than it may prove at first sight.

In a speech situation, the propounding of riddles can be alternated with other genres, for instance: the telling of tall stories, gossip, jests, practical jokes, and fairy tales. Neck-riddles pre-eminently border two genres: that of the riddle and the tale. In chapter 3, which brings clarity regarding the terminology used, I first discuss the difference between riddles within stories and riddle tales. Neck-riddles (an abbreviation of neck-riddle tales) belong to the second category. The English term neck-riddle is somewhat confusing, as riddles based on the poser's life history, or on something unusual he has seen, are often loosely called neck riddles. This, however, confuses the nature of the riddle itself with that of the frame tale in which the character's life is at stake. In my opinion it is important not only to define the riddles according to the speech frame, but to further distinguish between neck-riddles and neck-saving riddles. The latter category is a subform of the more general neck-riddle (Huizinga used the term *capital riddle*), which either you solve or you forfeit your head. Besides, as the English term indicates, the neck-saving riddles distinguish themselves from the various neck-riddles, by the fact that the condemned prisoner's riddle is always a life-saver.

In chapter 4 I have examined in how far one can speak of a Dutch tradition as regards neck-saving riddles. To that end I give an overview of the Dutch material that researchers and collectors have gathered. During my research, I was pleased to discover that the Dutch P.J. Meertens-Institute possessed an extensive collection of neck-saving riddles, started in 1968, but as yet unknown from other research. The four categories from the international corpus, Ilo, Living in the dead, Morning Spring and Unborn, were found here in varying numbers; Ilo riddles were the most, Unborn ones the least numerous. Specific for the Netherlands was the high frequency of riddles in the judicial frame in terms of legs: two-legs (stork) carrying four-legs (frog) in the air.

In chapter 5, in order to answer the question whether the neck-saving riddles derive from real events, I distinguish various levels in the material: the speech situation, judicial practices (events related), and source material. These levels interact: story-tellers generally attune their folktales to two traditions, thus the events that take place in present times, influence source material from more ancient levels. The speech situation of the neck-saving riddle is historic: for a century and a half people have been telling this kind of tale. They have drawn on a fairly limited stock of riddles that previously occurred in different folktales. Riddles and folktales bear traces of transgressions, rivalry, and violence. European story-tellers left the riddles more or less intact, but reduced their numbers when they transformed the setting of the folktales. Thus it became typical of neck-saving riddles that, in all instances, the condemned prisoner propounds the riddle to the judge. The situation is never turned

around, as in other stories in which a king, for instance, propounds riddles to his subjects. The socially lower class person tests out the higher in the neck-saving riddle; this enabled participants in a speech or riddle session to identify with the poor, condemned prisoner who outsmarts the judge.

As regards judicial practices: *casus* emerge to have existed with a related theme (such as the acquittal of a condemned prisoner at the gallows when a woman was willing to marry him), but the conclusion tends to the fact that the neck-saving riddle is not historic and that it refers to a reality wished for, or believed in, based on the same mentality that once produced the legitimate judicial custom of *Halslösung*. Apropos comparable riddle tales, the neck-saving ones have a characteristic which I regard as essential but which has been shed insufficient light on in earlier literature: the transformation of violence into a judicial framework in which the riddle always became life-saving. The transgression aspect remained, but rivalry and violence were transformed. The solution of the riddle is always based on the riddler's unique experiences, in which he takes action.

Although story-tellers present the riddles as if the condemned prisoners have really had such experiences within the judicial framework, they recontextualise ancient material: the sources of the neck-riddle complex. A prototype of this is Samson's "Out of the eater comes something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet" (Judg. 14: 14), referring to the living bees in the lion's carcass; the resemblance to the birds in the living-in-the dead riddle is clear. The ILO-riddle remodels the motif of a queen's lover, usually a slave, who is killed by her husband or son. The queen takes possession of the corpse, makes various objects of it, then challenges her lover's murderer with a riddle. If he guesses the solution correctly, she must die; if he fails he forfeits his kingdom or dies. The Morning Spring riddle remodels the story of late antiquity of the faithful daughter who saves the life of her imprisoned father by nursing him. It is based on the reversal of generations. The riddle of the Unborn refers to ancient stories which occur outside the judicial framework.

These frequently interrelated sources can deepen our knowledge of riddles because they explicitly portray an important characteristic of riddles: the bridging of antitheses. Or, negatively formulated: in these exceptional folktales, the natural and cultural order is harmed and a chaotic situation created. The borderline between life and death fades, conflicts between man and animal, male and female are neutralised, forbidden sexual relations (between father and daughter, mother and son), adultery, and traces of cannibalism come to light; the boundaries of the body fade away. Through the centuries, the folktale has been guided into culturally acceptable channels. In the sixth chapter I discuss these sources more extensively.

Finally, in chapter 7, I review the import of the judicial framework. More specifically, I go into the question: what does transgression (characteristic of riddles) have in common with the judicial frame? In the research tradition, the question of the complicated relationship between riddle and frame has not been satisfactorily solved. Recently, the suggestion has been to relate the experiences described in the neck-saving riddles to the tradition of the grotesque, in which transgressions are considered as moments of experiencing freedom. However, this approach ignores the role of violence in the folktales and cannot therefore shed light on the modernization of the folktale tradition of the neck-saving riddle. René Girard's work has generated insights to better formulate the complicated relationship between riddle and frame. Within his theory, the transgressions in the folktales can be regarded as forms of expression of a mimetic crisis, which develops when, in a society, rivalry has increased. In the cultural-

historical scenario which he sketches, such a crisis is resolved by the pointing out and expulsion of a scapegoat, which results in the smoothing of ruffled feathers. This thought links up with the observation that riddles have a function in moments of crisis; the transgressions reflect the crimes attributed to the scapegoat, to justify expulsion or murder. The unique experiences riddled in the riddle tales, reflect the isolated position of the riddler: the riddle can be regarded as a substitute for the sacrificial end of a crisis.

The development in the neck-saving riddle tales goes one step further: as stated earlier, the violence in them has transcended into a judicial framework. This leads to a channeling of violence which differs from the mere focusing on one person who is no more guilty than the average member of his community. The story-tellers in the neck-saving riddles, aim at the negation of scapegoat-thinking and accompanying violence. Judge and condemned prisoner stand opposite each other as equals, and this may lead to a more profound cultural message in the tale. The condemned prisoners find themselves in a position between death and life; basically, they have already been expelled; however, they prove themselves to be superior by confronting the judge with knowledge of a world 'beyond'. The knowledge of such experiences has been specifically institutionalized in the office of judge, when he regards his position as derived from that of the divine king, intended as a provisional sacrifice. Such an interpretation is justified by drawing a parallel with accession rites as reported in various cultures. Like the condemned prisoner, the judge has two faces, which can lead to an interaction that leads to acquittal. The neck-saving riddle tales are in keeping with the ideas in which capital punishment is rejected as reprehensible.

> Michael Elias, ["Neck-Riddles in Mimetic Theory"](#), *Contagion. Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture* 2 (Spring): 189-202.