LRS Newsletter

See the prize riddles below!

Qui inimicus est, etiam in scirpo nodum quaerit.
It is impossible to tie a knot in a reed.

This newsletter is devoted to the figure poem and has been inspired by the recent (May 2011) conference on classical (and to a lesser extent Renaissance) riddles which was enjoyably and ably organized by the University of Warsaw. Under the general heading of riddles, there were discussed oracles, figure poems, enigmas and other types of poetic word play such as palindromes, acrostics, anagrams and the like. This is a wide field, perhaps too wide and comprehensive definitions of the riddle tend to be so inclusive that they could easily apply to any of the symbolic literary species. Thus a riddle is "an object or situation" which has "the aim of puzzling the recipient."(Christine Luz *What makes a riddle a riddle?* [Conference Paper]), or "a question or statement" requiring "ingenuity in ascertaining its answer or meaning" (Naerebout, N. G. & Beerden, K. *Gods cannot tell lies* [CP]). These definitions could as easily apply to the emblem, the device, the fable or the proverb.

Alsted in his famous seventeenth century dictionary, in his entry for *technopaegnia* avoided the difficulties of definition by including everything, some sixty sub-genres many of which would certainly not be accepted as such today (Link to first page of Alsted's entry [Large File]; copies of further pages can be obtained on request from the Library). Dick Higgins, for instance, in his magisterial work *Pattern Poetry* enumerates just twenty different kinds of the genre (link to Higgins), Barbara Milewaka-Wazbinska in her paper at the Warsaw conference on …*Pattern Poetry from the Modern Era* (link to *Pattern Poetry*) describes others while the seventeenth century writer, Etienne de Tabourot, in his *Bigarrures*, a book which has been referenced several times in these pages, gives many more.

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THE FIGURE POEM

Figure poems are printed or written in shapes which reflect the subject of the poem. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance they were often called *technopaegnia* from the Greek *techne* meaning to fashion or create and *paegnia* meaning light poetry so together - "artificial light poetry" - rather a loaded and disparaging definition. The word *technopaegnia* was invented by Ausonius the Roman poet from the 4th century CE although examples of the genre go back to the earliest Greek literature and for convenience these too are termed *technopaegnia*. But this being rather an inelegant word and difficult to get your tongue around, nowadays the preference is for visual or pattern poetry or calligrams a term invented by Guillaume Apollinaire. Classical poets who wrote *technopaegnia* included Theocritus, Dosiados, Vestianus and Optatianus and the latter's work is believed to have inspired Hrabanus Maurus (c784-856), Archbishop of Mainz, a Carolingian poet and theologian, whose famous work *In Praise of the Holy Cross* was the first printed figure poem published in 1503.
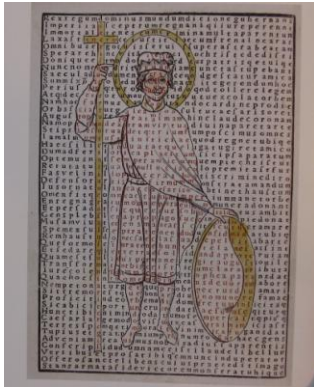

1 Hrabanus Maurus

The first mention of the word *technopaegnia* in the Renaissance is by Fortunius Licetus (1577–1654), the Italian humanist. He edited several volumes of technopaegnia by the classical writers as did his contemporary Albert Molnár (1574-1634) with his *Lusus poetici*, Games of the poets, from 1614.

In prose writing, the tradition of the *technopaegnia* was often manifest in chapter endings which were shaped like vases, cups or urns. A number of the epigrams from the Greek Anthology were published as figure poems in the shape of urns. This was considered appropriate since the origin of the epigram was as an epitaph on funerary monuments. There was also considerable cross-fertilization between emblem books and figure poems. One example is the unique manuscript emblem book made for Duke Philip II of Pomerania-Stettin in which the pictures are constructed of minute lines of quotations from the Psalms. Some emblem books had their poems in the form of figures. Examples are those of Francis Quarles, *Hieroglyphiques of the Life of Man* published in 1635 and Christopher Harvey's, *Schola Cordis,* the School of the Heart of 1647. In his *Ova Paschalia*, Easter Eggs, of 1634 Stengelius constructed each emblem in the shape of an egg taking his cue from one of the earliest and most famous of the genre the *Egg* by Simias of Rhodes from the 3rd century BCE.
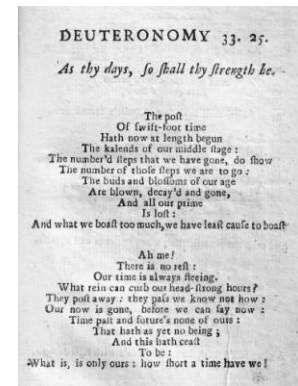
2 Quarles
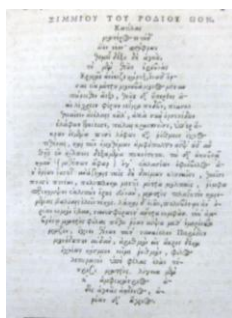
3 Simias' Egg

Pierio Valeriano, whose most celebrated work was the *Hieroglyphica* first published in 1556, also wrote a pear-shaped figure poem in his *Amorum libri quinque*, or Five books of love, published in 1549 which was intended as a pun on his own name. The *Poematum Liber, Ara Christiani Religioni*, or the book of Poems, Altars of the Christian Religion by Richard Willis of 1573 is one of the most interesting books of visual poetry and was intended for the use of schoolboys at Winchester College in England. A little later in 1591, Andrew Willet wrote an emblem book, *Sacrorum Emblematum Centuria Una, A Century of Sacred Emblems,* and his introductory dedication to the Queen Elizabeth was a poem shaped like a tree. To add to the conceit the first and last letters of each line spell out the phrase "*Elizabetham Reginam Div nobis servet Iesus incolumen. Amen.* Elizabeth Queen, long may Jesus keep us safe. Amen."

All these citations would appear to give respectability to the genre although the view of the critics over the centuries has been mixed. Gabriel Harvey (1550-1630), one of the most outspoken literary men of his generation, writes derisively of "this odd riminge with many other triflinge and childishe toyes to make verses, that shoulde in proportion represente the form and figure of an egg, an ape, a winge and sutche ridiculous and madd gugawes and crockchettes, and of late foolishely reuiuid." On the other hand, Peter Daly, the doyen of modern emblem studies,

quoting the dictum of Horace on the closeness of painting and poetry perceived by classical artists, says of figure poems that they are "the pinnacle of ut picta poesis poetry" (*Literature in the Light of the Emblem* p. 142). According to Dick Higgins: "all these pieces can be viewed as a theological meditation, a piece to be viewed symbolically and metaphorically". Scaliger himself said (quoted by Milewaka-Wazbinska) that "they are worthy examples of poetic endeavor" and George Puttenham in his *Art of English Poesie* of 1589 gave them his imprimatur (Book II, Chapter 12) outlining the shapes that he believed were acceptable poetic usage.

These dichotomies could be eased with a better classification of the genre into three separate categories: the riddle, the figure poem and the technopaegnion (or calligram). The figure poem does not normally present a riddle; the theme of the poem is presented in two different ways, visually and verbally but is not normally difficult to understand. On the contrary, the visual shape is intended to make it easier to grasp the meaning of the text. Whether the combined forms improve the aesthetics of the whole is a matter of debate, a debate which could also be held about the emblem; I personally think that one should not employ the same criteria for poetry as for the emblem and the figure poem and that they have to be judged on their own merits and treated as unique genres.

4 Willet

The riddle has its own distinguished history which can stand on its own: there is certainly material enough on the riddle with its links to and distinctions from enigmas, oracles and the arts of divination. The technopaegnion perhaps more largely deserves the title of lusus, game, or artificial construction, something that might be composed in an idle moment on a public holiday. But we might remember that that is exactly what Alciato said about his *Emblematum   Liber* and that blossomed into one of the most popular genres in literary history.

Dick Higgins *Pattern Poetry* State University of New York Press, 1987; Peter Daly *Literature in the Light of the Emblem* Toronto University Press, 1998.
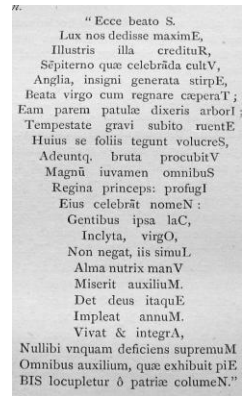

PRIZE RIDDLES

A prize (a book) is offered to anyone who can solve these two riddles and give the names of the authors. A clue: the solution to the first riddle is 'here' in the second riddle.

"There is a city in Arcadia in a level land where two winds blow by strong compulsion and there is beating and beating back and woe lies on woe."

"There is a grove in Attica which honors one who with two that are one first saved one of three who first rested here."

In the February Newsletter we offered a challenge to find the epigram hidden in a page of a 16ᵗʰ century manuscript of Tzetzes (lines 257-8). Disappointingly no one accepted the challenge. Here is the link to the original page and below is the enlarged version showing the location of the epigram.
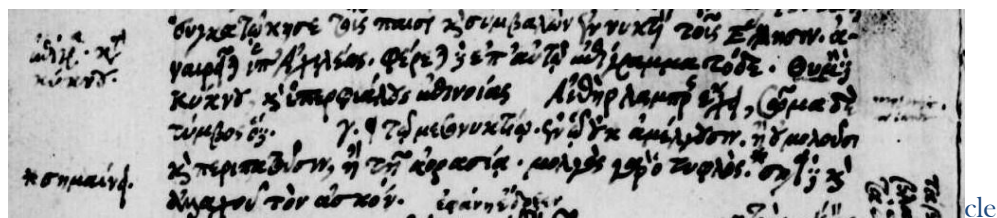
The epigram starts at the last word of the second line shown, continues on the next line and finishes on the first word of the next line: it is a distich which reads   Θυμὸν δὴ Κύκνου καὶ ὑπερφιάλους ἐπινοίας/ Αἰθὴρ λαμπρὸς ἔχει, σῶμα δὲ τῦμβος ὁδε or 'Here the brilliant air holds the heart of Cycnus/ And his arrogant

designs but the tomb holds his body.' This is one of Tzetzes' contributions to the survival of the Peplos of Aristotle. The Renaissance story of the Peplos will be the subject of a future Newsletter.

BOOK REVIEW

L'âge de l'inscription La rhétorique du monument en Europe du XVe au XVIIe siècle.
F. V. Laurens and P. Laurens   Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010

It is not too much to say that this book is a monument to scholarship and book design. There are reviews of epigraphic collections from the Renaissance which confirm the enthusiasm of contemporary scholars for the "pure radiance of the past"; insightful chapters on the contributions to epigraphy by Colonna, Alciato, Tesauro and Boldoni are completed by a promenade round the monuments of ancient Rome and modern Paris. It might be thought that the topic would be as dry as the bones in the tombs which are inscribed but remember that the inscriptions were written by those who were left behind, the survivors, the loved ones of the departed; some of the epitaphs bring tears to the eye and reveal as much as any text that the harshest realities of ancient life were much the same as today. I enjoy the beautifully crafted writing of the Laurenses. But on occasion when (by every grammatical device known) their sentences reach a Proustian length of more than 200 words, the mere Anglo-Saxon is left gasping and limp.

EVENTS

An exhibition sponsored by the Bibliothèque Nationale on Geoffroy Tory : imprimeur de François 1ᵉʳ 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

A rather remarkable site run by the Bodleian library in Oxford gives details of hundreds of historical, cultural and book events throughout Britain and Europe:

http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/hobo/

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.