LRS Newsletter

The Library of Renaissance Symbolism
November 2010

By a noun we mean a sound significant by convention. .. The limitation 'by convention' was introduced because nothing is by nature a noun or name-it is only so when it becomes a symbol. Aristotle On Interpretation. Section1. Part 2. Trans. E. M. Edghill.

In this edition of the Newsletter we focus on the Rebus, a trope much employed and enjoyed during the Renaissance. The more accomplished of these constructions used figures or signifiers which had some existing relationship with the meaning of the word they were intended to signify, thus opening a discussion as to the difference between the natural and the conventional sign.

A natural sign is one which is naturally related to what it signifies. A conventional sign by contrast is as Aristotle says above one where the relationship is arbitrary or purposive. Lightning is a natural sign that thunder will follow whereas language is given meaning by the convention of the society by which it is spoken.

But there is a tendency over time for conventional signs to become natural as we become so habituated to them that the distinction between signifier and signified becomes seamless and transparent. This is all very well but it means that in literature an obvious trope (for instance, a hackneyed metaphor or allegory) no longer evokes the 'wonder' that for Aristotle at least was the essence of art. The Rebus like the Enigma, the Emblem, the Device was intended to be puzzling. If it was too simple there would no pleasure in deciphering it, no 'wonder'. Thus the rebus like all other symbolic species had both to conceal and reveal.

ESSAYS
BOOK REVIEWS
RESEARCH SERVICES
EVENTS

THE REBUS

A Rebus is an element of a script in which pictures are used in place of letters, syllables or words or where a homonym is substituted for a word so that the meaning is disguised. Each rebus is normally constructed for a specific text and thus has to be deciphered to read that text. It has affinities to the hieroglyph in its visual aspect and to the cipher, the enigma, the pun and other purely word or letter plays such as the anagram in its puzzling aspect. A rebus can stand alone as a puzzle or be combined with words or other rebuses to form a complete text.

The word Rebus comes from the latin *res* meaning thing - rebus is the dative or ablative plural of the word: that is, to, by, with or for things. Students of language throughout the Middle Ages in Europe were accustomed to thinking about the relationship between words and things because the central thesis of St. Augustine's theory of the interpretation of the scriptures and of language depended on this. Words, he said, symbolize objects or things, but things themselves, can also symbolize other things. That might seem fairly obvious but what was important for Augustine (though not for us in this present context) is that it is the things and not the words which carry the multiple meanings and interpretations, for example the spiritual or ethical meaning is revealed, as he said, "non verbis sed rebus," not with words but with things.

So the word rebus was a familiar one in the Middle Ages. As a language using homonyms to disguise the real meaning of the text, it seems to have been in early use by the secret Christian society, the Gouliards. Possibly named after the cult of Saint Gall or Gaul (550-650 CE), this society is said to be the origin of the Freemasons, whose name apparently came from 'Four-maçon'. In the dialect of Limousin the home of the Gouliards, 'four' means a vault.

After the Gouliards we have the Basochians who were the clerks of the Paris law courts in the 14th and 15th centuries. To get relief from their arid profession, they put on performances satirizing the establishment of the day which were publicized as "de rebus quae geruntur" or "about things which have happened" or news of the day. These became very popular and were tolerated as harmless by the authorities until they apparently went too far in the middle of the 16th century and were finally suppressed. The performers disguised the individuals they satirized by means of a multitude of verbal rebuses.

There were quite a few Renaissance texts written in rebuses. One of the most sophisticated in the sense that the author made a determined effort to use a signifier which had an existing and known relationship with what it signified are the "hieroglyphic" messages in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* of Francesco Colonna (Aldus; 1499) (see more on the Poliphili) although these were certainly not Egyptian hieroglyphs as we understand them today nor can any of the images in Colonna be traced to the contemporary text the *Hieroglyphica of Horapollo*.

On the left is the first line of one of Colonna's messages. Many of the objects he uses derive from an ancient Roman temple frieze shown next to it which depict the implements used by the priests of the temple in their sacrifices (see more on the purpose of these implements).
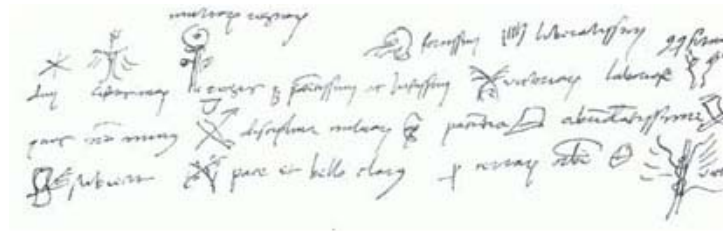
Pirckheimer in the manuscript of his translation of Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* tried his hand at rebuses (see more on Pirckheimer's Horapollo).

Rebuses were used for a complete poem in the *Rondeaux d'amour* in the *Opera Jocunda* of J. G. Alioni from 1521

And in the *Cifre quadrati et sonnette figurati* from the *Libro di Giovannibattista* of 1545.

The tradition continued into the 17th century. An extreme example was the *Cestus Sapphicus* by Nils Thomasson published in 1661, a wedding poem of 31 stanzas of which every word had at least one syllable printed as a picture. Thomasson also sets out in his introduction the rules for creating rebuses. An example was that a picture of an object should not be used to represent that word e.g. you should not use the picture of a mouse to illustrate the word mouse.

De Tabourot in his *Les Bigarrures et Touches du Seigneur des Accords* has a chapter on the *Rebus of Picardie* of 1662 the region from which he believed they originated and Camden in the *Remains concerning Britain* of 1629 has a chapter headed *Rebus or Name Devices* although what he describes are actually the devices which gentlemen constructed by puns on their names. Camden views these wordgames with some disdain saying for instance "Whosoever devised for Thomas Earle of Arundell, a capital A on a rundle [the step of a

ladder], wherewith hee decked an house which hee built, did think, I warrant you, that he did the Nobleman great honour." Camden's rebuses resonate with the *armes parlantes* or coats of arms which similarly used elements reflecting the owners name.

Bibliograpjhy : Rébus de la Renaissance, Images que Parlent Jean Céard Paris: Masonnevuve

BOOK REVIEW

La Satire dans tous ses États.
Edited by Bernd Renner Geneva: Droz, 2009

My favorite of many good essays in this collection was *Peut-on faire la Satire de la Bêtise,* Can one make Satire from Stupidity, by Michèle Clément which examines the *Apophthegmes du Seigneur Gaulard* by De Tabourot (the same book as is mentioned above). Sr. Gaulard is *bêtise* or stupid and the stories of him or by him are mostly simple and witless in the tradition of the facetiae of the time of which those by Bracciolini were preeminent. One of the stories which Gaulard/Tabourot/Clément relates raises interesting questions. Gaulard has a problem (he has many problems!). For example he cannot

comprehend the difference between reality and a likeness of reality. When shown a portrait of someone he cannot understand why the back of the portrait does not show the back of the individual portrayed. Why indeed? At the very least this tells us that a representation, a symbol, is also part of reality, shades into reality, and what is a conventional symbol slowly becomes a natural symbol. The modern exploration of this flight of fancy is Wilde's most famous work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in which the portrait of a young man ages while the sitter remains ever the same.

Other recommended books:

Walter S. Gibson *Figures of Speech Picturing Proverbs in Renaissance Netherlands* Berkeley: Univeristy of California Press, 2010.

Robert Viel *Les Origines Symbolique du Blason* Paris: Berg, 1972.

J. F. Champfleury *Histoire de la Caricature au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance* Kessinger Publishins, 2010.

EVENTS

A conference on Greek and Latin Technopaegnia is scheduled at the University of Warsaw on May 6-7th 2011. See this link.

Future editions of the Newsletter will contain: Stories from the first English edition of Poggio's Facetiae; Epigrams hidden in a 16th century manuscript; Fables and the Lives of Aesop; All about Enigmas; And much, much more.