

Enigmistica: Word Puzzles in Italy

by Hot

In the spring of 1999, I got to spend a few weeks in Italy, where my wife had some work. Coincidentally, there was a puzzlers' conference in Verona during our visit. I was invited to the con by Argon, who had attended an NPL convention a few years prior. This gave me a chance to find out a lot about Italian puzzling, which I will attempt to relate here.

A version of this article appeared in *The Enigma* in 1999.

Disclaimers:

- ◇ My knowledge of Italian is minimal, my exposure to Italian puzzling limited, and its rules and traditions are complex. So I may be wrong about some things. I am grateful that Italian puzzlers Orofilo, Hammer and Cocò checked this for accuracy in 1999.
 - ◇ This article was written about 25 years ago, and things have changed. Federico helped me bring it up to date, but I am responsible for any remaining errors.
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The Big Picture

There are three *Enigma*-like publications, dedicated to what the Italians call *classical* puzzling: flats, cryptographs, and picture rebi. A monthly (*Penombra*), a bimonthly (*La Sibilla*) and one all-rebus quarterly (*Leonardo*). There is also a free PDF quarterly: *Il Canto della Sfinge*, on whose site you can also download back issues of the other magazines (www.cantodellasfinge.net). Hard-core puzzlers subscribe and/or contribute to more than one publication. There is no national puzzlers' organization, except the ARI (Italian Rebus Association), but there are a number of local puzzlers' groups. There is also an Italian Puzzle Library in Campogalliano (Associazione Culturale "Biblioteca Enigmistica Italiana - G. Panini"; B.E.I. for short — www.enignet.it).

Some Italian puzzlers, in addition to their involvement in classical puzzling, are also creators of "popular" puzzles, such as crosswords and many other puzzle types, not unlike the ones you may see in *Games* or Dell publications. Two of the popular puzzle publications do include some classical puzzles: *Domenica Quiz* (which reprints puzzles from the classical reviews) and *La Settimana Enigmistica*, the main puzzle publication in Italy, also a weekly. All puzzlers seem to have discovered classical puzzling through *La Settimana Enigmistica*'s "Page of the Sphinx". During the summer, *La Settimana Enigmistica*'s circulation climbs to a noticeable percent of the population. A number of serious puzzlers work there, and that publication includes flats and rebi — mostly but not exclusively easier than the ones found in the classical magazines.

Italian puzzlers also have noms, though the "Eric" phenomenon (use of the first name as a nom) is more widespread there than here.

The Con in Verona

Their conventions — including the program — are fully organized by local groups. For example, the Verona con was organized by the Verona puzzlers, led by Il Maculato. The con program/schedule is published in all the puzzle magazines. The cons don't seem to always happen at the same time of year or follow exactly the same format. In 1972, in addition to the con, they had a puzzle cruise! In general, I must say that while Italian puzzlers seem equally dedicated (obsessed?) as we are, their con is not a round-the-clock marathon like ours. Off-program puzzling happens, but not quite on our scale.

The menus for all the meals were humorously anagrammed, course by course, though I was told that the exact form of menu wordplay varied from year to year.

This con included several lectures and debates on matters of interest to puzzlers. It was opened by a welcome speech by local puzzler and con organizer Giuli. A representative of the city council also said a few words. Then Zoroastro gave a rather scholarly talk (which was published as a little pamphlet) on the history of "the Verona riddle". An English version:

The land was white, the seed was black,
It'll take a good scholar to riddle me that.

The solution: writing. This is the first known puzzle in the Italian language, and it appears in the margins of the earliest known document in the Italian language. According to Zoroastro, folklorists have found the same riddle in the spoken culture throughout the regions of Italy, and in fact throughout much of the Western world.

Throughout the con, there were solving competitions, including one where people solved in randomly selected pairs. Three sessions were dedicated to great puzzlers of the past. This included speeches, the release of anthology books, and the awarding of prizes for special puzzle construction challenges. In fact there were many prizes awarded throughout the weekend, for "best flat", "best rebus", and so on, mostly on specific construction challenges. Winners were selected by special committees of judges, whose objectivity was guaranteed by the fact they did not know who contributed which puzzle. Many gold and silver medals were won, as well as cups, books, etc. People who didn't win any medals got a keychain with an "Oedipus and the Sphinx" image, matching the one on the medals. (The keychains were donated by a commercial publisher.)

The con had its own postcard, a cartoon of Romeo and Juliet (more or less), completely baffled as they watch a bunch of puzzlers race by on sphinx-back. (See below.) Con postcards were signed and sent to people who could not attend. Like our cons, the Verona con was filled with

a spirit of friendship among participants of all ages, though I would say the median age was definitely greater than at our cons.

Flats in Italy

Italian puzzlers are not as interested as we are in discovering new flat types or using exotic ones. Most flats are of a few basic types. Moreover the bases are often ordinary, short words, even from the pen of seasoned constructors. The focus of flat-writing and solving lies elsewhere: it is more about the clever and deceitful use of words in the verse. This is what they call "doppio senso", or "dilogia": double meaning (or double-talk). A flat should appear to be about something quite different from what it is actually about. This is not just a good idea, it's the rule. Flats are titled, and the title always refers to the apparent subject, not the actual subject.

It is not uncommon to challenge constructors to write flats with a given apparent subject. In the now-defunct *Il Labirinto*, there was a themed section, where all the flats had the same apparent subject -- in the issue I saw it was "a familiar dish". At the con, there was a contest sponsored by an airline (!) which required a flat with that airline as the apparent subject. The winning entry by Cocò and Il Maranello was an enigma with solution "minutes", with an ending line something like "as you enjoy yourself, see how we fly!"

Argon organizes a meeting in Capri every other year, with a theme such as The Sphinx, or The Labyrinth. These meetings involve puzzlers and others, such as academics and literary people. In 1998, there was a contest to write a short play that would have for its apparent theme the story of the Labyrinth. One entry had Theseus as the telephone, Ariadne as the voice, and the Minotaur as the telephone book. In the winning entry, Theseus was the nose, Ariadne the throat, and the Minotaur the ear.

The Italians do not use cuewords. In the popular press, the place holder may be xxxxyxx for a deletion (a format that was copied in the *4-Star Puzzler* back in the day). But in the puzzlers' publications, there are no place holders at all. (I was told that if I had come to Italy 100 years ago, there would have been cuewords, but that this was now considered completely archaic.) In any case, say that you have a charade. You would write a three-stanza poem, the first about ONE, the second about TWO, the last about ALL. Or if it's a quatrain (for what they call a "short") you'd have one line about ONE, one about TWO, and the last two about ALL.

All flat types work similarly, which forces them to have a different flat type for an addition than for a deletion, since the verse about ONE must precede the verse about TWO. The whole of the verse on each part word needs to be about it — unlike our Acrostical Enigmas where a single word can serve as a clue. So their flats are like our enigmas and riddles, with each part being its own little enigma. And the whole poem has to hang together, appearing to be about one topic or story.

Here is an example in English.

ITALIAN-STYLE REVERSED DELETION (*6, 5) (*6 = dictionary.com)

To a Young Boxer

When training, you must choose a coach—
A famous name will help a bunch.
A bell will sound; you'll see approach
A man. What does he bring? A punch!

If then you find you're laid out flat,
Just rise again. It's true, I see,
You weren't that good, but what of that?
Now you can sting just like a bee!

=LUNCH, New York NY

Solution: Amtrak, karma

They also have one-liner flats (parts can be "welded", in Italian: "continuing" — "continuativo") and the whole puzzle is clued in a single line, as in the following example (which they would call "anagramma" and a title describing the apparent subject would have to be added — the fact that it is welded is clear from the enumeration):

ONE-LINER WELDED TRANSPOSAL (6'1 7)

Slugs and snails and puppy dog tails

=HOT, Berkeley CA

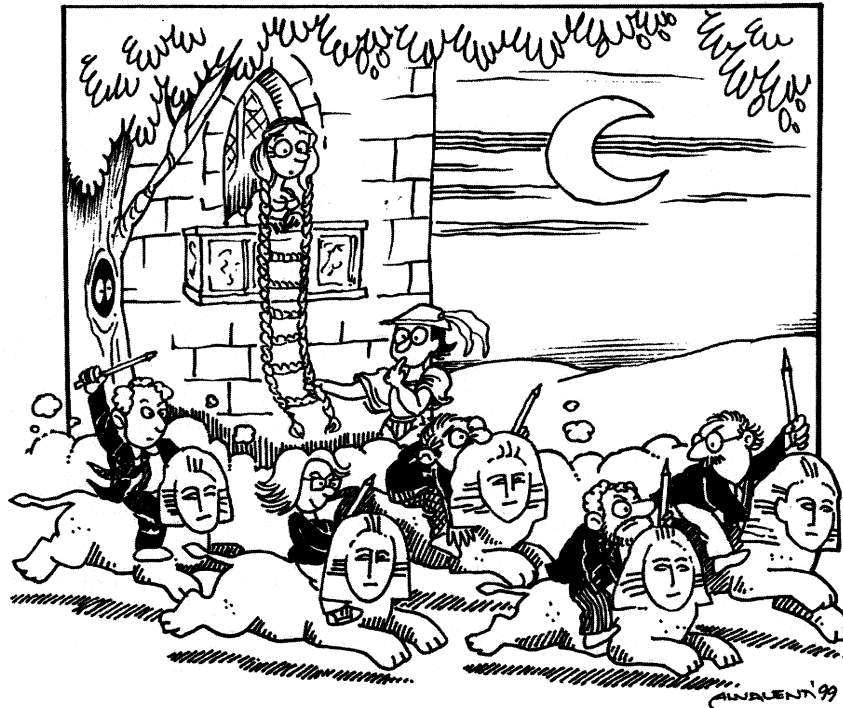
Solution: garden's dangers

At the con, there was a contest to create a picture rebus based on the postcard image. I wasn't able to do that, but I did create an illustrated welded transposal, which won me a prize, presumably because it effectively used both parts of the drawing, or just because I was an American guest.

WELDED TRANSPOSAL (6' 5: 7' 4)

58° Congresso Nazionale di Enigmistica Classica
20° Convegno Rebus A.R.I.

Verona, 3-6 Giugno 1999



=HOT, Berkeley CA

Solution: Lovers' cares: solvers' race.

The answers need not be entries, as long as the overall phrase makes sense. Perhaps an American version of the welded flat would not be merely one with adjacent keywords. We could require that the word breaks not be at the expected place, as in the welded transposal "greater tag", or as in this example:

WELDED TRANSPOSAL (10 6)

This sci-fi mag's subscription card
Depicts a nude Jean-Luc Picard
Diagramming brain endorphins
While stealing candy from some orphans.
It's too bizarre to inspire sales—
They should've used a more LAIN SNAILS.

=LUNCH, New York NY

Solution: mainstream insert

Will someone come up with an interesting welded word deletion? Is a welded double-cross conceivable?

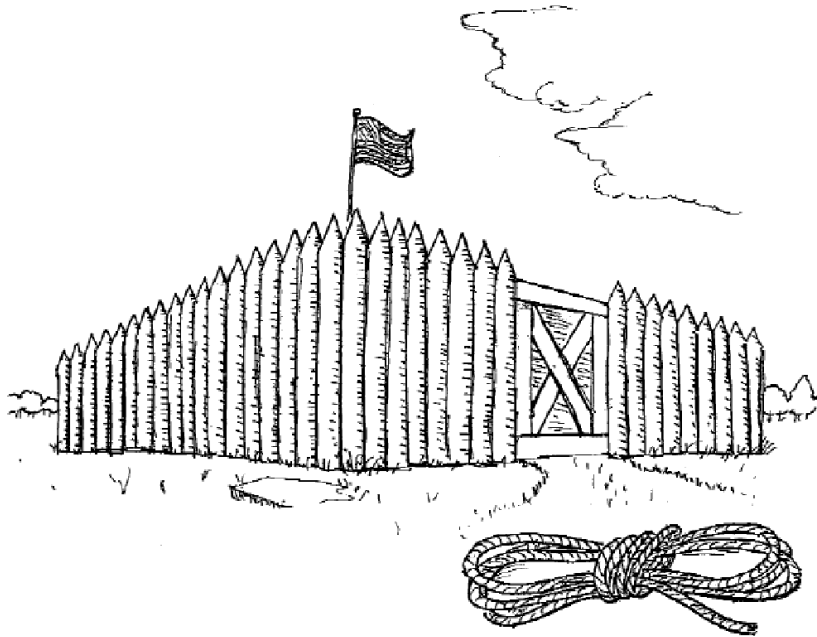
Other Puzzles

The rebus

This is a bit like the picture rebi that Games magazine occasionally carries, except that they are not phonetic, ever. (Since spelling is nearly phonetic, there are no phonetic puzzles in Italian, or else all puzzles are nearly phonetic.) The figure, with letters, bigrams, and/or trigrams (rarely other typographical characters) added, is the rubric. If there are no characters added, the rebus is "silent", and a star may be used to focus the solver's attention on a part of the figure. The figure is "read" from left to right, and its apparent subject has nothing to do with the final answer.

A good rebus must satisfy "Briga's triangle": plausible picture, clever reading, and meaningful solution.

PICTURE REBUS (4; 4, 4 = [3 3 6])



=LUNCH, New York NY
(drawing by CRAX, Mountain View CA)

Reading: fort; here: cord
Solution: for the record

Note that the solution is not clued at all, which has two consequences:

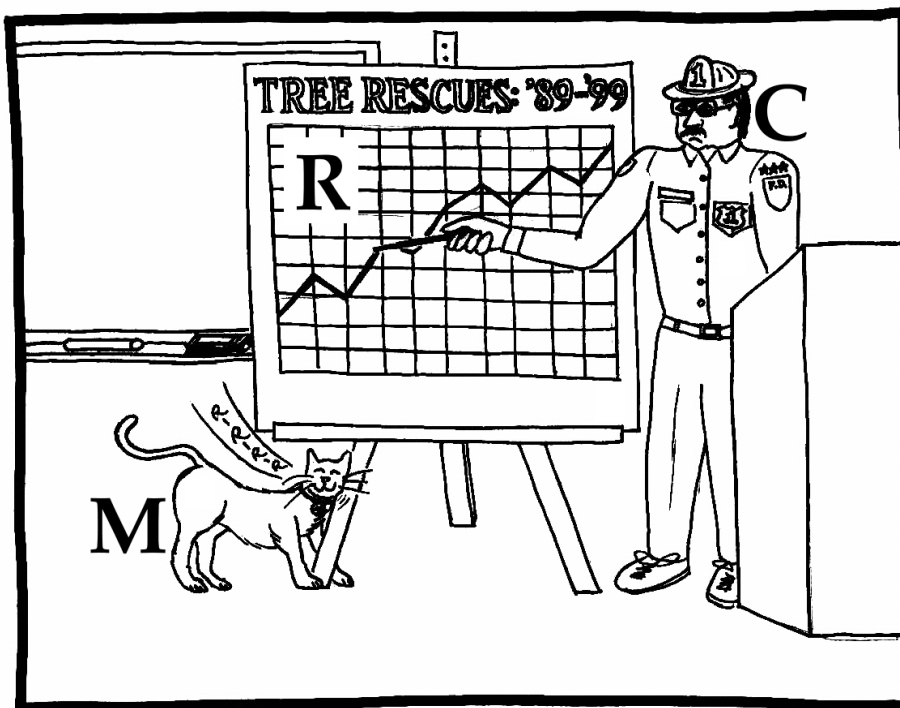
- ◇ Unless the puzzle is very easy, two enumerations are given: one for the reading, and one for the solution.

◇ It is required to be a meaningful phrase. It does not necessarily have to be a dictionary entry, but it cannot be an arbitrary sequence of words that one has to labor to justify (unlike some of our rebi). On the other hand, it seems that rebi with a single word solution (called "monoverbi") are no longer done.

In fact, for all puzzle types, there's a hierarchy of solution phrases. Ideal is a phrase that is a well-known unit, whether or not it's a dictionary entry. Those they call something like "ready-made phrases." Examples would be phrases like "rags to riches", "breaking a record", names of celebrities, well-known titles, etc. Not as good, but acceptable, are phrases like "bag of oats", "sparkling blue eyes", and so on -- in other words meaningful, plausible phrases. Not acceptable would be "bag of galaxies", "striped potato eyes", or "dandy Inca hoots".

There are many rebus variations, including the (rare) deletion rebus, where the letters shown are removed rather than added in constructing the reading. For example, in a deletion rebus, a picture of trains with a I on them, and a fern with an N on it would be read as TRANS FER.

DELETION PICTURE REBUS (6, 5, 5 = 2 5 1 5)

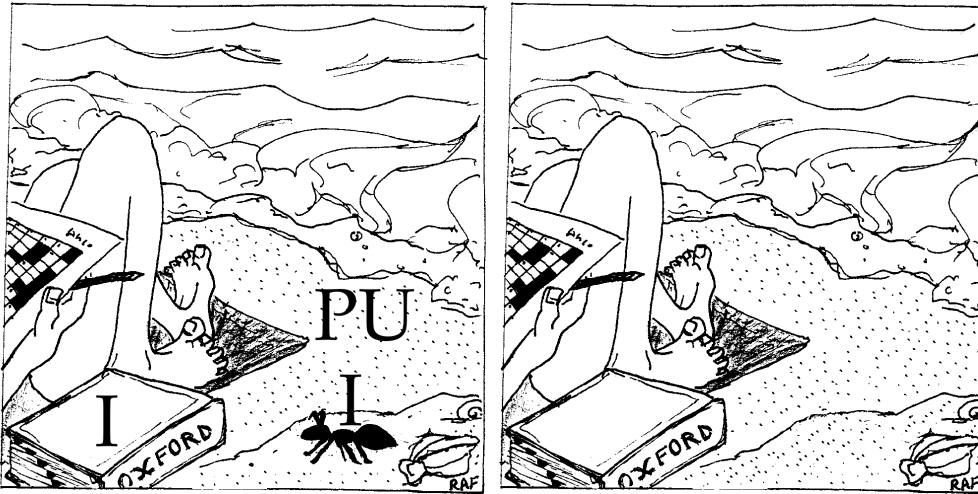


=DART, Vancouver BC
(drawing by DART, Vancouver BC)

Solution: tomcat - M, chart - R, chief - C = to catch a thief

Particularly interesting is the stereoscopic rebus (or chrono-rebus), invented by Briga, with two or more frames. It involves a time element, and has a reading in the past or future tense.

PICTURE CHRONO-REBUS (*1*1*1 1; 2 4; 3 1 4 = *7 3 *8)



=HOT, Berkeley CA
(drawing by RANDD, Sacramento CA)

Reading: OED I; PU sand; ant I gone
Solution: Oedipus and Antigone

Actually I was told by Italian puzzlers that this example isn't really legal, as the sol in its entirety should describe the second panel, in the future tense. But English verb conjugation being what it is, I decided to be liberal in the creation of this example.

One type of construction contest is to compose a rebus based on a pre-existing given image, whether it be a painting, a photograph, or a cartoon. One classic such rebus, by Nucci, is based on Caravaggio's painting of a sick child Bacchus. The rubric has an I on him, with the reading "I dio malatino" ('I' sick little god), and sol "idioma latino" (latin idiom).

See more rebus examples here

<http://www.picciotto.org/hot/picture-puzzles.pdf>

The cryptograph (crittografia):

This is a bit like NPL's rebus, but with no verse. The rubric is a word or phrase, though letters can be added, changed, omitted, shifted, etc. The rubric is almost never a meaningless arrangement of letters and absolutely never consists of letters sideways, or surprises lurking in another part of the publication, or any of the more far-out techniques our great rebusists use. A period would be used to indicate a missing letter in the rubric. Here is an example that would be fairly typical:

CRYPTOGRAPH (2 4 2 = 4 4)

FITS

= LUNCHBOY, New York NY

Reading: FI near TS

Solution: fine arts

The cryptograph has many variations, not all of which I understand. The so-called *mnemonic cryptograph* does not involve a heteronym to go from the reading to the sol, just a change in the interpretation of the sol words — not unlike a punny American crossword clue.

MNEMONIC CRYPTOGRAPH (3 6)

roach clip

= LUNCH, New York NY

Solution: pot holder

The *synonym cryptograph* involves both synonymy and heteronymy:

synonymy heteronymy
rubric —————→ reading —————→ sol

SYNONYM CRYPTOGRAPH (3, 1,4 2 = *4 *6)

SnARE

=LUNCH, New York NY

Reading: tin, A, turn ER

Solution: Tina Turner

Debate: There is a big debate about the rebus, the cryptograph and their relationship. Zoroastro claims that the rebus is merely an illustrated cryptograph, while Orofilo (who wrote a great book on the history of the rebus and is a member of the NPL) insists that the cryptograph is just a variant of the rebus. The majority think that the two types are completely distinct. A whole morning at the con was dedicated to a discussion of issues related to the rebus, including impassioned speeches on form vs. content, tradition vs. logic, and an analysis of a poll of the members of the Italian Rebus Association on these and related topics.

"True" cryptograph and rebus: Lacerbio Novalis gave a talk where he explained that a true cryptograph has three texts: rubric, reading, and solution (as pictured above). (The same is true of the rebus, as Lacerbio claims that the picture rubric is also a kind of text.) The second step,

from reading to solution, is essential and must be a heteronymic transformation—i.e., the words must break differently (again, this is a rule, not an aesthetic preference). Heteronymy must be complete: no part of the reading can share an etymological root with the corresponding part of the solution. (This last requirement may make it more difficult for us in English, as we don't have as much flexibility in word breaks.)

"Derived" cryptographic and rebus-like puzzles: in the case of the derived puzzle forms, one proceeds directly from rubric to solution, with no intermediate heteronymic unraveling. On the other hand, these derived forms require a constrained solution, which is announced up front. There are two types of constraints: bases, and "geometries". If the bases consist of more than one piece, those must be welded.

"Geometrics" are nine-syllable phrases, (three pairs of identical syllables, and three unique syllables,) in any order, as long as the first syllable is not repeated. They are written in a square:

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1 2 3
2 4 5
3 5 6
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If the geometric is indeed a SQUARE, the sol would read in the order

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1 2 3 2 4 5 3 5 6.
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But there are many, many other possibilities (Cocò, who is a mathematician, tells me there are 58 possible paths). For example, a SPIRAL would read in this order: 1 2 3 5 6 5 3 2 4. Note that there are always two ways to trace the sol, symmetrically with respect to the main diagonal. All paths start at 1. I strongly suspect that this puzzle form is not doable in its syllabic version in English, but here are a couple of attempts at variogram adaptations:

GEOMETRIC SQUARE (3'1 4 2 3 4, 1.1., 6)

Keep off the grass, Lawrence of Arabia!

=LUNCH, New York NY

Solution: Don't step on the leas, T.E., please

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D    ONT STEP
ONT  HE  LEA
STEP LEA SE
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GEOMETRIC BALL OF WOOL (6 8, 4 2 4!)
(The "ball of wool" path is 1 2 2 3 5 6 5 3 4)

Sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll lead to damnation

= HOT, Berkeley CA

Solution: Triple pleasure, sure as hell!

TRI PLE AS
PLE HELL URE
AS URE S

One amazing thing is that all the rebi and cryptographs created in the entire history of Italian puzzling are listed in a mammoth list with tens of thousands of entries, which is regularly updated. They are never reused. Some submissions in construction contests are rejected with a comment like "already done in 1949"! This is not the case for flats, where the same base can be reused with a different verse.

ITALIAN VS. AMERICAN PUZZLING

I still have a lot more to learn about Italy's rich puzzle tradition. Some of their ideas reflect differences in the languages. For example, the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is profoundly different in the two languages. These differences lead to different possibilities and a different aesthetic. Still, we can learn from each other. I hope that this report inspires American puzzlers to try some new things!