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Reading the rebus: the reception of seventeenth-century German rebus broadsheets

ALISA VAN DE HAAR

Abstract Rebuses—visual riddles that replace words or syllables by images—were highly popular in early modern Europe. Many broadsheets containing rebus poems were printed in France and Germany in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although multiple theories on the intended audience and use of these rebuses have been formulated by historians, very little is known about their actual reception, since the extant broadsheets rarely contain any traces of their use by contemporary owners. However, several German rebus riddles have recently come to light that do contain evidence of how they were read and interpreted in early modern times. The broadsheets in question are political in nature: they pertain to the Thirty Years' War, ridiculing the opponent by means of visual satire. The solutions to these rebus puzzles have been added in early modern hands. These rare traces of the contemporary reception of rebus broadsheets make it possible to follow the thought process of their readers step by step, demonstrating how they tackled the visual riddles and which type of image was most difficult to decipher. In one case, multiple individuals even worked on the solution at different stages, showing how these visual games could be played over and over again. These sources give us a unique insight into early modern visual literacy at work.

Keywords rebus; Thirty Years' War; broadsheet; reception; visual riddle; visual poetry

Early modern Europe was marked by a heightened attention to the ability of images to convey meaning. This attention is reflected in the popularity of the emblem book, as well as in the fascination with (pseudo-)Egyptian hieroglyphs.¹ One particular experimental genre at the crossroads of text and image that left its traces throughout Northwest Europe is the rebus poem. In this poetic genre, individual words or syllables are replaced by images. These images do not always represent the missing word itself, but can also refer to a homonym: the English verb 'to bear' can thus be rendered by the image of a bear.

Many poems integrating rebus elements were printed as broadsheets, especially in early modern France, the Low Countries, and Germany. Very little is known about the functioning of such poems. While the riddle element provides a form of entertainment, certain rebus poems do deal with topics of a very serious nature. Researchers have questioned the intended audience of early modern rebuses in general, and of the extant rebus poems more specifically: were they meant to aid the illiterate, or were they cultivated by an intellectual elite?

While the intended audience and use of these rebus poems continue to raise questions, even less is known of their actual reception. Of the rebus poems distributed in the form of broadsheets, very few survive, and the ones that do rarely contain any handwriting or other traces of use. Therefore, virtually nothing is known about the cognitive processes underlying the ways in which an early modern audience would have attempted to solve these visual riddles. Until now, the only way for modern researchers to gain some insight into the

processes of problem solving required for rebus poems was by attempting to solve these rebuses by themselves, which is often a complex affair since certain images no longer hold the connotations they would have had for an early modern audience.

However, the Gotha Research Library, affiliated with Erfurt University, holds a German rebus poem from 1632, related to the Thirty Years' War, that sheds light on the ways in which contemporary readers tackled the visual riddle. Remarkably, it is accompanied by a handwritten solution in not one but several early modern hands. It includes corrections, and special signs indicating where the early modern readers were at a loss. This unique source makes it possible to trace the thought processes of the individuals who owned this rebus broadsheet, thus lifting an important first corner of the veil that covers the reception of this enigmatic genre combining text and image.

Before retracing the different cognitive steps taken by previous owners of the Gotha broadsheet, this article will provide more contextual information on the popularity of rebus poems in early modern Europe, and specifically Germany. This particular broadsheet is not the only one of its kind that comments on events related to the Thirty Years' War. Moreover, in order to be able to interpret and assess the handwritten evidence, some knowledge is needed of the various hypotheses for the intended audience and of the use of rebus poems proposed by literary scholars and art historians. Finally, the Gotha rebus and its contemporary handwritten solutions will be analysed in detail and compared with other extant rebus sources in order to show their full value for our understanding of early modern rebus culture.

Early modern rebus poems

Rebuses were used in all visual domains in late medieval and early modern Europe, from artworks to architectural features and shop signs: they reached all layers of society.² Many French inns supposedly presented themselves through a sign bearing a golden lion: 'au lion d'or' (at the golden lion) is a homonym of 'au lit on dort' (in bed one sleeps).³ These rebus riddles could be seen and enjoyed by anyone with a knowledge of spoken French. More hermetic examples were produced and enjoyed in intellectual circles. Leonardo da Vinci famously created 171 rebus enigmas, most of which are currently preserved at the Royal Library at Windsor.⁴

The extant evidence suggests that in the later fifteenth century, poets in France first started to experiment with poetry in which they incorporated rebus elements. We find examples of poetry containing rebuses in the works of *grands rhétoriciens*—poets who were mostly active at the courts of France and Burgundy in the late fifteenth century—such as Jean Molinet and Jean Marot.⁵ Molinet thus made a poem in which musical notation replaced syllables like 're' and 'mi'.⁶ Marot played with the spatial disposition of the text, placing the letters 'en' underneath (i.e., 'sous' in French) the word 'riant'.⁷ The solution to this rebus is 'en souriant' (while smiling). Not all these early rebus poems are strictly joyful in nature. One particular example mourns the death of Anne of Brittany in 1513.⁸ Furthermore, Jessica Brantley has studied a number of religious rebus poems that combine text and image in a devotional context, adorning French books of hours from the early sixteenth century.⁹

As the popularity of the rebus poems in France dwindled around the mid-sixteenth century, *rederijkers* or rhetoricians in the Low Countries took up the production of such visual poetry. Netherlandish rhetoricians were influenced by French *rhétoriciens* in many ways, so it is likely that they also found their rebus inspiration in French materials.¹⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, it is possible that teachers of French from the Low Countries, who are known to have used rebuses in an educational context, played an important intermediary role.¹¹ In the circles of the Netherlandish rhetoricians, the rebus poem reached great heights. It became part of the competitive culture of these rhetoricians, who frequently organized festivals in which rhetoricians from different cities competed against each other in various poetical and theatrical categories. At some of these festivals, prizes were awarded for the best rebus poem.¹² Many rhetoricians were also active as visual artists, or closely connected to artistic environments. Collaborations between poets and painters eventually led to the creation of painted rebus poems in which the images were no longer alternated with text at all, adding an additional layer of difficulty. The culmination of the rebus culture of Netherlandish rhetoricians is a blazon created by the painters Sebastiaan Vrancx, Jan Brueghel the Elder, Hendrick van

Balen, and Frans Francken the Younger (figure 1). It represents an architectural structure containing four levels. The rebus images depicted on each level create, together, one verse of the rebus poem, which is a highlight of seventeenth-century painting.¹³ After a competition in Mechelen in 1621 in which rebus blazons took centre stage, the heyday of the Dutch rebus poems seems to have come to an end.¹⁴

However, by the late sixteenth century, rebus poetry gained renewed attention in France. From 1572 onwards, Étienne Tabourot published various editions of his *Bigarrures*, a book bristling with word games and puns, that also contains a number of rebus poems. In the 1590s, French rebus poems frequently attained a political character. Starting c.1592, broadsheets were printed containing varieties of a *Rebus sur les misères de la France*.¹⁵ They lament various troubles facing the French kingdom in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. These broadsheets contain engraved rebus poems alternating images and words, presented in a single column. Some examples contain the solution to the rebus riddle, printed in full text at the bottom of the broadsheet.¹⁶ There are other examples, however, where the space reserved has been left blank, forcing readers to untangle the riddle for themselves.¹⁷

In the second decade of the seventeenth century, broadsheets or *Flugblätter* containing politically charged rebus poems started appearing in Germany as well. These rebuses, several of which have been studied by Dirk Kampmann and Andreas Vater, mostly deal with the Thirty Years' War.¹⁸ Such engravings of rebus poems were printed on broadsheets, supporting either the side of the imperial alliance or that of its adversaries.¹⁹ They generally have a strong political meaning, attacking the opposing party. Comments on the Protestant or Catholic faith of the enemy are frequent. The Gotha rebus poem that will be examined more closely here is part of this group of rebus poems commenting on the Thirty Years' War. All these political rebus *Flugblätter* are relatively uniform in nature: they all have a layout in two columns over which the rebus poem has been distributed, and they all combine a relatively high amount of written text with interspersed rebus images. These German rebus poems are very similar to the French specimens from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, which make a comparable use of alternated text and image. Nevertheless, the French examples lack the division into two columns that characterizes their German counterparts.

It is remarkable that the golden age of the rebus poem coincides with the first period of expansion of the printing press. Like the rebus poem, the printing press raised questions about and opened up new possibilities for the spatial distribution of the text on the page and the combination of image and text. Little is known, however, about the readership and use of the rebus poem, which has sparked a scholarly debate. The Gotha rebus poem, through its handwritten solutions, makes it possible to make an important contribution to these



Figure 1. Frans Francken II and Jan Brueghel I, *Blason of the chamber of rhetoric 'De Violiere'*, 1618. 589 × 600 mm. Oil on panel. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum van Schone Kunsten in Antwerpen.

discussions on how contemporary readers dealt with such visual riddles.

Rebuses' readership

Theories on the intended and actual readership, function, and use of rebuses diverge greatly, and also depend on the types of rebuses that are under discussion. A first possibility that has been mentioned is the use of late medieval and early modern rebuses to communicate information to the illiterate. Still today, rebuses are often used as a pedagogical tool for children learning to read and write. Charlotte Eubanks relates that, in the late seventeenth century, too, a monk in Japan used rebuses to aid illiterate religious followers.²⁰ A similar use has been attributed to a German religious manual by

Melchior Mattsperger from the same period that substitutes some words with images: the images have been considered both to function as a reading aid and as a mnemonic device for children.²¹

In general, late medieval and early modern experiments with rebuses have received relatively little attention from historians. This lack of scholarly interest in the topic probably relates to the reputation of the rebus as a form of childish play. Several contemporary authors already remarked upon this negative reputation, or added to it. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors such as François Rabelais mocked the 'rebus rage' of their time.²² Rabelais lists several examples of rebuses, criticizing them as 'inept, dull, rustic, and barbaric homonyms'.²³

The complex nature of rebus poems, in which the images are used to create full poetic verse lines, suggests that in these

cases, there is no link with illiteracy, and many of the topics they cover seem hardly suitable for a juvenile audience. Both Andreas Josef Vater and Adrian Armstrong have pointed to the intellectual nature of rebus literature. Vater sees early modern rebuses as a form of intellectual play that should be considered in light of the swiftly increasing popularity of the emblem book, in which the audience is invited to move from image to text and back again in order to come to an interpretation.²⁴ Jelle Koopmans, too, has noted a ‘culture of enigma’ in this period, and the importance of play and curiosity for early modern knowledge production and transmission is well known.²⁵

Armstrong points to the intellectual challenges that are posed by rebus poems: many of them require a decoding of botanical, ornithological, allegorical, religious, or other visual clues.²⁶ Taking Vater’s and Armstrong’s views on early modern rebuses one step further, it could also be argued that these forms of intellectual play trained transferable skills such as problem solving and visual literacy.²⁷ In solving these visual riddles, the pictorial context was of little help, as a religious figure could be juxtaposed with a mythological one, so that close scrutiny of each individual figure was required. Moreover, in the case of a poem, some knowledge of rhyme and metre is required to find the correct solution.

It has been pointed out that intellectual games such as the rebus poem could also involve a social aspect.²⁸ As in the case of the emblem book, solving such riddles in a group setting adds an additional layer of entertainment.²⁹ Moreover, it seems that the use of rebuses in the Netherlandish chambers of rhetoric was marked, at least to some extent, by the creation of an in-group that could decode their complex and hermetic pictorial enigmas. Anyone possessing the rebus key could decipher their blazons, but fellow rhetoricians would have been much more versed in the rebus poetics than non-members, creating a sense of social cohesion within and among the chambers.

This leaves the question of the political nature of many French and German rebuses produced in the seventeenth century: Why was this particular medium used for such critical content in a time of religious and political polarisation? Might it have been chosen as a form of secret code, hiding the true meaning of the text from non-initiates and thus avoiding repercussions? This explanation does not seem likely. The broadsheets in question are far less hermetical than the ones produced in the context of the Netherlandish chambers of rhetoric. They provide relatively copious text written in full, rather than in the veiled form of an image. Moreover, the Gotha rebus in particular revolves around a central wordplay that is repeated multiple times and that does not seem to pose any difficulty: the letters ‘pf’ followed by the image of two monkeys or ‘Affen’, resulting in the critical term ‘Pfaffen’ (papists). Rather than hiding the critical nature of the

broadsheet with regard to the Catholic camp, this repeated simian rebus signals its subversive character.³⁰

It seems that the reason for presenting these political works in a rebus form lies, rather, in its ludic character. By opting for the rebus medium, these broadsides address politically sensitive topics in a playful manner, rather than through an open and direct attack. Their ludic nature allows them to start a discussion on very serious and divisive issues, in what appears to be a form of multimodal satire: the Catholic enemy is mocked both in word and in image, by ‘portraying’ them as monkeys through the ‘Pfaffen’ rebus.

The Gotha rebus deciphered

One political rebus that was produced in the context of the Thirty Years’ War sheds new light on the actual use of such rebus poems, and will therefore take centre stage in the remainder of this article. The Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich (figure 2), and the Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel all own a copy of the same anonymous etching, printed on a folio-sized single sheet in portrait orientation.³¹ In the bottom right corner, the year 1632 is given, probably referring to the year in which the engraving was made. The last part of the title is already given in the form of a rebus: a man holds on to or is being crushed by a house, which has been interpreted as ‘Haushalt[ung]’ (household or housekeeping). It has generally been catalogued under the title ‘Des Tilly [Haushaltung]’. The remainder of the broadsheet concerns a rebus poem in two columns of thirty verse lines each, in which written text and pictorial riddles alternate. The poem is composed in ‘freier Knittelvers’, lines with a varying number of beats (usually four), rhyming in couplets.

This political rebus broadside refers to the Battle of Breitenfeld (north of Leipzig), which was fought in September 1631. It opposed the troops of the Swedish tactical leader Gustavus Adolphus and those of the imperial commander of the German Catholic League, Johann ‘t Serclaes von Tilly, or in short, Tilly. Several months prior, Tilly’s imperial forces had captured and violently sacked the German city of Magdeburg. After news of and indignation over the atrocities spread, Tilly’s adversary Gustavus Adolphus received allied reinforcements.³² On 17 September 1631, Gustavus Adolphus’s reinforced army confronted Tilly’s troops—who were smaller in numbers—at Breitenfeld.³³ The League, under Tilly’s command, suffered a painful defeat. It is generally known as the first major Protestant victory of the Thirty Years’ War and a retribution for the events at Magdeburg.³⁴ The impact of stories recounting the horrors of Magdeburg is a clear demonstration of the importance of news media—including rebus broadsheets—in the context of the Thirty Years’ War. Indeed, Hans Medick has described

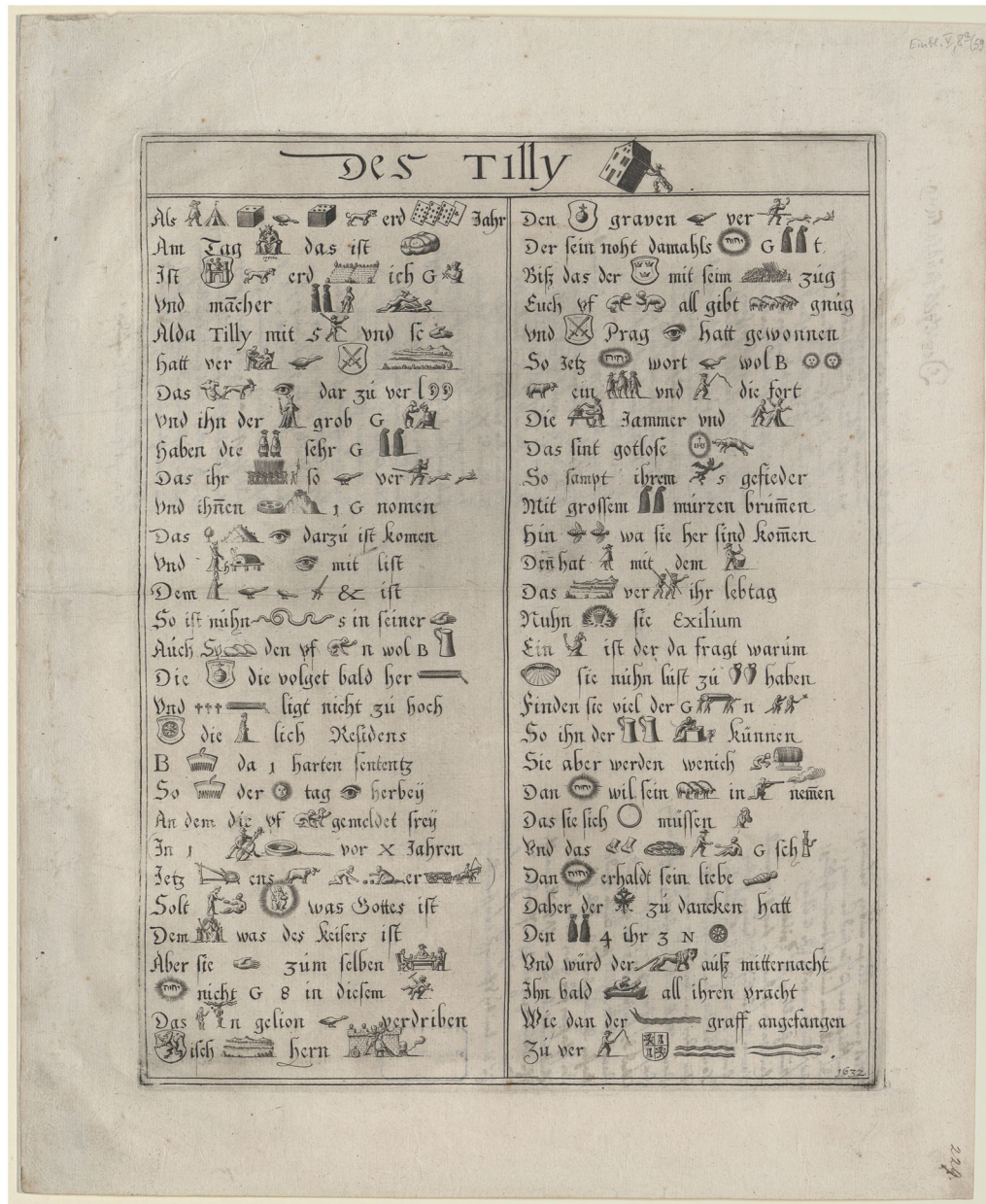


Figure 2. *Des Tilly* [Haushaltung]. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, cat. no. Einbl. V,8 a-59, f. 1^r, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00077390-2.

this large-scale conflict as a ‘Medienkrieg’, a media war, in which pamphlets and broadsheets played a crucial role by spreading information and influencing public opinion.³⁵

The rebus poem central to this study, which was seemingly made in the year after the battle, clearly takes the side of the Protestants, mocking Tilly for his defeat. The opening lines present the victory at Breitenfeld as revenge for the atrocities committed at Magdeburg: ‘As one counts 1631 years/[...] Magdeburg was revenged hundredfold/And many a Papist

servant was killed.’³⁶ Despite their ephemeral and fragile nature, multiple copies of the ‘Des Tilly’ rebus, stemming from at least four different editions, are still extant. The three copies preserved at Gotha, Munich, and Wolfenbüttel belong to one and the same edition, which appears to be the original one as it is of the highest quality and contains the date 1632. The Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek in Dresden owns a very similar etching of slightly lesser quality that does contain the date 1632 and

that seems to be a direct imitation of the first edition.³⁷ Copies of a slightly different edition that contains roughly the same rebus poem, but in which some of the images have been executed differently, are preserved at the British Museum (figure 3), Frankfurt University Library, and again at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich.³⁸ In this edition, the order of some of the words in the poem has been altered, and one of the riddle images has been replaced. A remake of this latter etching is kept at the castle of Český Šternberk in the Czech Republic.³⁹ It resembles the copies kept at London,

Frankfurt, and Munich closely, but does present small differences that suggest that a craftsman copied the etching.

Besides the fact that five of the eight copies of the 'Des Tilly' rebus family have been folded, three of them contain further concrete traces of use. One of these traces is, unfortunately, no longer visible. The website of the Historical Association of Týnec nad Sázavou, which discusses the copy kept at Český Šternberk, indicates that 'the almost completely deciphered text of the rebus is quoted on the reverse of this copperplate', suggesting that it contains evidence of the way

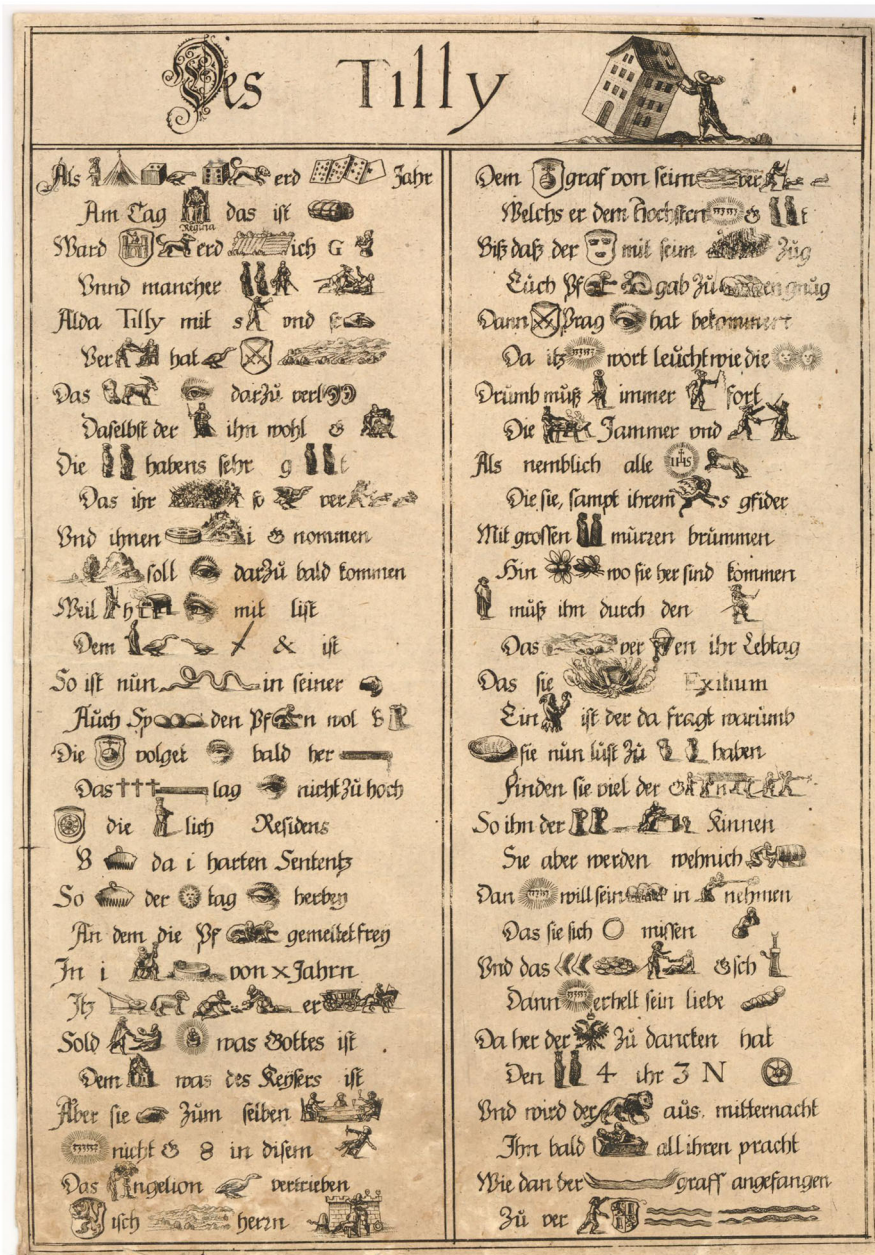


Figure 3. *Des Tilly* [Haushaltung]. London, British Museum, cat. no. 1875,0710.4362.

in which a contemporary reader interacted with the rebus riddle.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, upon enquiry, the curator of the castle's collections, Kateřina Řeháková, replied that the etching in question has been framed in such a way that its recto side can no longer be viewed without damaging the broadsheet. This potential source can thus no longer be consulted.

Another trace of a reader's reaction to the poem is still visible today. On the back of the first Munich copy (figure 2), the solution to the rebus poem has been written out in a contemporary hand (figure 4). It is a very clean version of the text with only a few corrections, which suggests that the contemporary reader first wrote the solution on a separate sheet, before copying the corrected version onto the recto of the rebus broadsheet.⁴¹ This trace of readers' use sheds little light on the way in which the contemporary reader confronted the pictorial riddle, but two small emendations do lift a small piece of the veil. The final word of the sixteenth line, which is

rendered as a B followed by the image of a jug in the rebus, apparently posed a challenge to the reader. They first drew a dotted line, which was then crossed through and replaced by the word 'kant', giving the solution 'bekant' (known). In the eighth line of the second column, a series of dots has been placed underneath a word about which the reader was, seemingly, unsure. Even in its 'finalized' version, the reader continued to doubt and correct the solutions to the rebus riddle.

Such a continuing process of rereading and correcting the solution to the rebus poems is also visible, but on a much larger scale, in the copy that is preserved at the Gotha Research Library (figure 5). It shows that these rebus poems were not only rescruited by individual readers, but could be reused by different readers as well. On the recto side of the broadsheet, containing the engraving itself, a contemporary reader added the solutions above individual rebus images. However, someone has erased these solutions by scratching

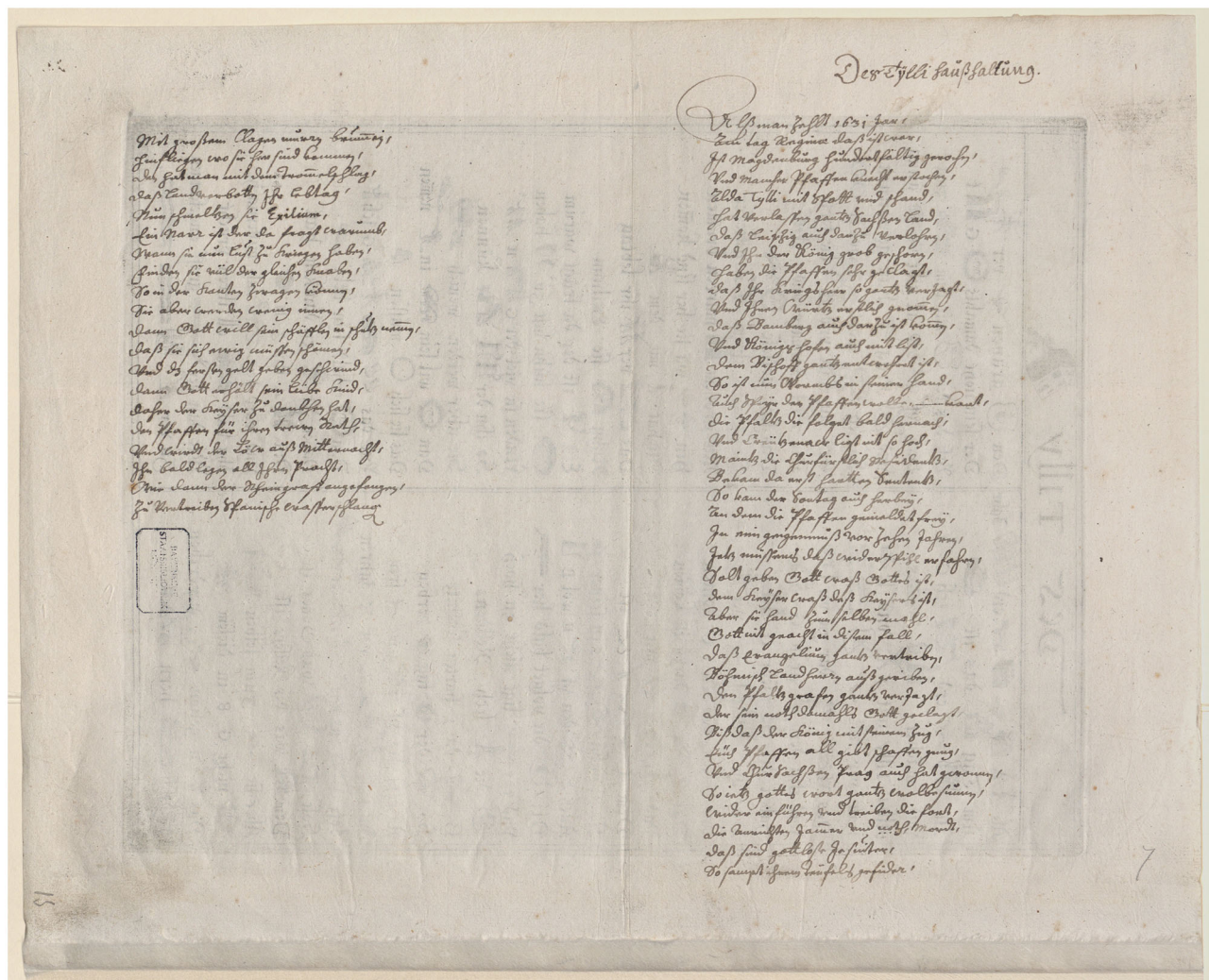


Figure 4. Des Tilly [Haushaltung]. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, cat. no. Einbl. V,8 a-59, f. 1v, urn:nbn:de:hbz:12-bs00077390-2.

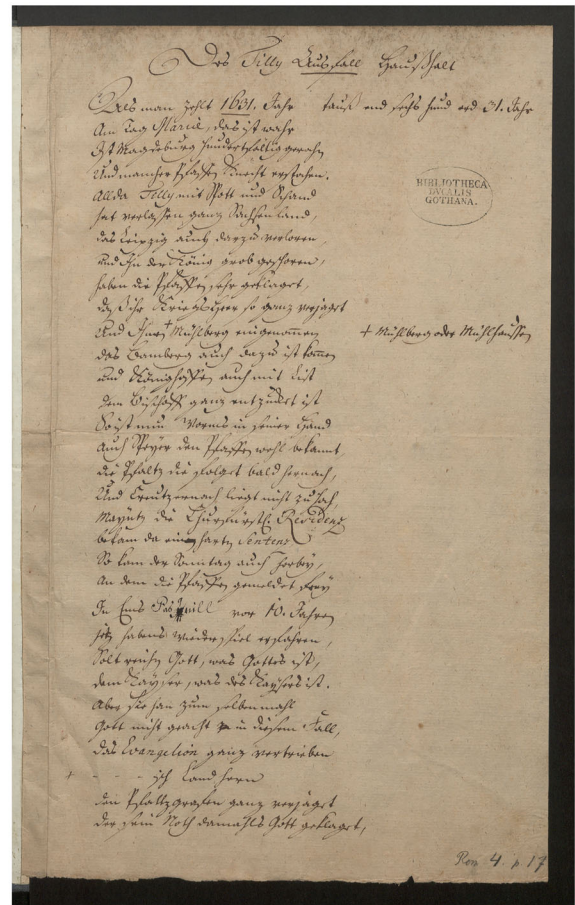
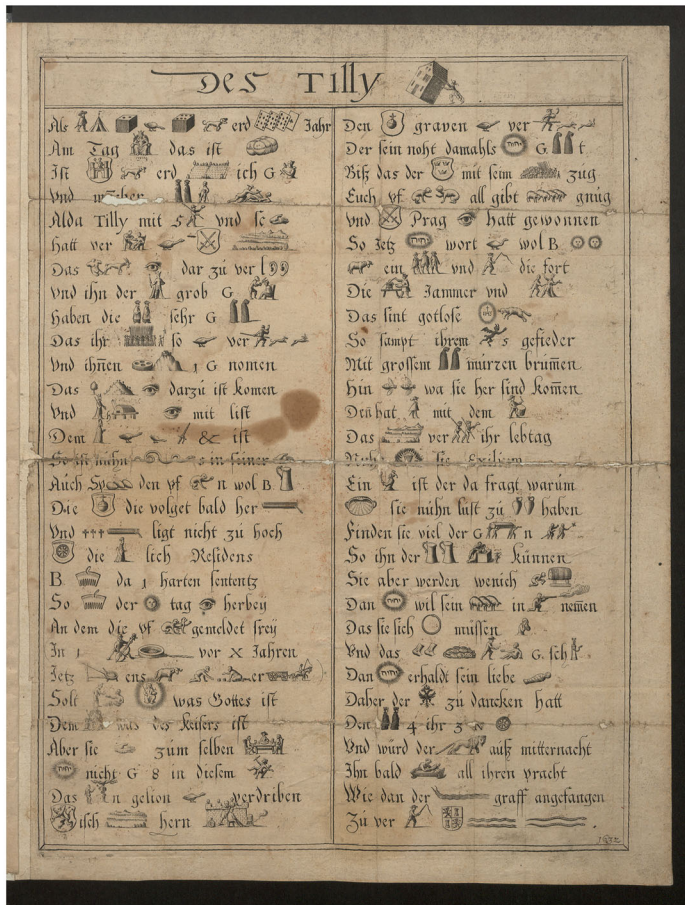


Figure 5. *Des Tilly [Haushaltung]*. Gotha, Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, cat. no. MAG:Math 4° 00585b/02, ff. 1^r, 2^o.

the paper, making them virtually unreadable. In the seventh line, ‘Das [Leib][Ziege] [Aug] dar zu verl[Oren]’ (‘That Leipzig also lost there’), the final h of ‘auch’ and the diacritical sign on the u are still visible next to the rebus image of the eye. Nevertheless, this person, or another user, seems to have realised that the presence of the answers to virtually all rebus images was in contradiction with the intended use of this puzzle. The rebus had been ‘spoiled’ because of the visibility of the answers, and therefore its entertainment value had been lost. Scratching out the added words restored this value and made it possible to play the game again, whether by the same or—more likely—by another reader.

But this is not the only layer of reception that accompanies this specimen. Not only the broadside itself has been preserved, but also what seems to be a contemporary attempt to decipher it on a separate page. The Gotha ‘Tilly’ is bound together with a handwritten sheet, which, on its recto and verso, contains the solution to the rebus poem written in full. The handwriting dates from the seventeenth century. The handwritten sheet shows various layers, various stages in which elements have been added and corrected.

This process is already visible in the title, as the creator of this document seems to have hesitated between ‘Des Tilly Ausfall’ and ‘Des Tilly Haushalt’. Both solutions have been given, but the former has been underlined. Where the individual who wrote out the solution on the back of the München copy only did so after having completed virtually the entire rebus riddle, this reader can be observed in the middle of their thought process.

This solution written on a loose leaf was probably made either before the notes on the engraved broadside itself were made, or after they had been scratched out: rebus images which had been resolved on the engraved sheet have been left empty in the sheet with the handwritten solution. Moreover, the hands in which the two solutions are written are different, revealing that two different readers were at work here. It is also noteworthy that the two rebus images that posed difficulty to the Munich reader have both been solved by the Gotha reader who wrote their solution on a separate folio. Apparently, the riddles in this rebus were not, in a more general sense, difficult to crack for an early modern audience.

The individual who made this sheet seems to have started by writing down the global solution to the poem, as found during a first read-through. The great majority of the rebuses have been solved in this first level, suggesting that the rebus poem was relatively readable to contemporary eyes. A cross was added in front of the problematic lines so that the reader in question knew that he or she had to return to them. In multiple cases, this concerns lines where multiple rebuses had to be combined without any letters in between to support interpretation. In line 11, they wrote down 'Muhlberg' as solution to a pictorial riddle showing a millstone and a building on top of a mountain. A cross next to this placename indicates that the reader was unsure about this answer. In the margin, they added another cross, with the words 'Muhlberg oder Muhlhaussen' ('Muhlberg or Muhlhausen'). By marking uncertain parts spatially in the margin and visually by using clear notes such as crosses, the reader could return to them easily to reflect on the possible solution again.

Difficult units which were not immediately solved were either replaced by dots, or their space was left empty. In some cases, the missing parts have, indeed, been added later in the same hand. In the fifteenth line of the second column, the rebus riddle of an object surrounded by fire was not solved in a first reading, as a series of dots is visible in the solution. Above the dots, however, the word 'schmelzen' ('to melt') was later added in the same hand. This sheet demonstrates the hermeneutic circle in working. It shows the early modern reader going through different stages of rereading and reattempting to solve the rebus riddle.

The first line also reveals how the reader dealt with a calculus puzzle. The faces shown by a series of dice and playing cards have to be added, and combined with an image of a dog ('Hund') to create 'hunderd' ('one hundred'). In the margin to the right of the main text of the solution, the reader has written the different numbers out in full: 'tauss end sechs hund erd 31' ('one thousand six hundred thirty-one'). Each unit in the riddle is written down separately, even when two units together create one word: 'hund', the solution to the rebus image of a dog, stands apart from 'erd', which is written out in the original broadsheet. This suggests that the reader really considered each unit individually, before moving on to the next. Rather than doing the calculus while solving the rebus riddle, an extra step was needed. First, the rebus images were translated into text, then the text was combined to find the correct solution, namely the year 1631.

Intellectual game and visual satire

The 'Des Tilly' rebus, in its various editions, supports the claims made by Vater and Armstrong that these rebuses were no child's play, but intellectual games for adults. Even though it does not concern one of the most difficult rebuses from this

period because of the ample presence of written text and rebus images that have been reused multiple times, deciphering the pictorial riddles does require a considerable level of visual literacy. Armstrong's observation that early modern rebuses often required profound musical and botanical insight as well as knowledge of the animal kingdom does not hold true for this particular rebus poem. Various animals are shown—among which a lion, monkeys, and a sheep—but no specific subspecies are targeted. The only exception concerns two insects, that should be interpreted as flies ('Fliegen'). In the Gotha, Munich, and Wolfenbüttel edition, both flies are depicted from above, which makes them resemble bees somewhat. The edition kept at the British Museum, Frankfurt and Munich presents one fly from above, and the other from the side, perhaps in order to make it easier to determine the type of insect portrayed.

While knowledge of the animal kingdom is hardly required for the 'Des Tilly' rebus, it does challenge its readers on other intellectual levels. Remarkably many social classes are depicted, for which readers need to activate their knowledge of clothing styles belonging to particular social groups. In lines 8 and 9 of the left column alone, a king, two papists, and two monks representing the term 'Klerge' (clergy) are depicted. Furthermore, some very basic biblical knowledge is required to interpret the naked woman standing next to a tree encircled by a snake as Eve. Neither of these puzzles posed any difficulty to the Gotha and Munich readers who wrote out the solution by hand. Readers would need to deploy more advanced knowledge of early modern symbolism in order to interpret the ouroboros image of a snake biting its own tail, forming a perfect circle. The Gotha reader interpreted this image as 'alle' ('all'). The Munich solution gives the more likely answer 'awig' ('eternal').⁴²

Furthermore, the 'Des Tilly' rebus contains strikingly many images in which particular actions or situations are depicted in remarkable detail: figures attacking each other ('erstochen', 'stabbed'), getting a haircut ('geschoren', 'shaved'), sitting at a table ('Mahl', 'meal'), playing the drums ('Trommelschlag', 'drum beat'), putting a baby to bed ('legen', 'to put'), or carrying a coffin ('Leiche', 'corpse'). Several of these action scenes were difficult to interpret for the Gotha reader. They require a series of considerations: is it the action that is targeted (stabbing, shaving, putting), an object depicted in the image or presupposed by the image (meal, corpse), or the figures in the image?

A final type of knowledge that is activated by the 'Des Tilly' rebus concerns heraldry. The political poem contains various shields carrying the emblems of the Palatinate, the city of Magdeburg, and the electorate of Saxony. This heraldic aspect made the political nature of the pictorial riddle immediately visible to the early modern reader. In this case, at least, the rebus images do not hide the critical nature of the

poem (as Vater suggested), they add to it. Indeed, rebuses play a role in the visual satire of this broadsheet, and not just in the visual link that has been established between monkeys ('Affen') and papists ('Pfaffen'). The second column presents the Jesuit emblem, followed by the image of a ram, a 'Widder', to create the word 'Jesuwidder', pronounced 'Jesuiten' (Jesuits). The ram is not depicted in a neutral posture, but is actively attacking the Jesuit emblem to its left. Despite the fact that different versions of the engraving each show a slightly different ram, they all portray it while jumping towards the Jesuit emblem, ready to bash its horns into it. Not only textually, but visually, too, the rebus images thus attack the political adversary.

Conclusions

The handwritten solutions of the 'Des Tilly' rebus poem that are preserved in Munich and Gotha are extremely rare and valuable for providing insight into the ways in which early modern readers confronted these pictorial riddles. Although they do not contain clues about the age, gender, or social status of the individuals who owned and read these multimodal broadsheets, they do reveal how they used them. Clearly, these rebuses were not used as didactic tools for illiterate individuals, but rather as multimodal intellectual games. They make use of intricate visual satire to ridicule the opponent, and test the reader's knowledge of heraldry. The visual literacy of the reader is put to the test, as the rebus images contain no visual context: a biblical image of Eve is surrounded by heraldic shields and scenes from everyday early modern life.

The handwritten solutions from Gotha and Munich demonstrate the importance of a written support for the readers tackling the game: the Gotha rebus shows that the reader had to go back and forth multiple times between the pictorial riddles and their own solution in order to come to a virtually complete interpretation. Both in the Gotha and in the Munich copies, the early modern readers were unable fully to complete the puzzle. The denser the visual riddles, that is, the more rebus images were stacked together without letters to guide the reader, the more difficult the challenge. This also holds true for the presence of complex images portraying a small scene, rather than a single object or figure. The potential social aspect of these riddles does not become evident in the handwritten traces: multiple individuals worked on the Gotha rebus, but it is impossible to determine whether they did so alone or together with a discussion partner.

The strikingly high number of extant editions (four) and copies (eight) of the 'Des Tilly' rebus is proof, finally, of the immense popularity of these hybrid broadsheets, which position themselves at the crossroads between text and image, between intellectual and playful culture, and

between politics and media. Despite their cheap, fragile, and ephemeral nature, the Gotha rebus was reused multiple times, and a past reader even made an effort to make the puzzle 'playable' again after it had been solved by a previous owner. In a time of troubles and war, these multimodal political riddles offered a welcome playful distraction and starting point for discussion.

NOTES

- 1– For example, Francesco Colonna, *Hyphnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1499); see also Thijs Weststeijn, 'From Hieroglyphs to Universal Characters: Pictography in the Early Modern Netherlands', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 61, no. 1 (2011): 238–81.
- 2– For instance, see the sixteenth-century painting *The World Feeds Many Fools*. Anonymous artwork. 345 × 475 mm. Oil on panel. Private collection; see also John A. Goodall, 'The Use of the Rebus on Medieval Seals and Monuments', *Antiquaries Journal* 83 (2003): 448–71.
- 3– Paul Zumthor, 'D'une poésie littéraire', *Revue des sciences humaines* 179 [Special issue: La lettre, la figure, le rébus dans la poétique de la Renaissance] (1980): 7–21, at 9.
- 4– Augusto Marinoni, *I rebus di Leonardo da Vinci raccolti e interpretati* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1954); Carlo Pedretti, 'Three Leonardo Riddles', *Renaissance Quarterly* 30.2 (1977): 153–59.
- 5– Adrian Armstrong, 'Two More Rebus-Poems by Jean Molinet?', *Scriptorium* 51.1 (1997): 76–80; *idem*, 'Jean Marot's Rebus-Rondeau: Sense and Space', *Le moyen français* 42 (1998): 19–27; *idem*, 'Reception and Interference: Reading Jean Molinet's Rebus-Poems', *Word & Image* 23.3 (2007): 350–61; Laurent Bozard, 'Mise en page et engagement: le neuvaïn picard de Jean Marot', *Le moyen français* 71 (2012): 63–86; Julie Singer, 'Parts and (W)holes: Confronting the Human in Molinet's Graphic Games', *Neophilologus* 96.4 (2012), 509–21.
- 6– Armstrong, 'Reception and Interference', 357–59.
- 7– Armstrong, 'Jean Marot's Rebus-Rondeau'.
- 8– 'Rébus sur la mort d'Anne de Bretagne', Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Gaignieres 4969, département des manuscrits, français 20070, f. 1^r. This rebus is mentioned in Jean Céard and Jean-Claude Margolin, *Rébus de la Renaissance: des images qui parlent*, Vol. 1: *Histoire du rébus* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1986), 17–20.
- 9– Jessica Brantley, '"In Things": The Rebus in Premodern Devotion', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 45.2 (2015): 287–321.
- 10– Combertus Pieter Burger, 'De rebus van onze oude rederijkers', *Het Boek* 14 (1925): 146–92; Paul de Keyser, 'Bijdrage tot de Blazoenkunde van de Rederijkerskamers', *Jaarboek De Fonteyne* (1946): 35–67; August Keersmaekers, 'Rederijkers-rebusblazoenen in de zestiende-zeventiende eeuw', in *Wort und Bild in der niederländischen Kunst und Literatur des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, ed. H. Vekeman and J. M. Hofstede (Erfstadt: Lukassen, 1984), 217–19; F. C. van Boheemen and T. C. J. van der Heijden, 'Rebustaal op Hollandse rederijkersblazoenen', *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 15, no. 1 (1991): 131–40.
- 11– Alisa van de Haar, 'Entre chambre de rhétorique et salle de classe: les rébus des rhétoriciens dans la pratique scolaire', *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* 40, no. 2 (2020): 359–76.
- 12– Yvonne Bleyerveld, 'De negen geschilderde blazoenen van de Vlaardingse rederijkerswedstrijd van 1616', in *Op de Hollandse Parnas: de Vlaardingse rederijkerswedstrijd van 1616*, ed. B. A. M. Ramakers (Zwolle: Waanders, 2006), 30–63.
- 13– On the first level, the painting shows the ancient Greek painter Apelles, accompanied by two schoolboys ('Students of Apelles'). Next to

them lies a chicken's thigh ('die'), to the right of which St Luke is shown, next to two fires ('vieren'). This forms the verse: 'Apelles' scholieren, die Sint-Lucas vieren' ('Students of Apelles, who honour Saint Luke'). The full poem reads: 'Apelles' scholieren, die Sint-Lucas vieren,/Wilt helpen versieren den Olijftak snel,/Met ons Violieren en Apollo's laurieren,/Vlucht nijd naar edel manieren, willig houdt vrede wel' ('Students of Apelles, who honour Saint Luke,/Help to adorn the Olijftak swiftly,/With us Violieren and Apollo's laurels,/Flee from envy to honourable manners, willingly keep the peace'). The Olijftak and the Violieren to which the poem refers were chambers of rhetoric.

14– Marc Van Vaeck, 'De schadt-kiste der filosofen ende poeten (Mechelen 1621): Een blazoenfeest aan de vooravond van het einde van het bestand', *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 8 (1992): 75–80; Carmen Verhoeven, 'Door Mars gespleten, door retorica vergaard: Verbondenheid en verdeeldheid op het Mechelse blazoenfeest van 1620', *Vooys* 35.4 (2017): 44–58.

15– For example, *Rebus sur les misères de la France* (Jacques de la Carrière, 1592). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des estampes et de la photographie, inv. Qb 1 1592; *Rhebus du monde*, Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, IE 54; *Rhebus de Champagne*, Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, cat. no. IE 55; *Rhebus sur les misères de la France* (Paris: Jean Le Clerc, 1613). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des estampes et de la photographie, réserve QB-201 (19)-FOL.

16– This is the case in one of the copies of the *Rhebus sur les misères de la France* from 1613, currently kept at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. *Rhebus sur les misères de la France* (Paris: Jean Le Clerc, 1613). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des estampes et de la photographie, réserve QB-201 (19)-FOL, Hennin 1703.

17– For example, in another copy of the *Rhebus sur les misères de la France* from 1613, kept at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. *Rhebus sur les misères de la France* (Paris: Jean Le Clerc, 1613). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des estampes et de la photographie, RESERVE QB-201 (19)-FOL, Hennin 1704.

18– Dirk Kampmann, *Das Rebusflugblatt: Studien zum Konnex von literarischer Gattung und publizistischem Medium* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1993); Andreas Josef Vater, 'Textlücken oder Bildfolge: Zwei illustrierte Flugblätter von 1621—Ein Thema, zwei Bildkonzepte?', in *Sprechen über Bilder, sprechen in Bildern: Studien zum Wechselverhältnis von Bild und Sprache*, ed. Lena Bader, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Johannes Grave (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2014), 99–111.

19– For example, *Die 3 Blinden aus Böhmen* (1620/21). Waldeckschen Hofbibliothek Arolsen, Klebebände, Band 18, f. 41; *Gründliche Weis[sag]ung Vom Heydel[berg]er vermeldt was Ihm ein Zigeinerin hat Er[zell]*. Waldeckschen Hofbibliothek Arolsen, Klebebände, Band 18, f. 41; London, British Museum, cat. no. 1880,0710.879; *Der Geh[sau] [wider]isch Pf[affen] [schwarm] ver[führt] die Leut [...]* (1619); British Museum, cat. no. 1873,0712.141; *Des Pfaltzgrafen Haußgsind* (1621). Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, cat. no. Einbl. V,8 a-11; Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, cat. no. IH 98.

20– Charlotte Eubanks, 'Visual Vernacular: Rebus, Reading, and Urban Culture in Early Modern Japan', *Word & Image* 28.1 (2012): 57–70, at 61.

21– Ulrich Kreidt, 'Melchior Mattsperger (1627–1698): *Geistliche Herzens-Einbildungen*. 2 Teile. Augsburg 1684/1692', in *Handbuch zur Kinder- und Jugendliteratur von 1570 bis 1750*, Vol. 2, ed. Theodor Brüggemann, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1990), 171–90. Andreas Josef Vater has questioned this view: Andreas Josef Vater, 'Jenseits des Rebus: Für einen Paradigmenwechsel in der Betrachtung von Figuren der Substitution am Beispiel von Melchior Mattspergers *Geistliche Herzens-einbildungen*', *Image* 22 (2015): 47–63. For rebuses as a mnemonic device, see also Jean Céard and Jean-Claude Margolin, *Rébus de la*

Renaissance: des images qui parlent, Vol. 1: *Histoire du rébus*, 2 vols (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1986), 55.

22– Céard and Margolin, *Rébus de la Renaissance*, 1: 21–23; Andreas Josef Vater, 'Spielen avant la lettre: Zum poetischen Spielraum von Rebusfiguren und dessen frühneuzeitlicher Kritik', in *Spielräume und Raumschiffe in der Literatur*, ed. Julia Dettke and Elisabeth Heyne (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2016), 181–96.

23– 'homonymies tant ineptes, tant fades, tant rustiques et barbares'; François Rabelais, 'Des couleurs et livrée de Gargantua', in *Gargantua*, ed. Marie-Madeleine Fragonard (Paris: Pocket Classiques, 1998), 96 (trans. by the author).

24– Vater, 'Jenseits des Rebus'; see also Alisa van de Haar, 'Language Games: The Multilingual Emblem Book and the Language Question in the Low Countries', *Queste* 22.1 (2015): 82–109.

25– Paula Findlen, 'Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge: The Playfulness of Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe', *Renaissance Quarterly* 43.2 (1990): 292–331; Jelle Koopmans, 'Le Present d'ung cat nonne ou le texte ludique', in *Jean Molinet et son temps. Actes des rencontres internationales de Dunkerque, Lille et Gand (8–10 Novembre 2007)*, ed. Jean Devaux, Estelle Doudet, and Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 59–66, at 51.

26– Armstrong, 'Reception and Interference'.

27– Alisa van de Haar, 'From Multilingual to Multimodal: Educational French–Dutch Translation in Early Modern Times', in *Multilingual Practices in Early Modern Literary Culture*, ed. Peter Auger and Sheldon Brammall (London: Routledge, 2023), 39–54.

28– Katelijne Schiltz, *Music and Riddle Culture in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 31–38.

29– Karl A. E. Enenkel, 'The Game of Emblems: The Invention of Junius's Self-Exegetical Emblem Commentary', in *Emblematics in the Early Modern Age: Case Studies on the Interaction between Philosophy, Art, and Literature*, ed. Eugenio Canone and Leen Spruit (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra, 2012), 1–20.

30– W. Harms, J. R. Paas, M. Schilling, and A. Wang, 'Des Tilly [Haushaltung]', in *Illustrierte Flugblätter des Barock* (Tübingen: De Gruyter, 1983), 120–22.

31– Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, cat. no. Einbl. V,8 a-59; Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, cat. no. MAG:Math 4° 00585b/02; Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, cat. no. IH 190.

32– Hans Medick and Pamela Selwyn, 'Historical Event and Contemporary Experience: The Capture and Destruction of Magdeburg in 1631', *History Workshop Journal* 52.1 (2001): 23–48.

33– Geoffrey Parker estimates that Gustavus Adolphus united about forty-one thousand men while Tilly might only have had about thirty-one thousand. According to Peter H. Wilson, the differences in numbers were smaller: his estimate is about thirty-nine thousand men for Gustavus Adolphus opposing about thirty-seven thousand troops led by Tilly; Geoffrey Parker, *The Thirty Years' War* (London: Routledge, 1984), 126; Peter H. Wilson, *Europe's Tragedy. A History of the Thirty Years' War* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 472–73.

34– Parker, *The Thirty Years' War*, 125–26; Toby Osborne, '1629–1635', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Thirty Years' War*, ed. Olaf Asbach and Peter Schröder (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 139–50, at 144.

35– Hans Medick, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg. Zeugnisse vom Leben mit Gewalt* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 270; see also Eva L. E. Janssens, 'Louder than Words: Broadsheets as Agents in a Multimedial Society', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 57.1 (2021): 114–37.

36– 'Als [Man] [zählt] [taus][End] [sechs] [Hund]erd [einunddreisig] Jahr/[...] Ist [Magdeburg] [Hund]erd[Fält]ich g[erochen]/Und m[ä]ncher [Pfaffen][Knecht] [erstochen]'; *Des Tilly [Haushaltung]*. Gotha, Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, cat. no. MAG:Math 4° 00585b/02, f. 2^r.

- 37– Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, cat. no. Hist.Germ.C.16,misc.37.
- 38– Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, cat. no. Einbl. II,12 c; London, British Museum, cat. no. 1875,0710.4362; Frankfurt University Library, Gustav Freytag collection.
- 39– Hrad Český Sternberk, cat. no. 147/140.
- 40– Jiří Douglas Sternberg, Zdeněk Sternberg, and Tomáš Koch, ‘The Thirty Years’ War: Events and Personalities of the Thirty Years’ War Displayed on the Contemporary Engravings’, *Historical Association Týnec nad Sázavou*, <http://www.goletavalka.eu/medirytiny.html?lang=en#ryt-149> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 41– This approach closely resembles one other example of a rebus poem relating to the Thirty Years’ War that contains traces of readers’ use. The British Museum owns a rebus poem under the title [*Reiter*] und [*Post*] *Ihr* [*Boten*] *zugleich*, cat. no. 1876,0510.524. At the top of the

recto side a seventeenth-century hand has added the solution to the riddle, seemingly without hesitation.

- 42– Guy de Tervarent, ‘Serpent en forme de cercle’, in *Attributs et symboles dans l’art profane. Dictionnaire d’un langage perdu (1450–1600)* (Geneva: Droz, 1997), 403–04.

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