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Family Plays



Riddle Me Ree

Answer This Question
or Pay Me a Fee

A play with folk music by
Martha Bennett King

Riddle Me Ree

Answer This Question or Pay Me a Fee

Drama. *By Martha Bennett King. Based on the ballad King John and the Abbot of Canterbury.” Cast: 8m., 5w.* This beguiling work by a master of playwriting allows subtle audience participation. Out of the medieval sport of riddles, a spell is woven of laughter, life and death while involving the audience in song and suspense. Riddles, now the delight of children, were once a sport-of-wits for adults. The ancient ballad on which this play is based tells of a king who forgot the laughter behind the shout: “Answer my riddle or pay me a fee!” The envious king raises the stakes to grim heights, commanding a wealthy abbot to answer three impossible riddles at peril of his wealth and his head. The queen, her ladies, the court jesters, an evil astrologer and even the audience become involved—first in spirited riddle songs and questions, then step-by-step in growing concern for the despairing and doomed abbot. It is the scorned step-brother of the abbot, a simple singing shepherd, whose wit and courage bring the day to an astonishing climax. *Set: settings include an open field and a room in the palace. May be simple or elaborate. Approximate running time: 40 minutes. Music in book. Code: R97.*

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098-3308
Phone: (800) 448-7469 / (815) 338-7170
Fax: (800) 334-5302 / (815) 338-8981

www.FamilyPlays.com

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This Riddle or Pay Me a Fee

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RIDDLE ME REE

Based on the ballad "King John and the Abbot of Canterbury"
(Child 45) first printed for P. Brooksby at the
Golden Ball in Pye Corner (1672-1695) London.

F. J. Child, ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH POPULAR BALLADS,
edited by Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge
Cambridge Edition, Houghton Mifflin, 1904.

RIDDLE ME REE

TWO LOCALES:

- (1) The Queen's sitting room in the palace.
- (2) A shade tree at the edge of a field

CAST:

King John

His Astrologer

The Abbot of Canterbury

His Brother, a Shepherd

The King's Jester

Spriteley }
Ligteley } apprentices to the Jester

Sir Roger of Akeley

The Queen

Elsbeth }
Genevieve }
Mary }
Madeleine } Ladies-in-Waiting

RECORDINGS:

(Suggested for Background)

THE FESTIVE PIPES: Five Centuries of Dance Music for Recorders.
Krainis Recorder Consort.
Kapp KCL 9034

Respighi: ANCIENT DANCES AND AIRS FOR LUTE, Suites 1, 2, 3
Antal Dorati conducting the Philharmonia Hungarica.
Mercury Records MG 50199

The cover graphic designed by Ken Holamon

RIDDLE ME REE

The Queen's sitting room in the palace. Two low, but elaborate, chairs are placed informally apart for the King and Queen. Benches and cushions serve for others.

The Jester enters as music is heard off. He skips as if prepared to entertain, but finding no one in the room, sits down in the King's chair, posing elegantly. He claps and his two apprentices dart in to sit at his feet.

JESTER: Your name, Sirrah?

LIGHTELEY: Lighteley.

JESTER: And yours, Sirrah?

SPRITELEY: Spriteley.

JESTER: (*pointing to wrong ones*) Lighteley...Spriteley...(*they protest silently. He tries again.*) Spriteley...Lighteley... (*they nod.*) Ah...sent to me to be instructed in the inscrutable ways of kings and queens...of ladies and lovers...of churchmen and astrologers. (*He paces floor talking to himself.*) A riddle, however you twist it. (*To apprentices.*) So. We must always be prepared to speak in riddles. We must amuse the King. Let's practice. Riddle me, riddle me ree. Answer this riddle or pay me a fee.

APPRENTICES: (*mimicking Jester*) Riddle me, riddle me ree. Answer this riddle or pay me a fee.

JESTER: (*back in King's chair*) Very good. Now heed what I say. And never forget. The King likes nothing better than riddles. BUT...HE LIKES TO WIN! (*Confidentially*) There was a time when he could lose and laugh, but since the new astrologer arrived...well...now the King may challenge someone to a game and set the forfeits himself. Unfortunately, his whim is law.

The Astrologer strides on. Jester tumbles from chair. Apprentices try to hide. The Astrologer dusts the King's chair with a large handkerchief, then bows, pretending the King has arrived. He whispers in his ears, then solemnly consults the stars, whispers to the King, rubs his hands and chuckles...then strides off. The apprentices crawl up to the Jester.

LIGHTELEY: What was that?

JESTER: The King's new astrologer.

SPRITELEY: I don't like him.

JESTER: Nor do I. We must walk softly and listen closely. *Exit.*

THE SCENE CHANGES to a field with a large shade tree bordering Sir Roger of Akeley's land. Recorder music continues...as...

A young man wearing an elegant velvet robe with a jeweled belt enters. He carries a skin of water and a sack of bread

which he drops under the tree. He stretches his arms with joy, then throws them around the tree.

SHEPHERD: Home at last. You, good tree, shall be my new home. No more living in my brother's great castle. No one to tell me what I must do. (*Bows, mockingly*). Bow here. Bow there. From this day forth, I am a shepherd.

He unbuckles his belt and steps out of his velvet robe, revealing his shepherd's smock. He rolls the robe into a pillow.

There, my fine robe. You shall be my pillow while I sleep under the stars. Let my worthy brother, the good Abbot of Canterbury, sleep in fine sheets on a goose feather bed. Let him eat his supper with fifty servants standing around. I shall serve myself... with my own loaf of bread and my own skin of clear water.

He sits down and starts to sing:

"Summer is a cumin in... Loudly sing cockoo
Soweth seed and groweth mead and springeth wood anew."

He stops to listen; returns to a phrase of the song, then jumps up, listening. The sound of distant shouts and horses' hooves makes him uneasy.

Ha! My brother comes after me. Sooner than I thought... Well...

He sits down abruptly and crosses his arms.

He cannot make me change my mind. From now on, he must make up his own riddles. AND answer them.

Starts to sing as the splendidly dressed Abbot of Canterbury strides in.

ABBOT: (*calling to someone offstage*) He's here. Hold the horses.

SHEPHERD: (*trying to sound casual*) Good day to you, brother.

ABBOT: (*scornfully*) A shepherd does not call an Abbot "brother".

SHEPHERD: (*getting his courage up*) But do I not resemble you, my lord Abbot? Do we not have the same father.

ABBOT: You disgrace your father. Look at your clothes. (*Sarcastically*) Do you pretend to be a shepherd? (*Shepherd does not answer*) Why have you left my castle?

SHEPHERD: (*defensively*) THIS is MY castle.

ABBOT: This? You prefer this to my fine rooms where you have everything?

SHEPHERD: (*bitterly*) In your castle, I am no more than one of your serving men. You keep me only because of my wits. I think up new riddles so that you may play with the king.

ABBOT: I have no need of your riddles.

SHEPHERD: (*grinning*) Oh, riddle me, riddle me, ree. Answer THIS riddle or pay me a fee.

Abbot holds up hand in protest but shepherd continues.

What is higher than a house, yet seems much smaller than a mouse?

Abbot pauses, as if he cannot resist trying to find answer, then wheels away. Shepherd answers riddle himself.

A star is higher than a house, yet seems much smaller than a mouse.
Come. You owe me a fee. . . a forfeit.

ABBOT: (*angrily*) I did not come here to play riddles.

SHEPHERD: (*mocking*) You play only with the King?

ABBOT: If it amuses the king to play riddles, his courtiers are obliged to play. Even an Abbot must oblige.

SHEPHERD: You have taken many rich forfeits away from the king of late.

ABBOT: (*shrugs*) A few horses.

He waves his hand thereby showing off a great ruby ring. Shepherd reaches up and takes the hand.

SHEPHERD: Is this not the king's own ruby ring?

ABBOT: I won it fairly.

SHEPHERD: The forfeits have become too high.

ABBOT: The king himself sets the forfeits. He has taken rings from me.

SHEPHERD: Beware lest you anger the king.

ABBOT: I need no advice from a shepherd.

SHEPHERD: (*leaning back against tree*) No matter. My advice costs you nothing.

ABBOT: Come. I have no time to waste.

SHEPHERD: Farewell, brother.

ABBOT: (*frustrated and angry*) I cannot have anyone say that you live here like a serf.

SHEPHERD: Tell them I live like a free man.

ABBOT: (*smugly playing a trump card*) You will not be allowed to live here. This tree stands on Sir Roger of Akeley's land. He'll set his dogs on you.

SHEPHERD: Then I shall move on.

ABBOT: (*whirls and stalks off. . . but returns abruptly with a conciliatory air*) I am bidden for tea with the queen. I would have you with me.

SHEPHERD: And you will play riddles with the king again? I HAVE DONE WITH RIDDLES. I DO NOT LIKE THEIR FORFEITS. (*cooling down*) Pray, carry my humble wishes for her Majesty's good health. . . and for that of the king. . . and. . . (*pauses and speaks grimly*) for that of his very wise and venerable astrologer.

ABBOT: You hate the king's astrologer.

SHEPHERD: I fear him. Even as you should.

ABBOT: I fear no one.

SHEPHERD: The king's astrologer serves only himself. He taunts the king into winning great riches. He cannot afford to let the king lose such forfeits as he has lost to you... he will find a way to get them back.

ABBOT: (*haughtily*) For the last time, I say COME.

SHEPHERD: Forgive me, brother. I stay.

ABBOT: Then rot here to your heart's content.

He stalks off. Recorder music is heard as THE SCENE CHANGES back to the Queen's Sitting Room.

The Jester races through the audience, leaps to center of room, looks about, does a dance step and goes. The two apprentices follow, mimicking his every move.

Four Ladies-in-Waiting enter... drop their needlework on cushions, then cluster around Mary, who has pulled a long-handled mirror from beneath the Queen's chair. They chatter as they peer at themselves.

An elegantly dressed young man peeks in, then enters quickly, surprising the ladies.

ROGER: Good day to all beautiful ladies.

GENEVIEVE: Sir Roger!

MADELEINE: You surprise us. It is still early.

ROGER: I'm only looking in on my way to attend the king.

He goes to Elsbeth, kneels and kisses her hand.

GENEVIEVE: The wedding day will be soon.

ROGER (*to Elsbeth*) Not soon enough.

MARY: I'll be so happy to have singing and dancing in the castle again.

GENEVIEVE: I hope the king will be joyful for a change.

MARY: He's been in a frightful mood...

GENEVIEVE: And when the king is in a dark mood, a shadow lies over us all...

The jester gallops in on a stick bobby horse.

JESTER: Fie on dark shadows... Come let us be merry...

He starts to sing and prance and the others gladly fall into a follow-the-leader dance.

JESTER: (*singing*) Come follow, follow, follow, follow, follow, follow, me...

TWO LADIES: (*answer, singing*) Whither shall we follow follow follow?

TWO OTHER LADIES: (*answer, singing*) Whither shall we follow follow thee?

JESTER: To the greenwood, to the greenwood, to the greenwood, greenwood tree...

Roger and Elsbeth join the group. The two apprentices rush in

to bring up the rear in the twirling, skipping dance. Mary finally drops to a cushion.

JESTER: Do not quit now... (*others drop down*)

MARY: It's too hot for such dancing.

ROGER: And I am late.

ELSBETH: (*catching his hand*) Do not go...

ROGER: When the King commands, all must obey. (*light hearted*).

ELSBETH: Pray, do not play riddles with the King.

ROGER: Have no fear. My wits are in the best form.

ELSBETH: I do not like the way the king plays of late.

ROGER: Trust me, my lady. I will be wary.

He leaves, waving. Lighteley and Spiriteley caper after him. The Jester moves to Elsbeth.

JESTER: Smile, Lady Elsbeth. Answer this riddle or pay me a fee.

ELSBETH: (*Petulantly*) I NEVER can answer your riddles.

JESTER: But if you do, I must pay YOU a forfeit.

The other ladies have picked up their needlework and are pulling long threads through fabric with each stitch. Elsbeth joins.

Ready? Old Mother Twitchett has but one eye,
And a long tail which she lets fly,
And every time she goes over a gap,
A piece of her tail is caught in a trap.

What's the answer, Lady Elsbeth?

Elsbeth tries to think but bites finger, perplexed.

MADELEINE: Use your wits, Lady Elsbeth.

ELSBETH: Old Mother Twitchett has but one eye... (*pause*)
And a long tail which she lets fly... (*pause*)

JESTER: (*prompting*) And every time she goes over a gap...
A piece of her tail is caught in a trap.

ELSBETH: Oh, I don't know! I give up... Lady Madeleine, do you know the answer?

MADELEINE: It's your needle and thread, of course.

Elsbeth holds up her needle and thread, not understanding.

Your needle is Mother Twitchett. She has only one eye. Now look at your thread. It's a long tail. When you take a stitch the tail is caught in a trap. There.

JESTER: (*gleefully*) You owe me a forfeit... A fee... a fee.

ELSBETH: Oh, dear... what do you want?

JESTER: That flower in your hair.

ELSBETH: No... it just matches my gown. (*Reluctantly, she gives it to him*)

MADELEINE: Here are FOUR riddles for you, my fine jester.

JESTER: Four? Four at once. That's not fair.

MALELEINE: (*singing the riddle — with or without an instrument*)
I gave my love a cherry without a stone,

JESTER: (*speaks each line after her, perplexed, but does not interrupt song*)

MADELEINE: I gave my love a chicken without a bone,

JESTER: Chicken without a bone?

MADELEINE I gave my love a ring that has no end,

JESTER: No end?

MADELEINE: I gave my love a baby with no crying.

JESTER: Impossible. A baby with no crying?

MADELEINE: (*pauses*) Give up? (*Answers the riddle, still singing*)

A cherry when it's blooming it has no stone,
A chicken in the egg, it has no bone,
A ring when it's a rolling, it has no end
A baby when it's sleeping, has no crying.

JESTER: (*holding head and rocking*) That's terrible...terrible.

MADELEINE: I'll take those four pretty ribbons from your horse.

JESTER: You wouldn't...Not from my beautiful horse.

*He cradles the horse's head, but finally gives the ribbons to Madeleine.
Speaks to horse.*

Never mind, my friend. I'll win them back for you.

Spriteley and Lighteley return. One holds a trumpet with a long, pointed, decorated banner.

LIGHTELEY: His Majesty, the King.

King strides in. Ladies rise and curtsy. Jester darts behind chair with his horse.

The Astrologer scurries in as if he'd been accidentally left behind and stands baughtily just behind King.

KING: Where is the queen?

MADELEINE: Your Grace, the queen is still being dressed in her robe.

GENEVIEVE: Her musicians play for her.

MARY: There will be guests today.

KING: The Abbot of Canterbury. Is he coming? (*to Astrologer*) I will not play riddles with that man again.

ASTROLOGER: No, no — of course not. The stars are not right, Sire.

KING: YOUR riddles are not good any more.

ASTROLOGER: (*soothingly*) Your Majesty. You must not always have the best riddles. You should not always win all forfeits.

KING: I never win any more. (*Angrily*) I have been paying forfeits to that Abbot for three whole weeks. (*works up a rage*) A dozen fine horses...my best carriage...three bags of gold...and(*holds his hand out*) my best ruby ring.

ASTROLOGER: A temporary misfortune, Sire...only temporary.

KING: The Abbot has someone making up riddles for him!
Impossible riddles. I won't play with him any more.

He whirls on the ladies who are almost jittery with courtseys.

Tell the Queen she must not receive the Abbot of Canterbury.

*The ladies retreat hastily. The king sits in his chair fuming.
The jester tumbles out hoping to change the mood.*

JESTER: Oh, my good Sire. Let not thy gizzard be riled.

King tries to strike him but Jester tumbles out of reach and keeps up his banter.

A wise man loses merrily. For soon HE will be the winner.

KING: How soon will I be the winner, my good soothsayer?

JESTER: Soothsayer? You flatter me. There is your soothsayer.

He points to Astrologer and rides off on hobby horse.

ASTROLOGER: (*shaking head wisely*) True. True. You could be the winner any day. Perhaps this very day.

KING: Say more.

ASTROLOGER: (*shyly*) Sir Roger of Akeley awaits you even now.

KING: What for?

ASTROLOGER: He plans to marry Lady Elsbeth, Sire. You bade him speak with you. (*Dreamily*) He is not quick at riddles, Sire. His horses are fast...his castle is small...but a very fine one. I would not mind owning such a castle.

KING: (*eagerly*) You shall. You shall... (*stands*).
Come. I will receive Sir Roger in the game room.

ASTROLOGER: (*still plotting, puts hand on King's arm*) Next you must invite Lady Buckingham to play riddles.

KING: (*smiling*) I do not like Lady Buckingham.
King starts off. Astrologer detains him.

ASTROLOGER: She is rich. Very rich and slow of wit. I would not mind having some of her forest land.

Again, the King starts up but the Astrologer muses.

Then you must challenge the Earl of Nonesuch. All this will be good practice before you play against the Abbot of Canterbury again.

KING: I'm not going to play HIM again.

ASTROLOGER: (*musings*) They say that the Abbot grows richer than the King. They say he keeps a finer house. One hundred serving men in his castle...they wear velvet coats and gold chains...

King sits down and bangs chair arm.

When the Abbot goes abroad in London Town, men precede him with trumpets and drums. Others follow on horses with embroidered blankets and plumes on their heads.

ASTROLOGER: (*continuing*) A splendid parade for all to watch. And his banquets...they say that no one gives such banquets...

KING: (*Rising*) Stop. Does he think to outshine the king?

ASTROLOGER: (*as if placating the King*) I'm sure the good Abbot would not wish to appear richer than thou art. Still...if you could take his wealth from him...

KING: How? Tell me how I could take all his wealth.

ASTROLOGER: Three riddles...three riddles which he cannot answer.

KING: Where are these such riddles?

ASTROLOGER: In the stars, Sire. In the stars...

King starts out once more but still the Astrologer stands.

If the good Abbot cannot answer the riddles, he should lose his head.

KING: (*startled*) Lose his head?

ASTROLOGER: (*apologetic*) Forfeit his head, Sire. Then you can claim all his land and possessions. No one will be richer than thou.

King stands thoughtfully. Astrologer takes his arm.

Come Sire. Sir Roger is waiting.

The Jester has been listening, unseen, through the plotting. As the king and Astrologer leave the room, he moves center and sits down crosslegged. His two apprentices crawl into room, hesitant, sniffing like dogs on a faint trail.

SPRITELEY: (*softly*) There's trouble in the air. I can smell it.

LIGHTELEY: (*sniffing*) The Astrologer's been here.

The Jester motions. They sit down on either side of him. Suddenly he stands. They leap up but he pushes them down. They sit, leaning back on their hands while the Jester reenacts the scene he has witnessed between King and Astrologer.

JESTER: Listen carefully. I am the King. Bow now.

Apprentices bow to floor.

I command you to answer my riddles. If you cannot answer, you will lose your heads.

SPRITELEY: (*rolling to a pillow*) No. No. I will hide my head. (*does so.*)

LIGHTELEY: (*holding his head*) And I will hold my head tightly.

JESTER: (*sitting down*) This is no jesting matter. The King is in a beheading mood.

LIGHTELEY: (*worried*) I might make him laugh with a new riddle.

JESTER: If he would laugh, that old Astrologer's spell might be broken.

LIGHTELEY: (*smiling happily*) This is a very good riddle.

JESTER: Quiet. I am thinking.

He goes to Queen's chair and sits down. Lighteley prods Spriteley with his foot.

LIGHTELEY: Answer this riddle.

SPRITELEY: (*pops from under cushion briefly*) And lose my head? Never.

LIGHTELEY: (*brods with foot again*) I say. Read me this riddle. Who has a cat with ten tails?

SPRITELEY: (*look out*) Ten tails? No cat has ten tails.

LIGHTELEY: (*sitting beside him*) MY cat has ten tails.

SPRITELEY: (*sitting up*) Prove it.

LIGHTELEY: (*smugly*) No cat has nine tails. (*Spriteley nods in agreement*)
One cat has one more tail than no cat. So...MY cat has ten tails.
You owe me a fee.

SPRITELEY: Not till you answer this one. (*Speaks rapidly*)

As I was goin to St. Ives
I met a man with seven wives
Each wife had seven sacks
Each sack had seven cats
Each cat had seven kits
Kits, cats, sacks and wives
How many were going to St. Ives?

LIGHTELEY: (*groans, counts wildly on fingers, mutters*) Seven sacks...
seven wives...seven kits... seven...seven... Oh, I'm no good
at figures. I give up.

SPRITELEY: The answer is ONE. I was going to St. Ives.

LIGHTELEY: Where were all those others going? Cats...wives?...

SPRITELEY: (*pointing over his shoulder*) The other way.

LIGHTELEY: All of them? All going...(*points over shoulder*)...the
other way?

JESTER: (*leaps up*) The King might laugh at this one.

Jester picks up a three-legged stool. Sits on it between apprentices.

Two legs sat on three legs holding onto one leg. In came four legs
and ran away with one leg. Up jumped two legs, and hurled three
legs after four legs. Four legs dropped one leg.

*Lighteley and Spriteley stare, thrust necks out like snakes and
shake heads, open mouthed.*

JESTER: Give up? (*He demonstrates as he repeats*) I'm two legs. I sit
on three legs. I'm eating one leg...a bone with meat. In comes my
dog... four legs...and one leg right out of my mouth. And he
runs...I jump up. I throw three legs after him. He drops one leg.

LIGHTELEY: That's good.

SPRITELEY: Very good. (*They roll over.*) ..

JESTER: I am going to the King now. You two practice all the tricks you know. We're going to need them.

Jester leaves. Lighteley and Spriteley juggle colored balls, roll hoops, jump rope, box with each other...try acrobatic tricks... anything. Lighteley finally trips and falls down. Leans on elbow.

LIGHTELEY: It's more fun to play riddles. What can roar like a lion, hiss like a cat, whistle a tune, blow the fire in the fat?

SPRITELEY: Roar like a lion? (*Lighteley roars*) Hiss like a cat? (*Lighteley hisses*) Blow the fire in the fat? (*Lighteley blows*)

LIGHTELEY: (*watches Spriteley make faces*) Give up? The wind. That's the answer. The wind. Give me your ring.

SPRITELEY: (*gives a ring but retaliates*) Answer this riddle or give my ring back. What goes day and night and never moves?

LIGHTELEY: What goes day and night and never moves? A clock.

He laughs gleefully because he has guessed correctly, then leaps into audience to riddle with the children.

Riddle me riddle me ree. (*Points to a child*) Answer this riddle or pay me a fee. What's black and white and red all over?

Child will probably guess answers a newspaper, in which case Lightely will give him a piece of hard candy in a wrapper.

SPRITELEY: (*intrigued with the new contestants*) You over there. Answer this riddle or pay me a fee. What horse can you ride all day? It never gets tired and it won't eat hay.

(Answer: a bobby horse. Repeat above procedure).

LIGHTELEY: (*pointing to a child*) I ask you this riddle, whoever you be: a hand full, a hole full, you can't catch a bowl full.

(Answer: smoke)

A man in tatters strides through audience...The Jester points at him and laughs.

SPRITELEY: Hark, hark, the dogs do bark, the beggars are coming to town.

LIGHTELEY: (*amazed*) It's Sir Roger of Akeley.

SPRITELEY: What's happened to his clothes?

The two jesters prance after Roger. As he reaches the Palace sitting room he turns on them.

SIR ROGER: Off with you...

The two dart away. Roger steps behind the Queen's chair as Madeleine enters with a small table which she places beside Queen's chair.

She leaves as Genevieve enters with a table for the King's chair. She leaves as Mary enters with a vase of flowers for each table. She in turn leaves as Elsbeth enters with a small tray of glasses. Roger steps out behind her.

ROGER: (*loud whisper*) Lady Elsbeth... (*She freezes in terror; without seeing him. He puts hand over her mouth*) Don't scream. It's Roger...