

## DEVICES, A FORGOTTEN GENRE OF RHETORIC

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When I first read *The Three Musketeers*, I was puzzled why the diamond tokens Anne of Austria had given Buckingham were such trouble. Couldn't she simply buy some more? Or say they were stolen? But after reading the sixth dialogue of Dominique Bouhours' *The Dialogues of Aristide and Eugene*, entitled "Devises", I feel I understand better. Tokens were one of the places where a ruler's devise was engraved. The devise would prevent the tokens from being stolen or sold, for the owner could be immediately identified. Hence if they were found on Buckingham, their owner could for the same reason be easily identified, so they had to be found and returned to the Queen.

Conley valued Bouhours in his history of European rhetorical theory chiefly because "[h]is writings are far from unimaginative imitations of old rhetorics. He was a creative and ingenious author of vast erudition" (199). *Le manière de bien penser* was Bouhours' most famous work, and it has long been available in translation. The *Entretiens* should be of more interest to contemporary scholars, as it takes on topics, such as devises, unique to its time, and does not focus so much on well-known Belletristic concerns such as literature.

In short, then, the devise was a multimedia personal emblem consisting of a metaphorical illustration and an ambiguous phrase or short sentence. Taken together they would be understood as representing a particular person or that's person's state of mind (315-16).

The devise was held in high esteem among the upper classes. Bouhours has Aristide argue late in the dialogue that the devise is of all the products of human art "the most attractive and the most spiritual. It's an extraordinary genre having all the perfections of others, without their faults: for the devise joins together subtlety with good sense, doc-

trine with gallantry, clarity with brevity” (418) Furthermore, he believes that although the ancients did not use the devise, nevertheless it was implicit in their mytho-poetic productions (418).

## USES OF DEVICES

Devises were used in a variety of settings and on a variety of things. The dialogue mentions a variety of settings and events: jousting tournaments, horse races (420), hunts, dances, ballet performances (429), masquerades, entering a conquered city (430), the births and deaths of rulers and upper class people (431), military victories and achieving successful plans (435), [Catholic] Christian ceremonies (437), miraculous occasions (438), the establishment of knightly orders (460) and university faculties (463), and other similar settings and events.

Devises were painted on many things and in many places. Shields, flags and pennants were the original military modes (469). Yet they could also be found on tapestries, obelisks, pyramids, statues’ bases, ships, and over the doors of homes, academic buildings and deliberative chambers (469-70). Portable modes were the previously mentioned tokens, as well as tablets (471-72).

## THEMATIC TYPES OF DEVICES

The dialogue divides these devises thematically into six types. The purest and highest type (because devises were believed to have had been originally found on heroes’ shields), was the **heroic** devise. They dealt with “... military tactics, glorious actions, virtues and other good qualities ... for there is more than one sort of hero” (365). A good example is Monsieur le Dauphin’s, which consisted of some dolphins frolicking during a storm at sea, with the motto *pericula ludus* (perils frolicking but a game) (384).

Seemingly the converse of the heroic devise was the **satiric** devise, which pointed out “faults and vices” (379). Both Aristide and Eugene

are upset about the existence of these devises, but with sadness admit that they are authorized by history and custom. A good example is one with the figure of a donkey grazing in a field of thistles, with the motto *Pungent, dum saterent* (Stung, then relieved). This was supposed to censure a social parasite, who endured the insults of the upper classes in order to keep dining at their tables (379).

A third type of devise was the **romantic**, which is self-explanatory. An example held up by the dialogue as a good one was a sunflower seedhead oriented toward the sun, with the motto, *Hasta la muerte* (until death) (408).

A fourth type was the **moral**, intended to show “natural decency” (380). The following example was supposed to suggest a woman who dedicated herself to working in her church and for the sick. The figure was a beehive, and the motto was *Aris ægrisque laboro* (for the altar and the sick) since the busy bees provided candle wax for the altar and honey for the sick, just as this person provided money & care for both (394-95).

The fifth type, **political** devises was drawn from “maxims of state” (380). An example is a horse bridle with *regit corrigit* (rule and correct), for the faculty of the University of Modena (Fondo Antica).

Finally, the sixth type, **Christian** devises pertain to “the mysteries of faith and the truths of the Bible” (380). An example would be a moth flying around a candle with the motto, *Tetigesse perisec est* (To touch is to die) to make understood how seriously the author took sin.

## RULES FOR CONSTRUCTING DEVICES

Aristide calls the devise’s figure, ‘The Body’ and the devise’s slogan or motto ‘The Soul’.

### Rules for Constructing the Body

#### Suitable Types of Figures

The first and most complicated rule for choosing a figure was that it should contain “nothing monstrous or irregular”, “nothing against the

nature of things”, and nothing “... against the common beliefs of the people” The first example the interlocutors discuss is a set of devises using the slogan *Festina lente*, usually translated as “make haste slowly”. The one depicting a tortoise with a sail on its back is judged both monstrous and irregular (www.neithersnow.com). In contrast, a dolphin with its tale wrapped around an anchor is merely against nature, since dolphins never do that.

Exceptions are nonhuman, mythical creatures that are well known. Those mentioned are Medusa, the griffin, the hydra, dragons, etc. (323). It follows that humans & mythical creatures with human form are forbidden, as well as parts of human bodies (325-27). So, the Greek gods are out. In our time, would vampires and zombies pass this rule? The reason for this restriction is that the figure of the devise is a metaphor for a human, so a human figure would create “a metaphor of a metaphor”, making a devise too complicated and difficult (325).

Another corollary of these rules is that unaccustomed, strange, or unrecognized plants and animals are excluded because they would make the devise too hard to understand (332). Aristide and Eugene censure Marie Stewart’s devise on the death of her husband: the motto, *Dulce meum terra tegit* (My sweet lies below) is fine, but the figure of a licorice plant, whose root is sweet, would have been obscure to their audience (332). Today, with the influence of the Internet and cable channels like Animal Planet, we might recognize the properties of many more animals than in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Besides ‘natural’ beings, objects taken from “the arts and their instruments” were allowed (328). Above are objects from sailing and animal husbandry. Other such objects were mirrors, sundials, T-squares, and locks.

Finally, with regard to the types of figures that are acceptable, the Body of a devise “must be noble and agreeable to the eye” (330). Nobility seems to have been the stronger consideration. Throughout the work there are many lions, eagles, horses, falcons, dragons, and unicorns. The dialogue only specifically mentions “a toad or a bat” as too ignoble or disagreeable. On the other hand, “serpents” are acceptable because they appear in scripture and some of them are quite lovely (330).

### How Figures Should Be Deployed

Aristide insists that the figure should not be an allegory. The example he gives is Marc Antony of Collonna's devise, crossed cypress boughs and palm fronds with the saying, *Erit altera merces* (One or the other) (Giovo 15474/051). This is not proper because although cypress boughs and palm fronds were decorations at funerals and victory processions, respectively, Marc had abstracted them in order to represent death and life, the two possible outcomes of an upcoming military undertaking (324). Presumably, this would make a devise into an emblem.

The features drawn upon in the devise must be "real properties of the bodies" (329). Yet by the standards of today, many of the devises are laughable in this regard. Several draw on the salamander's supposed ability to live in fire, and one of Louis XII's devises admired at the time the work was written was a porcupine with the slogan, *Cominus & eminus* (Near and far) (Results). The two admire the King's ingenuity in choosing the porcupine to imply he is safe against enemies near and far, for the porcupine can both stab with his spines in close battle, and also launch them into the distance (366)!

The final rule for composing figures is that figures should be drawn in motion if possible. This is more memorable, according to Aristide, and partakes better of metaphor's active nature (331).

### Rules for Constructing the Soul

#### Characteristics of the Soul's Language

Several rules are explained concerning the proper language for the devise. First, the Soul shouldn't enunciate anything that cannot be verified by the Body (345). So, personification is usually not regulation, unless it comes unintentionally from a dead metaphor in a language (347). However, here we confront a contradiction in the rules because later in the dialogue one finds that the custom was to write mottoes in the first person, "as if the figure could speak" (365). Yet this was not regarded as a personification. A second corollary of this rule is that general moral sentiments are not allowed since the figures are not illustrations of such rules (349). Third, the characteristics of the

figure mentioned by the motto must be true of the figure at all times, not only sometimes (349-50). Otherwise the meaning will be too obscure. Finally, the gender of the language must match both the figure and the person. This may have been the reason that many French mottoes were in the first person. Of course, this would not be as much of a problem in English.

Second, the motto should refer equally to the figure and the person. The dialogue offers two good examples of this principle. The first is a picture of a flame with the slogan *Desorum nunquam* (Never below), to represent a person whose thoughts were always lofty. Since flame always rises, the motto represents both the person and the figure well. The other is a silkworm spinning its cocoon with the slogan, *Sibi vincula nectit* (Forging its own bonds) for a person committing to serve someone else. Since service at that time was a heavy bond, and the silkworm passes away in a cocoon used for silk production, the language suited both the figure and the person well.

A second rule regarding the language of the Soul is it should have either a poetic meter or be “pure prose” (346). A broken meter was to be avoided. Halves of classical heroic couplets were common (346). However, creating one’s own slogans was perfectly fine (347).

A third rule was that the motto should not be a metaphor since the figure was a metaphor. One violator of this rule was a devise portraying a rose with the motto, *Tutta fiammo, tutta strali* (All the flames, all the arrows). Here the red color of the rose and its thorns are represented metaphorically.

Finally, other rules defined what languages were proper for the devise. In France, the custom was to write the slogans in a foreign language (362). Spaniards and Italians usually wrote in their native tongues. But many languages are defined in the dialogue as improper. Eugene says that a motto written in an “Oriental” language or in a Northern European language would be “something monstrous” (363). Further, some languages are OK for some but not for others. For example, Greek is judged suitable for scholars, but inappropriate for women (363-64)!

### Relation of the Soul to the Body in Good Devices

The dialogue argues that the words must be suitable to the figure (338). As a result, if the figure is noble or grand, the slogan must have a noble or grand tone. An example of mismatch is a devise portraying a tranquil sea with the motto, *Felice l'ama che per voi sopra* (Happy the Soul who sighs for you), which Aristide and Eugene state is too limpid for the sea (338).

Also, the words should not express what could clearly be seen (338). For example, saying the sun “shines” or “illuminates” is obvious. On the other hand, to say it “obscures all other lights,” for example, is not so obvious (339).

Further, the figure should not be named in the motto, unless the meaning would be horribly obscure without that. (338). However, if one’s name was a common noun, and what one’s name names was portrayed in the figure, one was allowed pun on it (338).

Finally, and importantly, the words “should not express all” (341); in other words, the Soul must not have the same meaning as the Body and Soul together. This further distinguishes the devise from the emblem, where the figure and the words are supposed to have the same meaning (341). As a result, the motto should leave something to be worked out. To help with this, verbs were often omitted from the motto (343). Further, generally, the shorter a motto was, the more “grace” it was considered to have (344). In French, Aristide and Eugene estimate two or three words are best, in Latin up to five, in Italian maybe a few more are acceptable (345).

### Desired effects of the Soul

If a devise has a motto that follows all the above rules, then the “marvelous” could be encountered (367). This seems to have been a sense of surprise at the artistry of the devise. In the dialogue this seems to be mostly an effect of the motto since the figures are usually quite simple. Two examples held up in the dialogue show a shrub next to an oak tree, battered by swirling winds, and cold water being poured over lime (Don’t try this at home!). The motto of the first figure is *Cedendo resisit* (Resisting by yielding), and the other’s is *E fredda m'accenda*

(Cold as it is, it enflames me) (369-70). These are so far from the expected that the interlocutors regard them as quite marvelous.

Further, when the person's name enters into a devise somehow, either through the figure or the motto "it gains admirable virtue" (373). And when a devise includes elements from a coat of arms, it has "even more justice" (374).

In contemporary theory, one might point to the extra time needed to process a devise as one reason for its effectiveness. Like puns in advertising, persons represented by devises may be better remembered (Tanaka 105-106). In addition, if a devise were prevalent enough, it may have cornered the market on a certain design. For example, in the introduction to the dialogue, the two interlocutors reveal Louis XIV's devise was painted on all of his and the government's possessions, so it was difficult for others, even other rulers to use the sun in their devises.

## **BRINGING DEVISES INTO THE PRESENT**

Although devises as an art have been lost, some are produced by accident. One common tattoo is an admirable devise, a ship on the sea with the motto, "Homeward Bound" ([skindeepart.com](http://skindeepart.com)) It seems to express the desire of a traveling man or woman to always return home. The dialogue's only criticism might be that ships don't always return home.

However, much of contemporary self-expression seems to violate the rules of devise creation. Often when tattoos are written in Chinese characters, they are barbaric, not because, as the dialogue argues, 'Oriental' languages are barbaric, but because the person doesn't understand Chinese ([buzzfeed.com](http://buzzfeed.com)). If devises were used at present, any language should be permissible, as long as the person understands the language, both to avoid mistakes and to be able to explain the meaning to others.

Another barrier to reviving the devise would be that our ideas about ourselves have changed. One type of tattoo, which is seen from time to time, portrays a few of a person's favorite things to represent



the self, much like Facebook's old Sandbox application (youmeandcharlie.com). In those representations a person is defined as his/her consumer preferences, in stark contrast to the dominating moods (determination, folly, grief, passion, etc.) represented in devises.

Finally, it seems that currently there is a tendency to name the figure in the motto, when there is a motto, which according to the dialogue is a grave mistake. Two examples should suffice. One tee-shirt design shows an octopus with the text, "Octopuses give the best hugs ever!"; another shows a Slinky™ toy with the text, "Slow and slinky wins the race" (both mentalfloss.com). The first example of a motto would be acceptable as "Great hugs!", omitting the verb for elegance, to represent a very warm person, while the second is more difficult to rectify. Perhaps, "One step at a time, to the end" to represent a methodical yet successful person, though it remains a bit long by 18<sup>th</sup> Century standards. Why is referring to the figure a contemporary tendency? I must admit I have no idea.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, the devise is an interesting and difficult-to-construct self-representation. It can give us insight into early belletristic genres representing the "*honnête homme*" in Western Europe, and further remind us how painstaking those representations were (Conley 200). Of course, the French Revolution made all the old aristocratic genres *passé*, even dangerous, for a time.

However, it would be possible to revive the devise. The threat of the guillotine is gone. Yes, we live in a consumer culture, but our culture also tells us we are all heroes, with an inherent dignity giving us every right to use devises! For those willing to follow the rules of composition and construction, devises are admirably suited to represent our noble natures, or to poke fun at them. Also, in a crowded personal branding marketplace, they would make our natures and our names easier for others to remember. As a result of this essay, I fully expect to see them on tattoos, t-shirts, business cards, and other self-representations.

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