

# LRS Newsletter

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The Library of Renaissance Symbolism

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September 2011

βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἑσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι  
Videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate  
For now we see through a glass darkly  
(Corinthians 13, 12)

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The quotations above from one of the most famous passages in the Epistles and taken from the original Greek, the Vulgate and the Authorised Version are appropriate for a Newsletter issued on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King James Bible. They illustrate an interesting point of contact between two symbolic modes, the mirror and the enigma despite the fact that the translators of the AV shied away from the loaded word enigma and adopted the rather anodyne adverb 'darkly'. Perhaps the metaphor of looking through rather than into a mirror was thought too obscure and the compromise was a dark (looking-) glass symbolizing the mystery of God.

St. Augustine has a long exposition of this passage in his *De Trinitate* XV where he questions the use of the two words, mirror and enigma: are they synonyms in this context or do they have different meanings? The symbol of the mirror goes back to Plato's *Timaeus* (46A-D) where he is illustrating his notion of the absolute Ideas by the example of a man who could create likenesses of the world just by carrying around a mirror. These images, Plato says, would just be appearances, *phainomena*. Nevertheless he makes clear in the same passage, as a result of his understanding of the physics of the mirror image, that these *phainomena*, like his Ideas, do have a reality; they actually exist on the surface of the mirror. It was this reality that was seized upon by medieval and Renaissance writers both in their encyclopedic descriptions of the natural world and in their theological and mystical texts.

The enigma also has an ancient history and I discussed some of this in the last Newsletter. St. Augustine makes clear in his exposition that the passage from Corinthians is an allegory of a two-stage process. Even if you can see through the glass you will still be faced with the enigma that man is as much unlike God as he is like. And the solution of this enigma will not be revealed until the Apocalypse (the unveiling) or the Last Judgment.

*ESSAYS*

*BOOK REVIEWS*

*RESEARCH SERVICES*

*EVENTS*



## The Mirror, Mirroure or Speculum

was a popular title for a multitude of works in the Middle Ages and Renaissance and one commentator who has attempted a bibliography (Paul Lehmann) has called the number limitless. We can start with Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Majus*, the Great Mirror, from the 13th century, perhaps the most comprehensive of the medieval encyclopedias. It contained some 9,885 chapters (excluding the 4th book now known to be written by a later author) and was printed in full three times by the end of the fifteenth century. There was the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, the Mirror of Human Salvation, from the early 14th century, 'one of the most influential books of the era.' Each page of the book illustrates a scene from the New Testament and its type or prefiguration in the Old Testament. This was so popular that it was translated into many vernacular European languages and over 300 manuscript copies survive as well as many printed editions.

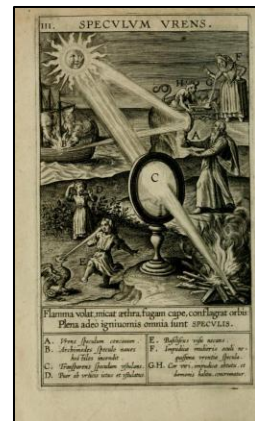


1 *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*

Jan David of 1610.

Not only were mirrors an ubiquitous choice of title but they were also frequently employed instruments at critical moments in many literary works of the age. There was the threefold mirror in the *Anticlaudianus* by Alain de Lille, the mirror of Narcissus in the *Roman de la Rose*, Leah's mirror in the *Commedia* and mirrors play an important role in the *Pelerinage de la vie humaine* by Deguileville and Langland's *Piers Plowman*.

So was the medieval mirror a metaphor, a symbol, or a reality? Augustine in one place says that all things that are written [in the scriptures] are our mirror and in another that the mirror when turned up reflects the Platonic ideas and when turned down reflects the sensible world. In a third reference he says that the soul is a mirror image of the likeness of God. In this he was following his older contemporary St. Athanasius who taking Plato's understanding of the physics of the mirror believed that the mirror image was a reality and thus that the soul was a real image of God. To some extent he was right. Since we can see the mirror image it must exist in some form and at the least this should provoke a discussion as to the distinction between symbol and reality, how the symbol can help us approach the enigma or mystery of reality, how we should look through the mirror to see what should be rather than the reflection of what is.



2 *Duodecim Specula*

Adrian & Joyce Wilson *A Medieval Mirror: Speculum Humanae Salvationis 1324–150* University of California Press, 1985; Ritamaria Bradley *Background of the Title Speculum in Medieval Literature* in *Speculum* 29 (1954) pp. 100-115

## PRIZE RIDDLES

No one presented a solution to the riddles given in the last Newsletter. The solutions can be found in a reading of SCIMITAR by Robin Raybould for which see <http://www.scimitarthebook.com>.

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Enigmas and Riddles in Literature by Eleanor Cook*  
Cambridge University Press, 2006

An excellent overview of the subject from the historical, textual and generic point of view, it includes detailed analyses of the riddles in Dante's Purgatorio, Lewis Carroll and Wallace Stevens' later work. The most enjoyable chapter for me was "Enigma as trope: history, function and fortunes" which details the early evolution of the genre and its distinction from allegory, similitude, scheme, trope, metaphor and figure with a section on Augustine's essay on the mirror referred to above.

Also recommended:

*The Neo-Latin Epigram A Learned and Witty Genre*  
edited by De Beer, Emenkel and Ruser. Leuven University Press, 2009

## EVENTS

For information on events celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King James Bible see: <http://www.kingjamesbibletrust.org/>

The Folger Shakespeare Library also has an exhibit on the KJB.  
<http://www.folger.edu/whatsontype.cfm?wotypeid=6>

Harvard University's Houghton Library has an exhibit featuring the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of America's first Bible.  
<http://hul.harvard.edu/calendar/calendar-exhibitions.html>

The New York Public Library has an exhibit featuring its copy of the Gutenberg Bible.  
<http://www.nypl.org/events/exhibition/2009/05/31/gutenberg-bible>

The German National Library has an exhibit on Reading Europe: European Culture through the book  
<http://www.d-nb.de/eng/aktuell/veranstaltungen/veranstaltungen.htm>



Future editions of the Newsletter will contain: Stories from the first English edition of Poggio's Facetiae; Fables and the Lives of Aesop; 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 [www.libraryofsymbolism.com/contributionsandconbutors.php4](http://www.libraryofsymbolism.com/contributionsandconbutors.php4). The Library now offers Research and Book locating services. For details see [www.libraryofsymbolism.com/bookservice.php4](http://www.libraryofsymbolism.com/bookservice.php4). For general correspondence email [rraybould@libraryofsymbolism.com](mailto:rraybould@libraryofsymbolism.com). For comments on the web site email [benheller@libraryofsymbolism.com](mailto:benheller@libraryofsymbolism.com)

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