

Tautosakos darbai 71, 2026, p. 257–276
ISSN 1392-2831 | eISSN 2783-6827
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51554/TD.26.71.15>

The Contemporary Use of Riddles: Riddles in Fiction and Theatre (Based on the Example of Rimantas Kmita)

AELITA KENSMINIENĖ

Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore

<https://ror.org/050gfgn67>

aelita.kensminiene@liti.lt

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8010-2231>

ABSTRACT. This article examines the contemporary use of riddles in creative professional works, such as fiction and theatre. The works of the popular contemporary Lithuanian writer Rimantas Kmita contain many riddles, and so as he offers an exceptional illustration of this phenomenon he was chosen as the basis for the analysis. The following three works were selected: the novel *Remyga* (2020), the play of the same name (premiere 2020, dir. Oskaras Koršunovas), and the comic book *Keliuonė. Įmink Šiaulius* (2023) by Kmita and the artist Povilas Vincentas Jankūnas. Translated literary works and plays by foreign authors are used in the article to provide a cultural context for the use of riddles in authorial work. These include children's and popular literature, as well as classical dramatic works containing riddles and which have influenced the use of riddles, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and Giacomo Puccini's "Turandot". Kmita's work is viewed as a case study, although from a narrow perspective, i.e. in considering what riddles the author uses and what they add to the work.

KEYWORDS: riddles, the riddle of the Sphinx, novel, comic book, theatre.

Šiuolaikinė mįslių vartoseną: mįslės grožinėje literatūroje ir teatre
(remiantis Rimanto Kmitos kūryba)

SANTRAUKA. Šio straipsnio objektas – šiuolaikinė mįslių vartoseną profesionalių menininkų darbuose, pavyzdžiui, grožinėje literatūroje ir teatre. Populiaraus šiuolaikinio lietuvių rašytojo Rimanto Kmitos kūryboje gausu mįslių; negana to, jo kūriniai itin gerai iliustruoja šį reiškinių, todėl jie ir tapo analizės pagrindu. Pasirinkti trys kūriniai: romanas *Remyga* (2020), pjesė tokiu

Received: 30/04/2025. **Accepted:** 22/05/2026

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pačiu pavadinimu (premjera 2020 m., rež. Oskaras Koršunovas) ir komiksas *Keliuonė. Įmink Šiaulius* (2023), kurio autoriai yra Kmita ir dailininkas Povilas Vincentas Jankūnas. Straipsnyje kaip kultūrinis mįslių Kmitos kūryboje kontekstas pasitelkiami verstiniai literatūros kūriniai ir užsienio autorių pjesės. Tarp jų – vaikų ir populiarioji literatūra, taip pat klasikinės dramos, kuriose esama mįslių. Šie kūriniai – pavyzdžiui, Lewiso Carrollio *Alisa Stebuklų šalyje* ir *Alisa Veidrožio karalystėje*, J. R. R. Tolkienu *Hobitas, arba Ten ir atgal*, Sofoklio *Oidipas karalius* ir Giacomo Puccini „Turandot“ – padarė tam tikrą įtaką mįslių vartosenai. Kmitos kūryba pasitelkiama kaip atvejo analizė siaurąja prasme: aptariama, kokias mįsles autorius naudoja ir ką jos suteikia kūriniui.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: mįslės, Sfinkso mįslė, romanas, komiksas, teatras.

INTRODUCTION

For the main analysis, particularly when writing about the novel *Remyga* and the play of the same name, I have selected verbatim folkloric riddles (true riddles and joking questions, as defined by riddle researchers, e.g. Taylor 1951: 1; Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001: 56–57) or authorial rewritings and improvisations of folk riddles on the theme of the imagery they create. I recognise folk riddles in the text immediately, as I have been cataloguing and studying them for thirty years; moreover, the piece often notes that a riddle is about to be posed. This is also emphasised in the comic, although there the narrative is developed by trying to solve not a folk riddle, but one created by the author based on the structure of a folk riddle (so-called the neck riddle; Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001: 69). In the first section, dedicated to the cultural context, the overview of riddles and texts close to them encompasses a broader understanding of the genre: in addition to those just listed, this includes riddle-like dialogue, metaphorical riddle structure, and purely literary riddles (ibid.: 75–78).

I have already written briefly about some of the works discussed here (Kmitas' *Remyga*, and Kmitas' and Jankūnas' comic) in an article on the contemporary use of riddles in various fields, and in a monograph (see Kensminienė 2022: 121–123; Kensminienė 2024: 151–155). Then, I realized that the topic of riddles in art deserves a closer examination and broader perspective.

CULTURAL CONTEXT: RIDDLES IN TRANSLATIONS OF THE WORLD'S LITERARY HERITAGE

We find excellent examples of riddles being used in works of world literature that have been translated into Lithuanian. One of the most famous examples is Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. First published in the United Kingdom in 1865 (with a sequel in 1872), the book gained immense popularity, being translated

into 174 languages (Zolubienė 2015) and inspiring many other works of art. The books contain multiple references to riddles and similar situations (CAAW: 97–100; CTLG: 116, 190, 207–209; CASŠVK: 60–63, 175, 215, 225), and the whole work can be viewed as one big riddle. Canadian researcher Eleanor Cook devotes an entire chapter to Carroll's works on riddles in literature. She agrees with the idea of 20th-century Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden, whom she quotes:

This is the Land of Enigma, in Auden's sense of the English language as "enigma" inhabiting a country. We perforce see it from a young girl's perspective, in Carroll's imaginative tour de force. And after all, it is only right that puzzles and paradoxes and griphs, as well as personified riddles, riddle-masters, mirror-riddles, arithmetical riddles and more populate this place (Cook 2009: 160).

Kęstutis Urba, a researcher of Lithuanian children's literature, calls this book a great literary riddle-fairy tale that no one has been able to solve to this day (2000: 235). One reason for this is that many of the names and references in the book come from popular English folktales, children's songs and rhymes, riddles, proverbs, and the famous Mother Goose Tales, which have been a staple of English families since the 18th century (ibid.: 236). The character Humpty Dumpty originates from children's poems and riddles, where it refers to an anthropomorphised egg who is typically depicted sitting on a fence. Archer Taylor's collection of English riddles contains as many as 26 riddles that mention this character (TER 1951: 738–747). Of course, the folklore texts in such a work are difficult to translate, and it is probably no coincidence that the first translation into Lithuanian was completed by the folklorist and paremiologist Kazys Grigas. His translation of *Alisa stebukly šalyje* (Alice in Wonderland, CASŠ) was published in 1957. In it, he skilfully created new Lithuanian puns and adapted a Lithuanian folk song, albeit sometimes losing part of the original meaning (Zolubienė 2015). Several other translators later translated the Alice duology into Lithuanian. In 1965, Julija Lapienytė translated the second part (the poet Judita Vaičiūnaitė translated the verses). During the years of independence, a new translation was produced by Vilija Vitkūnienė, with the poems translated by the poet and translator Violeta Palčinskaitė. Agnė Zolubienė compares these translations and analyses the problems of translating the work (ibid.). Liuda Petkevičiūtė translated the work even later. The books have been reprinted many times in Lithuania with illustrations by various artists (Baliutavičiūtė 2022).

There are also many riddles in the fantasy novel *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (1937, see TH), written by the British author J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien, an Oxford professor and a scholar of Anglo-Saxon language and literature (including the 10th–11th-century epic "Beowulf"), drew on many examples of myths and

folklore, including riddles, in his works. These riddles are presented in situations that resemble those in fairy tales or ancient Scandinavian myths. One such situation is depicted in *The Hobbit* when the main character, Bilbo Baggins, and the repulsive inhabitant of dungeons and waters – a chthonic creature – Gollum, fight a battle of riddles:

Then he thought the time had come to ask something hard and horrible. This is what he said:

This thing all things devours:
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays king, ruins town,

And beats high mountain down. Poor Bilbo sat in the dark thinking of all the horrible names of all the giants and ogres he had ever heard told of in tales, but not one of the had done all these things. He had a feeling that the answer was quite different and that he ought to know it, but he could not think of it. He began to get frightened, and that is bad for thinking. Gollum began to get out of his boat. He flapped into the water and paddled to the bank; Bilbo could see his eyes coming towards him. His tongue seemed to stick in his mouth; he wanted to shout out: “Give me more time! Give me time!” But all that came out with a sudden squeal was: “Time! Time!”

Bilbo was saved by pure luck. For that of course was the answer (TH: 75).

The author constantly emphasises the riddle battle for life, and such a description takes up more than ten pages. There are eight rhymed riddles similar to the old ones and one deceptive riddle-question that Gollum cannot answer (TH: 71–80).

This book was first published in Lithuanian as *Hobitas, arba Ten ir Atgal* in 1985, then again in 2002 and 2020. It was translated from the English by Bronė Balčienė (THLt). Interestingly, a very slightly altered version of the Lithuanian translation of this riddle was recorded in 1992. It reads as follows, (the first) comparing to Balčienė’s translation of Gollum’s riddle (the second):

1. Kas visus praryti daiktus –
Paukštį, žvėrį, medį – greitas.
Krimsti varį, graužti plieną,
Gludint akmenį kiekvieną.
Pražudyt karalių, miestą,
Kalną pamažu kiekvieną. – Laikas
(LTR 6116/877/).

2. Kas-s vis-sus-s praryti daiktus-s –
Paukš-štį, ž-žvėrį, medį – greitas-s,
Krim-s-ti varį, grauž-žti plieną,
Gludint akmenį kiekvieną,
Praž-žudyt karalių, mies-stą,
Kalną pamaž-žu s-suės-sti?
(THLt: 80).

Not only the book, but also the films based on it, and even more so on the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003), which the same author wrote and Peter Jackson directed, were very popular in Lithuania among viewers of all age groups and could revive interest in this traditional folklore genre.

The Theban myth of Ancient Greece has provided the inspiration for many works of world culture. Just as in fairy tales, it is a riddle that is supposed to save a life.¹ According to Antti Aarne, this riddle went as follows: “*Was ist das, was nur einen Namen hat und vierfüßsig, zweifüßsig und drefüßsig wird? [...] Es ist der Mensch, der vierfüßsig geboren wird, da das Kind auf allen Vieren kriecht, herangewachsen ist der Mensch zweifüßsig, gegen das Alter hin aber nimmt er als dritten Fuss den Stab zur Hand*” (What is that which has only one name and becomes four-legged, two-legged, and three-legged? [...] Man is born four-legged, as the child crawls on all fours; man grows up two-legged, but towards old age he takes the staff as his third leg; 1919: 6).

One such work based on this myth is Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus the King*, written in 5th-century BC Athens (see Dilytė 2018). This play has long been one of the most famous tragedies included in school curricula and is therefore familiar to many. Sophocles’ tragedy features riddles repeatedly, and Oedipus’s reputation as a good riddle-teller is referenced:

OEDIPUS to Tiresias

Ther was a riddle, not for some passer-by to solve –
It cried out for a prophet. Where were you?
Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,
You and your birds, your gods – nothing.
No, but came by, Oedipus the ignorant,
I stopped the Sphinx! [...] (SOeK: 182)

.....
1 King Laius of Thebes was told by the oracle that his son would kill him, so he had the newborn’s legs pierced and ordered that he be thrown into the mountains. Taking pity on the abandoned child, a shepherd took him to Polybus, the childless king of Corinth, who named the baby Oedipus (Greek for ‘swollen feet’) and raised him as his own son with his wife Merope. After hearing from the oracle in Delphi that he would kill his father and marry his mother, Oedipus did not return to his alleged parents’ house. En route, he encountered Laius. The two argued about who should let the other pass, and Oedipus killed his unrecognised father with a stick. After solving the riddle set by the Sphinx to all travellers going to Thebes (who would tear apart those who failed to solve it), he became king of Thebes and married Jocasta, unaware that he was marrying his mother. He lived happily with her for about 20 years until, when a plague epidemic broke out in Thebes, the Delphic oracle predicted that it would end when the murderer of Laius was driven out of the city. Oedipus set out to find the murderer and discovered that he himself had killed his father and married his mother. Horrified, Jocasta hanged herself, Oedipus gouged out his eyes and was banished from Thebes. Later, he was swallowed by the earth when it opened up (see Veličkienė 2018).

OEDIPUS:

Riddles – all you can say are riddles, murk and darkness.

TIRESIAS:

Ah, but aren't you the best man alive at solving riddles? (SOeK: 184)

In the restored independent Lithuania, the play was staged twice by two theatre giants from different generations: Rimas Tuminas at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre in 1998 (Šabasevičienė 2018), and Oskaras Koršunovas at the eponymous theatre in 2002 [1] (prior to this, the play was staged at the Panevėžys Drama Theatre by the renowned director Juozas Miltinis in 1977 [2]).² It is interesting that the same riddle of the Sphinx about the age of man, which was solved by Oedipus, can be heard at the end of another performance, although this is not emphasised further. This is the puppet and object performance for children titled “Riddle(s)” staged by the Lėlė professional Vilnius theatre (premiere 10 September 2022). The performance consists of dialogues based almost exclusively on riddles and a few proverbs. In the trailer, director and artist Aušra Bagočiūnaitė Paukštienė emphasises not only the imagery of riddles, but also their fatal role in the past: “After all, in ancient times, the ritual telling of riddles or proverbs could not only be a game, a form of competition, a demonstration of wisdom and dexterity, but also a matter of life or death” [3]. This performance, which is intended for preschool children, does not obviously explore any existential problems. However, it uses traditional riddles to establish the folklore worldview and aesthetics of riddles in the minds of the youngest members of society (see Kensminienė 2022: 123).

Giacomo Puccini's opera “Turandot” (which premiered in Milan in 1926) features a plot similar to that of fairy tales, since it is based on a 12th-century Persian tale. The opera's plot is believed to originate from the 12th-century poem “The Seven Beauties” by the Persian poet Nizami. The plot has come a long way since then. In 1722, the French collection of fairy tales *One Thousand and One Nights* was published, in which Princess Turandokht appears in one of the tales. In 1762, the Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi created the *Commedia dell'arte* play *Turandot* based on this tale, transferring the action to China; the play was adapted in 1801 by Friedrich Schiller, and this version became the inspiration for Puccini's opera, for which Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni wrote the libretto. Incidentally, the riddles and answers differ in each work (Van Ruymbeke 2018: 192–193). The first production of this opera in Lithuania (dir. Detlef Sölter, cond. Stefan Lano) took place very late, in 2003. The next production, directed by Robert Wilson and

2 As the performances are no longer shown and only short excerpts are available online, I will not discuss the productions of this drama in more detail.

conducted by Modestas Pitrenas, took place in 2019 [4]. At the time of writing, this production is still being performed. The last series of performances took place in autumn 2025 and sold out. This shows that the message about riddles and riddling as a significant plot point in the opera reached many viewers, thus increasing the popularity of riddles.³ The motif of a pre-marital test that involves asking riddles depicted in the opera is similar to that depicted in the international tale ATU 851 “The Princess Who Cannot Solve a Riddle”: in the opera the princess herself sets riddles for her prospective fiancé candidates, and those who fail to answer are punished by death. The riddles presented in the opera have the answers “hope”, “blood” and “Turandot” [6]. Despite the intricate embellishments of the libretto’s language, the situation and purpose of the riddles are similar to those of fairy tales, i.e. the groom, risking his life, seeks the hand of the princess by solving her riddles.

RIDDLES IN THE PLAY *REMYGA* BY OSKARAS KORŠUNOVAS (BASED ON THE PLAY BY RIMANTAS KMITA)

The drama *Remyga* written by the popular contemporary Lithuanian writer Rimantas Kmita and subtitled “a psychological rock ballad about a cop from Šiauliai” was staged by the renowned director Oskaras Koršunovas at the Šiauliai State Drama Theatre. The play premiered on 22 September 2020 at the Pakeleivingi festival in Anykščiai, but rehearsals and further performances were stopped by the pandemic and consequent quarantine measures. Meanwhile, Kmita continued to write a novel with the same title. Although the play and the novel were both published in 2020, Kmita says that he had the idea for the play first [7]. As stated in the play’s announcement, its author, Kmita, presents a fantastical version of history, combining real facts and fiction. The play talks about the city of Šiauliai and its people, as well as real events and myths. Taking the audience back to the early years of Lithuanian independence, the action of the play is set in the controversial years of 1988–1992. It was a challenging period of transition, during which the dark forces of the old structures grappled with the idealism of independence. The play’s main character, Remyga, is torn between these two forces. After serving in the Soviet army in Afghanistan, he returns to his native Šiauliai. He wants to live like “normal people”: to be a loved husband, a good father and a loyal employee. However, the shadows of the past and the surrounding chaos are increasing and the dark forces are gaining more and more power. How can you draw the line between good and

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3 As I was unable to attend the performance and a recording is not available online, I present the situation and the answers to the riddles from the libretto of the New York Metropolitan Opera production (premiere 4 April 1987, dir. Franco Zeffirelli, cond. James Levine) [5].

evil in such a chaotic society? How can you control your inner demons? The play's announcement says that the creators have mixed "a difficult-to-define genre cocktail of documentary material, everyday authenticity, psychedelic mysticism, and live rock music" [8].

The play begins with riddles, posed at by the character A Child (played by Vladas Baranauskas) who immediately issues a warning upon his entrance – an almost traditional opening formula:⁴ "A riddle!". Next, two completely different riddles are presented one after the other. The first one is "*Vienoj pusėj – devynaukštis, kitoj pusėj – nei to bybis, nei to paukštis. Kas? – Leninas Šiauliuose!*" (On one side – is a nine-storey building; on the other side is something like a dick, something like a bird. What? – Lenin in Šiauliai!) As Kmita later clarified, this refers to Kaštonų alley, where there is an apartment building on one end and a Lenin monument on the other. And the other riddle:

VAIKIUKAS:

– Antra mįslė! Iš raidės „P“:
Padaras žemėje yra dvikojis,
Trikojis ir keturkojis,
Vardu tuo pačiu.

CHILD:

– Second riddle! From the letter "C":
A Creature on earth is two-legged,
Three-legged and four-legged,
With the same name.

Kas? [pauzė] Kas?!

Who? [pause] Who?!

KITI VEIKĖJAI:

– Kas? Žmogus.

OTHER CHARACTERS:

– Who? A man.

VAIKIUKAS:

– Sako, žmogus! *Homo fabians?*
Ar *homo sapiens*?⁵

CHILD:

They say man! *Homo fabians?*
Or *Homo sapiens?*

There are no more riddles in the entire performance. Although there are only two, they are very eloquent. According to the play's author, the first riddle originates

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4 The formulas at the beginning and end of riddles are fixed word combinations or phrases that are not necessarily semantically related to the question part of the riddle or the referred object. For example, "Riddle me, riddle me / Riddy, riddy, I suppose...", TER 13b, 41; "Riddlum riddlum, raddy...", TER 2, Lithuanian "*Mįslė, per pilvą gyslė, po kojų vesėlė. – Verpiamasis ratelis*" (A riddle, a vein running through the belly; a wedding taking place beneath the feet. – Spinning wheel, LTR 218/1237–160/; for more see Kensminienė 2013).

5 A recording of the performance, which took place on November 7, 2025 at the Šiauliai State Drama Theatre, was made by the author of the article.

from contemporary Šiauliai folklore and was used by the actor at his own discretion.⁶ The riddle not only marks the realities of space and time, thus representing reality, but also refers to the carnival worldview (the juxtaposition of low vocabulary and the ‘bottom’ of the body with a bird which is associated with the higher spheres of heaven and spirituality) and the style of the burlesque or *Commedia dell’arte* genres (there are quite a few such aesthetic elements in the performance, and the characters correspond: masks embodying urban legends such as ‘lords’, ‘servants’, ‘lovers’). The second riddle is an almost unaltered version of the Sphinx’s riddle (Taylor 1951: 20–24), which Oedipus solves in Sophocles’ tragedy. This riddle is widespread internationally (Aarne 1919: 9–23) with around 120 variants recorded in Lithuania. In Lithuanian, this popular riddle goes as follows: “*Rytą eina keturiom, dieną – dviem, vakarą – trim. – Žmogus*” (In the morning, it walks on four legs; during the day, on two; and in the evening, on three. – Man, LTR 13/191/). The first international versions did not mention the time of day, this information was added later. In the Lithuanian translation of Sophocles’ play, the riddle reads as follows:

Padaras žemėj yra ir dvikojis drauge, ir trikojis,
 Ir keturkojis vardu tuo pačiu ir pralenkia jis vienas
 Visa, kas juda ore, vandenynuos ir žemėj ropoja [...]
 (A creature on earth is two-legged and three-legged,
 And four-legged in name alone it surpasses
 Everything that moves in the air, in the oceans, and creeps on the earth [...], SEK: 9–11).

The rhyming answer says that as a baby humans crawls on all fours, as adults walk on two legs, and in old age lean on a stick (*ibid.*).

This riddle seems to hint at another dimension of the performance, located next to the three unities of quasi-classical theatre (action – the survival of society and the individual in a confrontation with the past, an attempt to break free; place – Šiauliai; time – the end of the Soviet era). The riddle of the Sphinx gives the performance a broad range of meanings, encompassing the heritage of Ancient culture and Western civilisation, located somewhere far away or nearby, the tragedy of an individual against fate and the inability to choose, alluding to Oedipus, the natural stages of human life (infancy, maturity, old age), a privilege not afforded to all the characters in the drama *Remyga*. Thus, the riddles in the performance serve a similar function to the overture in opera: they provide a concise summary of the style and main themes of the entire piece. Moreover, they create additional meanings. According to Kmita, both riddles in the play were the initiative of the actor. When I suggested that the second riddle – which, like Oedipus the King,

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 6 From e-mail correspondence with Kmita, message dated 08/11/2025.

continues the theme of human helplessness in the face of fate – appeared at the beginning of *Remyga* under the influence of the director who staged *Oedipus the King* in 2002, Kmita did not argue, saying that he was not heavily involved in staging the play.⁷ According to him: “In theatre, many other artists engage with your work and bring their own energy to it. Seeing how your text grows and develops is a very good feeling” [7], “[t]he actors really enriched the performance with their experience of that time. After all, they witnessed those events, not me” (Čerškutė 2021). The actor’s comment *homo fabians*? Or *homo sapiens*? is very eloquent. The first part of it makes an allusion to the anthropological term *Homo faber*, meaning a producing/working person who controls his own destiny and environment by using tools [9]. This allusion is not accidental, as the entire play speaks of man’s limited ability to control his own destiny when he is faced with truly major turning points in history and the challenges they bring.

The second riddle generally seems to contrast *Homo faber* and *Homo sapiens*, inviting us to question human evolution towards progress. This is not surprising, given the era in which the drama is set and the grotesque nature of some of its characters. The theme of the ability to control or be helpless against fate is a key theme in both Sophocles’ and Kmita’s plays. The impression of the ruthlessness and inevitability of fate is reinforced by a giant cross standing diagonally in the centre of the stage, as if a sword had been thrust into it and divided it. The culminating events take place at and around this cross: Remyga’s ‘trial’ and subsequent murder (or sacrifice). By the way, in one interview, Koršunovas compares *Remyga* with another performance by himself in the play by Sigitas Parulskis, which premiered in 1997:

I see more parallels between these performances. ‘PS Case OK’ features a protagonist, the Student, who, like Remyga, could not come to terms with what was happening and refused to accept his historical mission. Like Remyga, the Student embarks on a search for identity and goes through various stages of self-perception in a postmodernist way, becoming Hamlet and Oedipus (Šatkauskienė 2020b).

RIDDLES IN RIMANTAS KMITA’S NOVEL *REMYGA*

The play discussed above was the prototype for Kmita’s 2020 novel *Remyga* (KmR). Like the play, the novel depicts the life of Remigijus Volkūnas, a young man born in 1968 who served in the Soviet army in Afghanistan (it was the greatest fear of the

7 From Kmita’s letter of 28/11/2025: “I’ll say right away that I would love to have the answers to most of these questions myself. Both riddles were set by the actor Baranauskas. [...] I can’t say much more because I only participated in a few rehearsals and I don’t know much about what goes on behind the scenes of the production.”

entire generation) and thereafter suffers from severe post-traumatic stress disorder both in post-Soviet reality and in an inner world full of demons. Remyga's real life takes place in Šiauliai: the background of the action created from the various realities of this city reveals the reality of the wild capitalism of the 1990s, the fight for the country's independence, the rise of new business and political figures, the influence of criminal groups and the survival strategies and entertainment of that time. Remyga's inner life, which is identified with that of a werewolf, is filled with myths, beliefs, urban legends, surreal visions and the frightening ghosts of the past.

The two riddles introduced into the play by a supporting actor (one of them perhaps by the director, as I mentioned) seem to have inspired the writer to include them extensively in the novel. Riddles are presented or mentioned in the work more than ten times, eight of which are traditional riddles or riddling questions. They often complement the depicted situation; for instance, the riddle about a galosh (rubber boot) is posed while the mystical characters Bear and the Child observe the start of a criminal orgy involving girls: "All the other guys also grab the girls, drag them into the rooms and all sorts of corners. It's black all around and red in the middle when you put it in – it's warm and pleasant"⁸ (KmR: 107–108).

A riddle joke about the policeman acts as an anchor to reality amid the hero's long reflections. The riddle is a question that members of the police force ask each other at the police station:

"Well, who knows what the difference is between a policeman and a wagon?" someone asks, everyone is laughing, but no one knows, it's a new joke.

"A policeman can probably take more than can fit in a wagon", Andrius guesses.

"Well, not exactly. The wagon needs to be hitched up, and the policeman hitches himself up."⁹

Everyone in the police station bursts out laughing (ibid.: 169–170).

This well-known riddle illustrates how humour is one of the functions of riddles, while at the same time reflecting the reality of the time, i.e. the huge corruption that was tolerated by the majority (the word "*ima*" (he takes) is often used in colloquial speech to mean 'takes bribes').

The riddle about thunder "*Eina jautis rėkdamas, dangų ragu rėždamas*" (A bull walks roaring, with his horn cutting the sky, LTR 3010/70/) has been elaborated on, building on the impressive image it creates:

8 The Lithuanian riddle: "*Aplinkui juoda, vidury raudona, kaip įkiši – šilta ir malonu. – Kaliošas*" (LTR 3518/1161/).

9 The Lithuanian riddle: "*Kuo skiriasi milicininkas nuo vagono? – Milicininkas pats prisikabina, o vagoną reikia prikabinti*" (LTR 4934/130/).

The bull raises its head, thrusts its horn into the sky, and strides forward, roaring. The sky rumbles and a crack begins to form. Like a plough, the bull ploughs the soil with its horn, creating a furrow in the sky. The sky rumbles, thunders and flashes... Buratino shouts: "The bull goes, roaring!" And the echo ripples out, giving each dust mite its own voice: the bull goes, roaring, the bull goes, roaring, the horn cuts the sky, the horn cuts the sky, the bull goes, roaring, roaring, roaring – what? What, what, what? Thunder! Thunder! Thunder!

The bull is so shaken that it seems that the scaffolding supporting the sky will collapse and collapse onto the Hill of Crosses¹⁰. But something thunderously rumbles inside the bull, as if something has broken... Steam begins to rise from its huge body. "The bull has been sacrificed!" Not only is steam rising from the bull, but the bull itself is turning into fog and thick fog is filling the entire space around it... (ibid.: 273–274).

Notably, through this improvisation, the author intuitively unveils the code of the riddle space, which becomes strikingly apparent throughout the novel. The world created by riddles is characterised by a constant dynamic alternation of dimensions, boundary violations and depictions of openings and cracks (see Kensminienė 2010, for more on space in riddles). This is precisely the function of the riddles in Kmita's novel: they most often occur at the boundary between two worlds, or mark a fatal, limiting, moment in time that will soon begin. When asked directly about this, the writer replied:

In *Remyga*, these spaces are apparently brought together half-intuitively and half-consciously. Clearly, it is about the collision of two eras and the collision of the historical and mythical worlds. The character himself is so ambiguous – he is both a man and a werewolf, changing his fur and uniform. I remember reading an article in a folklore study about the symbolism of the ox in folklore¹¹, and of course, Beresnevičius's work had to be reconsidered. I could only remember three riddles, so I had to search

.....
10 The Hill of Crosses (Kryžių kalnas) is a hill near Šiauliai with many crosses erected by locals. "Local people say that the first crosses were built in the middle of the 19th century, with prayers to God for grace and health, because people considered this hill to be a holy place. Others claimed that people started to erect crosses to remember those who were killed in the 1831 and 1863 uprisings against Tsarist Russia. After suppressing the uprising, the occupation authorities prohibited the construction of crosses and destroyed those that were already built. Despite this, throughout the period of Lithuania's occupation, the Hill of Crosses remained a symbol of heroic resistance and belief in freedom. The Hill of Crosses became famous around the world when Pope John Paul II visited it on September 7, 1993. In the chapel (architects A. Jukna and R. Budrytė) built opposite the Hill of Crosses, John Paul II celebrated Holy Mass for a gathering of 100,000 pilgrims. The Pope blessed Lithuania and all of Christian Europe. One year later, the gift of the Holy Father to Lithuania – a cross (sculptor E. Manfrini) – reached the Hill of Crosses." [10]

11 Most likely, the article by Jūratė Šlekonytė (2010) is in mind.

through publications and the internet (from electronic correspondence with the author, 26/08/2022).

Thus, although the author is not a connoisseur of living oral riddle traditions, he uses secondary written sources and demonstrates a deep understanding of riddles.

Following the priest's reflections on one of the personifications of evil in the novel (the hero's father-in-law who is also Buratino), in which he says: "You can drive the devil out of one person, or out of a hundred, but he won't disappear. So is it worth hoping that Remyga will deal with Buratino?", the paraphrased traditional riddle goes: "A gentleman in a red frock coat and a red jacket comes. He comes and says: 'Take away the chickens, I'm not afraid of dogs'".¹² But the answer is not given, only a hint is provided: "I will help you. He lives underground" (ibid.: 264), creating tension and giving a warning of the approaching underground inhabitant. Although the traditional answer to the riddle is an earthworm, the novel uses the ambiguity inherent in riddle poetry to make it clear that it is in fact about Buratino, who was found in a dungeon, where it was dark and smelly (KmR: 203–204). In an interview with Nomeda Šatkauskienė, Kmita said the following about this character:

Let's consider the depiction of Buratino in *Remyga*: Buratino was a popular Soviet symbol and a toy shop called Buratinas operated in Šiauliai during the Soviet era. There were also obscene jokes about him in folklore. While writing the book, I also discovered that tanks capable of sweeping vast territories first tested in Afghanistan¹³ were also called buratins. Then you suddenly realise that by turning the embodiment of evil in *Remyga* into a buratin, you have intuitively connected those threads (Šatkauskienė 2020a).

In the parallel world, Remyga is the Werewolf; his mission in the novel is to restore historical memory and fight evil. Ignas Šlajus, who analysed historical sources from the 16th to 18th centuries that describe people turning into wolves, claims that the mythical significance of this transformation during the summer

12 The Lithuanian riddle: "*Ateina ponaitis raudona sermėgaite: 'Atginkit vištas, šunų nebijau!'*" (A gentleman in a red coat comes: "Take away the chickens, I'm not afraid of dogs!", LTR 266/37/).

13 Buratino is a character from the 19th century Italian puppet theatre, as well as from Alexei Tolstoy's adaptation of Carlo Collodi's book *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. The book *The Golden Key, or the Adventures of Pinocchio* (TB) was extremely popular in the Soviet Union. The original Russian edition was first published in 1936, and the Lithuanian translation went through ten editions, the first of which was in 1937 (Urba 1996; Urba 2011: 186). The epilogue of Kmita's novel states that the TOS-1 jet flamethrowers were called Buratinos (KmR: 281). Apparently, Kmita gave them this name because the two machines are similar in appearance: the tank has one barrel and the flamethrower has a special multi-hole firing aperture. A photo of this can be found in the novel (KmR: 124).

Solstice may have been to combat witches (2025: 47). As mythology is very important to him, Kmita consciously seeks ways to include it, and he could have been interested in and aware of this function of werewolves.

Riddles create obstacles for the characters, and if someone has the power to solve them, this becomes a defining feature of that character... Since the novel is based on mythology anyway, riddles appear as an important aspect of it (from the writer's answer to my questions via electronic correspondence, 28/11/2025).

As the end of the novel approaches and the tension rises, riddles are quoted more and more frequently. Often, riddles are repeated two or three times, as if the sound of them is being enjoyed. For example, when the future murderer approaches the guardhouse where Remyga is standing guard at the Hill of Crosses and tries to take his automatic weapon, dust mites (which are closely associated with oblivion) recite the traditional riddle about the rifle "*Kampe čerepe smertis stovi, kampe čerepe smertis stovi*" (In the corner, in the skull, death stands, in the corner, in the skull, death stands; *ibid.*: 274–275). As the tragic climax approaches, Remyga engages in a verbal duel with his father-in-law. He loses because he is forced to remember the war crime he committed:

"So, Remyga, what do you see in one of the huts? Let's take a look and blow off the dust!" Smiles the father-in-law [...].

Remyga is silent. A splinter throbs in his heart. But the dust mites answer for him:

"A child. He sees a child. A dead child" (*ibid.*: 277).

Remyga loses the climactic question-and-answer duel with his father-in-law, which also means losing his life. According to riddle researcher Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, the participant who poses the riddle holds the power, exercising both intellectual and social dominance (2018). Similar verbal duels for the life of the protagonist using riddles also take place in fairy tales, for example in the international folk tale ATU 851 "The Princess Who Cannot Solve the Riddle".

RIDDLES IN THE COMIC BOOK *KELIUONĖ*.

ĮMINK ŠIAULIUS BY RIMANTAS KMITA AND
POVILAS VINCENTAS JANKŪNAS

The comic book *Keliuonė. Įmink Šiaulius* (Journey: Solve Šiauliai, KmJnK), published in 2023, by Kmita and artist Povilas Vincentas Jankūnas is almost entirely about finding answers to a complex riddle posed by the character Laumė (Fairy).

As the title suggests, this is a book about riddles. Initiated by the Šiauliai Art Gallery, the book has a clear educational ambition: to introduce young readers to the history of the Šiauliai region and its notable figures. This educational purpose overshadows the ‘fictional’ aspect of the book. The author weaves together aspects of his hometown Šiauliai into one narrative, incorporating historical knowledge, the region’s former industrial power, its politically active society, the press and the artistic objects that adorn the city and embody its legends. The comic’s plot unfolds with two schoolchildren, Tauras and Lukas, hiding from the school principal, unexpectedly finding themselves in a 19th-century library. There, they overhear a conversation between two women who were public activists at that time. The ladies speak in didactic phrases, and one of them notices the boys. She hands them a note and imperiously asks them to take it to the brewery and give it to Jonas.¹⁴ The main plot intrigue begins here with the children’s journey through the mythical 19th-century city of Šiauliai. The boys set out into the city with the note with various events from that era then depicted (KmJnK: 7–13). The boys find themselves in a sewer full of monsters. The book further explains that “all those creatures in the sewer were from the boulevard” (ibid.: 47). These creatures are sculptures that stand in various places on the central street. They are both witnesses to and creators of the city’s myth because, as Kmita writes in the author’s foreword at the end of the book, “Myth protects and defends” and “Myth is active now” (ibid.: 169). While running away from them through a sewer pipe, the boys find themselves in a swamp. There, they meet the third character, Eglė, a book-loving girl who also loves one of the boys. They also meet Laumė, a mysterious half-woman, half-cuckoo creature whose sculpture can be found on the façade of a building in Šiauliai.¹⁵ Laumė poses a complex riddle to the young people, who want to escape the swamp and this past era. The search for answers forms the next part of the comic’s plot. According to the context of the riddle, it is similar to the riddles found in fairy tales (also known as “neck-riddles” or “riddles about a specific event”), because solving it can save one’s life and earn a reward. It is not solved through thought but by encountering the objects or phenomena that need to be guessed:

14 To the poet and booksmugler Jonas Krikščiūnas-Jovaras (KmJnK: 158). Booksmuglers symbolised resistance to the ban on printing in the Lithuanian script (i.e. the Latin alphabet), which was imposed by Tsarist Russia after the 1863 uprising. They smuggled banned publications from the so-called Lithuania Minor, which belonged to Prussia (now the Kaliningrad region, Russian Federation), to Lithuania Major.

15 This is the sculpture “Laumė” (The Fairy) created in 2017 by the graphic artist Reda Uogintienė from Šiauliai. It is dedicated to the anniversary of Algirdas Julius Greimas, the world-famous founder of the Paris School of Semiotics, who was born in Šiauliai. It is located in the city centre, high on the wall of Šiauliai University’s Art Gallery. According to the artist, it reflects the transformation of the pagan deity Cuckoo into a woman (Juškevičienė 2017; Urbonavičiūtė 2017).

The sky and water will show you the way, the beehives of light will guide you, you will feel like you are in an unfamiliar place by the iron river, the smell will lead you to the water, but if you manage to cross the water without getting your feet wet, the bear will give you a golden egg (KmJnK: 38). [...] The answer will be your guide, and the ox will be your map (ibid.: 40).

The spaces created in the comic and the novel *Remyga* are quite similar (by the way, the novel also provides some documentary illustrations, recreating the historical events and atmosphere of that time). While the comic features swamps, underground rivers and polluted lakes more often, fog is also a characteristic:¹⁶ when the children fall into the sewer, the words of one of the historical figures described, Ona Lukauskaitė, are quoted: “We were covered in fog, We were surrounded by cobwebs” (KmJnK: 28). The comic is also rich in historical detail. At one point in their search, the children find themselves in a photo shop where they look at historical photographs of the city (ibid.: 61–62). It turns out that all the components of the riddle refer to different parts of Šiauliai and are discovered while travelling around and experiencing the city. “You have to experience it”, “to experience the city”, as the book says after the happy ending (ibid.: 151–153): the sky and water showing the way are the constellation of the Bull and the ball in the lake overlaid on the imaginary city (ibid.: 44–46), the hives of light are ancient cameras, because they capture light, and the photos taken with them (ibid.: 63), the iron river is the railway (ibid.: 72), and so on. However, the book does not end after the happy ending of the story, but continues with another commentary section, “What Remains Unsaid”. Here, biographical details, historical knowledge and interpretations are added to each chapter of the comic. These additional layers of meaning are akin to the hidden depths of riddles, which are referred to as double-stranded (“*mįslė dvigyslė*”) or even quadruple-stranded (“*mįslė keturgyslė*”) in Lithuanian. Thus, when reading the commentary after the chapter titled “Beehives of Light”, the reader suddenly realises that the people introduced are those hives of light. However, the most interesting aspect is the author’s reasoning or prompts on how to understand a particular part of the work, or indeed the entire comic:

The comic’s code, which changes chapters, eras and worlds, is cultural. Books, music, photography, artwork and sculptures all lead to the depths of the collective subconscious, expanding the context and opening up a completely different experience (ibid.: 160).

.....
16 In Kmita’s novel, fog is a very important and frequently recurring “character”. It is mentioned in almost twenty places. The novel opens with scenes of the river near the Hill of Crosses in fog, and the final chapter, which depicts the tragic ending and fateful riddle-telling, also takes place there, shrouded in fog. Fog is closely associated with oblivion and what one does not want to remember.

In his work, Kmita particularly likes to depict dungeons, which usually signify parallel, surreal or subconscious worlds. He also explores the multi-dimensionality of the world and the layers and alloys of meaning:

The Rūdė is a small river in Šiauliai. You haven't seen it because it's underground, not because it's small. Its course is marked by Rūdė Street and a fountain on the boulevard. The name of the river is associated with bog ore, which has been found in the Šiauliai area since the 4th century. Iron was smelted from this ore and used to forge tools and weapons. While the sun may not have been forged here and thrown into the sky, the weapons used to win the Battle of the Sun certainly were. Perhaps that is why metal sculptures and godlessness – or rather, the social democratic tradition and concern for the weaker members of society – are so popular in Šiauliai. After all, ore is extracted from swamps to make iron and weapons. In our mythology, swamps have always been the devil's territory. But don't be afraid: Šiauliai has an alternative to the devil, an impressive cathedral and the Hill of Crosses (KmJnK: 164).

It is worth stopping at this devil's territory, which is mentioned not coincidentally. According to Lithuanian folklore, fairy tales come from God and riddles come from the devil:

God brought a bag of tales and scattered them across the world for people to share and pass the time. The Devil had nothing to offer, so he brought a bag of riddles and scattered them across the world. Therefore, fairy tales come from God and riddles come from the devil. The devil is very happy when people solve riddles... (LTR 2234/85/).

As my previous research on the perception of riddles in Lithuanian folklore showed, riddles were considered to be under the devil's jurisdiction; he was responsible for ensuring that riddling ran smoothly. The current perception of riddles has not changed radically either: a study of media article headlines revealed that the term "riddle" is used to show that mysterious and difficult-to-understand phenomena will be discussed; the term has negative connotations (see Kensminienė 2017). In an interview with Jūratė Čerškutė, Kmita attempts to summarise the central theme of his novel *Remyga* in a single sentence. He describes the metaphor of an omnipresent, eternal evil that he still feels (Čerškutė 2021). Although the author does not directly link the devil and riddles, his work does not contradict the broader cultural context from which it emerges; rather, it blends into it harmoniously.

CONCLUSIONS

Traditional riddles are still included in professional creations, whether in fiction or works for the theatre. For artists who incorporate riddles in their work, the fatal and existential role of riddles as depicted in myths and fairy tales is a relevant theme. The competitive nature of riddling is often emphasised, as are the life-saving or damning consequences of successfully solving them. The so-called Riddle of the Sphinx, recorded in writing as early as the 5th century BC in Ancient Greece, is a popular example. Its continued use today is no coincidence: being relatively short and corresponding to many features characteristic of riddle poetics, it summarises human life while simultaneously alluding to a huge field of meaning. Therefore, it has been and continues to be very convenient for both ancient and postmodern creators.

The contemporary Lithuanian writer Rimantas Kmita has a particular fondness for riddles. In the play *Remyga* by Kmita and Koršunovas, the Riddle of the Sphinx is presented alongside a vulgar contemporary riddle, performing the role of a peculiar overture as it defines the play's main themes and style. This is an unexpected and previously unheard-of aspect of the use of riddles, although in general the contemporary use of riddles in professional verbal creativity generally does not deviate from their traditional perception and functions. In other works by Kmita, riddles play a role that complements the narrative, sometimes stopping or illustrating it. The riddle used in the comic is similar to neck riddles; recognising its segments and searching for a memory form the axis of the narrative.

Thus, riddles remain relevant because they enable us to discuss eternal and universal themes and create multilayered meanings.

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