

# LRS Newsletter

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The Library of Renaissance Symbolism  
[www.libraryofsymbolism.com](http://www.libraryofsymbolism.com)  
February 2011

πρῶτος Πηνέλεως Βοιώτιος ἦρχε φόβοιο.  
βλήτο γὰρ ὤμον δουρι πρόσω τετραμμένος αἰεὶ  
ἄκρον ἐπιλίγδην: γράψεν δέ οἱ ὀστέον ἄχρις  
First to begin the flight was Penelaos the Boeotian  
For he, turning always toward the attack, was hit in the shoulder's  
End - a scratch. (Iliad 17.597-599 trans. Richard Lattimore).

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It may seem odd to quote from the Iliad in a letter about the Renaissance but the extract above shows the first use in Western literature of the word *graphein*, (graph, graphic, epigraph as above) with the later meaning in Greek, to write. But here it means a slight wound, a scratch, confirming what is known from other evidence that the earliest Greek text was inscribed, incised or scratched on pottery or stone.

This first text most likely consisted of epitaphs carved in stone and from the epitaph came the epigram. Of necessity since the grave stone was small and inscribing in stone was hard the epitaph was short and so was the epigram. Further, since the epitaph was short and had to sum up the personality and achievements of the deceased it had to be succinct and this in turn led to the brevity and wit of the epigram.

This newsletter is devoted to some aspects of the epigram and its history, not only for its own sake as a witty saying which references an underlying meaning or moral but also because it was a principal source of the emblem literature, that extraordinarily popular genre that flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.



*ESSAYS*

*BOOK REVIEWS*

*RESEARCH SERVICES*

*EVENTS*

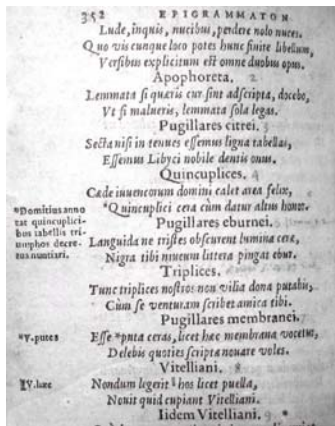
## THE EPIGRAM

The Greeks invented epigrams, wrote them in copious numbers and made the first collections of them. Those that have survived have come down to us as the Greek Anthology a work consisting of some four thousand short and witty poems most of which can be characterized as epigrams. The modern Anthology is made up of various separate individual collections and one of the first of these, from the first century BCE, was compiled by Meleager, one of the great Greek poets in his own right. He introduced his anthology, appropriately called the Garland, with a wonderful poem ([link](#)) or introduction comparing each of the poems in his collection to a flower – the word anthology, of course, itself derives from the Greek *anthos* and *logos*, flower and word.

The Anthology survived in two recensions. The first was the collection of Maximus Planudes a 14<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine monk, himself a prolific writer and, unusually for a Greek, a Latinist. He translated many Latin works into Greek but he had a liberal attitude towards his sources; his Life of Aesop, for instance, was entirely fictitious and responsible for the poor reputation that this latter suffered over the next few centuries. Planudes' edition of the Anthology was equally idiosyncratic but nevertheless it was the only one available in the West until a second fuller version was discovered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century called the Palatine Anthology.

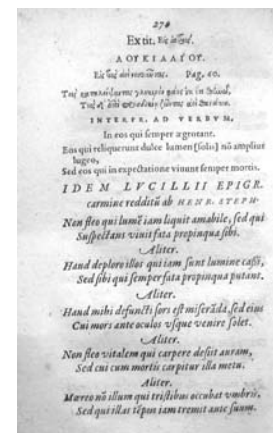
The extent of the popularity of the Greek Anthology in the Renaissance and after is revealed by James Hutton's *The Greek Anthology in Italy to the Year 1800* where he gives examples of translations from the Anthology by some 239 separate authors. The 1571 edition of extracts from the Anthology by the great French scholar and publisher Henry Estienne is particularly celebrated for two reasons. First, it is said that he forgot to get the *Privilege* for the book from the authorities (the license to publish it), and as a result was imprisoned for a short time and secondly in it he demonstrates his virtuoso erudition by translating one epigram in 106 different ways. The first five of these are shown here. ([Link to larger image](#))

The most well-known Latin epigrammatist and perhaps the greatest of all was the



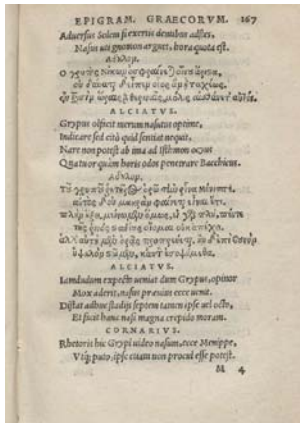
Roman poet, Martial, from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. He wrote some 1,400 epigrams many of which have been characterized as salacious but despite this

are noted for their subtlety, variety and wit. The first publication of the epigrams of Martial in the West was in the 1470's. It was translated and edited by Niccolo Perotti and Pomponio Leto and the former also wrote a commentary on Martial entitled *Cornucopia* published in 1489. Perotti's son Pyrrhus subsequently published an expanded edition of the *Cornucopia* which included the delightful remark that "with commentaries of this sort, the longer they are the better". The last two books of Martial's epigrams are entitled *Xenia* and *Aphophoreta*. These are the Greek names for gifts given by hosts to their dinner party guests and New Year's gifts, both a common custom in classical times. If you could not afford a gift you could recite a poem and Martial provides these prepackaged gift-poems. Here you can see a page from his *Aphophoreta* in a 1568 Edition. ([Link to larger](#)



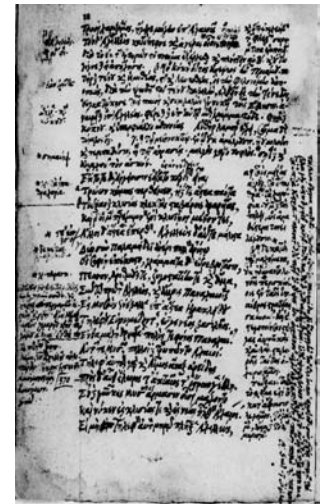
[image](#))

The tradition of epigram-writing continued through the Renaissance. Every gentleman in the Renaissance was supposed to be as adept with the pen as with the sword and most did indeed write poetry whether it was to establish their learned credentials, to advance an amorous adventure or record their personal achievements. Some of this poetry was in the vernacular but most was in Latin since this was the lingua franca of the age and the output was enormous. Ijeswijn and Sacré in their survey of Neo-Latin texts state that their eleven hundred page introduction hardly scratches the surface of the genre. The epigram was one instance of this prodigious output. One collection of epigrams from 1602 is said to contain 260,000 examples. The enthusiasm for writing was matched by a zeal for collecting. Just as today we might collect books, Individual poems by well-known writers were valued and collected avidly.



Alciato, the founder of the emblem tradition, wrote and translated epigrams. Here is a page from a collection edited by Cornarius from 1529 which shows translations by different authors including Alciato of two epigrams. Several of the translations by Alciato also form the basis for some of his emblems (or vice versa), the first edition of which was published two years later in 1531 (but written in 1521). Alciato did not at first intend to accompany his emblems with pictures and these were included in the first edition without his knowledge (indeed he had not given approval for this publication at all). It is therefore not easy to understand the distinction he intended between the epigram and the emblem. The word emblem comes from the Greek meaning something inserted: a mosaic, a gloss in a legal text, a piece of precious metal on a vase. But in the case of his emblem book it is not obvious what was being inserted. ([Link to larger image](#))

Finally, to round out this discussion and take it back to its starting point, I include here a copy of a page from a vigorous manuscript from the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century which shows the scholia to a verse commentary by the 12<sup>th</sup> century scholar Johannes Tzetzes on the Greek Epic Cycle (which includes the Iliad and the Odyssey). The manuscript dated 1560 illustrates how, even though printing had been in existence for a century, scribal writing still existed and how, since paper was still expensive, every scrap of it had to be utilized. Within this page ([link to larger image](#)) there is an epigram and anyone who can locate it and identify its subject matter and source deserves and will get an honorable mention in the next Newsletter! The manuscript (BM Royal 16c iv) was copied by one Pierre Moreau from an earlier manuscript in the collection of Jean de Saint-André, canon of Notre-Dame. Saint-André was a Parisian book-collector who had inherited the library of the lawyer and scholar Guillaume Budé and also possessed a valuable collection of Greek manuscripts sent to him from Calabria by Cardinal Siret. His collection was acquired, after Saint-André's death by Alexandre Peteau.



Bibliography: James Hutton *The Greek Anthology in Italy to the Year 1800* Cornell University Press, 1935; Jozef Ijeswijn and Dirk Sacré *Companion to Neo-Latin Studies* Leiden University Press 1998; Mason Tung *Revisiting Alciato and The Greek Anthology: A Documentary Note in Emblematica* 14 p. 327.

In the Newsletter for November 2010 there was a link to a piece describing certain “hieroglyphic” texts in Colonna’s *Hynerotomachia Poliphili*. which derived from the sacrificial instruments displayed on Roman temples. At the end of this piece ([link http://www.libraryofsymbolism.com/images/newletters/pdf\\_romantemples.pdf](http://www.libraryofsymbolism.com/images/newletters/pdf_romantemples.pdf)) there was an extract from the *Champ Fleury* by Geoffrey Tory where he describes a similar rebus text he saw in a house in Rome. Kathryn Evans, [kathryn-e@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kathryn-e@sbcglobal.net), has provided the following translation of this text.

“Find God's work between the two horns of opposites. Sacrifice yourself into the fire of the primordial waters, where you will find God's seed of life. Anchored there to God's Will, you will blossom anew together. You will be Lord of the four elements; Air, Earth, Water, and Fire.” ...

## BOOK REVIEW

*Symbola et emblemata avium*  
José Julio García Arranz Coruña: SIELAE, 2010

This splendid book is to be used for reference rather than read from cover to cover although the Introduction gives an excellent and comprehensive overview of all the sources of the symbolic literature from classical times and later, especially for animals and birds. There is also an exhaustive bibliography. The book covers every interpretative meaning of all emblems and devices of some eighty birds. It does

not, however, print any of the epigrams accompanying the emblems. This would be understandable if it was for reasons of space alone but it is noticeable that very little attention is given to the poems in the commentary. Each of the three elements of the emblem was a unique contribution to the elucidation of the motif or the moral signified in the whole ensemble not just an alternative description. To ignore the contribution of the epigram does not do justice to the whole. Despite this omission the book is a monument to scholarship with 800 pages in small type and is to be highly recommended.

Other recommended books:

Allesandro Polcri *Luigi Pulci e la Chimera: Studi sull'allegoria nel Morgante* Societa Editrice Fiorentina 2010

## EVENTS

A conference on Greek and Latin Technopaegnia is scheduled at the University of Warsaw on May 6-7<sup>th</sup> 2011. See [www.ifk.uw.edu.pl/mousapaidzei.html](http://www.ifk.uw.edu.pl/mousapaidzei.html)

An exhibition sponsored by the Bibliothèque Nationale on Geoffroy Tory : imprimeur de François 1<sup>er</sup> will be held at the Musée National de la Renaissance, Château d'Ecouen, Ecouen, France 4/6/11-7/4/11. See [www.bnf.fr/fr/evenements-et-culture/anx-expositions/f-geoffroy-tory.html](http://www.bnf.fr/fr/evenements-et-culture/anx-expositions/f-geoffroy-tory.html)



Future editions of the Newsletter will contain: Stories from the first English edition of Poggio's *Facetiae*; Fables and the Lives of Aesop; All about Enigmas; And much, much more.

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Contributions of text to the Newsletter, including Articles; Reviews, Notes or Events or contributions of bibliographic material to the Library are welcome and will be properly acknowledged in their place. For how to contribute see <http://camrax.com/symbol/contributionsandcontributors.php4> Library now offers Research and Book locating services. For details see <http://www.camrax.com/symbol/bookservice.php4>. For general correspondence email [rraybould@libraryofsymbolism.com](mailto:rraybould@libraryofsymbolism.com). For comments on the web site email [benheller@spruce.it](mailto:benheller@spruce.it). Also at Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/libsymbolism> and Facebook at [www.facebook.com/pages/Library-of-Symbolism/107421335952122](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Library-of-Symbolism/107421335952122)