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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

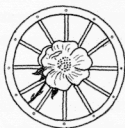
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Publication Date

1970-10-01

Peer reviewed



A NOTE ON ROSES AND WHEELS

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Professor John Leyerle's witty and lucid address to the Medieval Association of the Pacific on February 27, 1970, "The Rota-Rosa in Medieval Architecture and Poetry," seems to have set out an original and very important observation. Presented in its baldest terms, its gist is that what we now call rose-windows represent on the outside a wheel symbolizing the world and worldliness, while on the inside (where the spokes and other adornments cannot be seen) they represent God's peace and grace.¹ During the discussion which followed the address, Professor Singleton pointed out that the twelve spokes might be related to the numerology of Dante and Professor Matthews noted that the nine figures which cling to some of the wheels might represent the nine worthies (in which case they anticipate by more than a century what has always been thought to be the earliest categorization, viz. the one that appears in the *Vœux du Paon*, a poem composed ca. 1312 by Jacques de Longuyon).

Professor Leyerle's thesis is strong and can probably stand by itself; nevertheless it does at present lack a keystone. In the Middle Ages the rose-window was called *rota* in Latin and *roe* or *roet* (or variants of these) in French; these terms all mean "wheel." The term "rose-window" is not recorded by the OED before 1773, while

¹ There are also two aspects of the rose in medieval literature, viz. the flower and the thorn; see for example *Confessio Amantis* I, 603: "That was a Rose is thanne a thorn." The pair is of course also associated with both Venus and Cupid, the flower for love, passion and so on, the thorn for blindness, recklessness, uncharitableness, cupidity or covetousness (see Chaucer, *HF* 137, 617, 668; *TC* 1808; *KT* 1623; etc.).

the earliest citation for its synonym "rosace" is even later (1849).² The question thus arises whether medieval folk thought of these windows as roses as well as wheels. On that identification rests much of the application of Professor Leyerle's observation to medieval literature.

There are several paths which do indeed lead to just such an equation between *rota* and *rosa*. We noted above that in medieval France, where the rose-window flourished, it was called *roe* or *roet*.³ Both of these words, aside from their substantive meaning of "wheel," are also forms of the adjective *roé(t)* which Godefroy defines as "orné de figures de roue, de rosaces, . . ."⁴ The term *rosace* itself, which Godefroy defines as a "figure symétrique circulaire présentant plus ou moins d'analogie avec une rose,"⁵ was used in its architectural sense as early as 1547 even though it was not borrowed by the English until the nineteenth century. Thus both the *rota* and the *rosa* are embodied in the Medieval French names for the rose-window.

A second approach to establishing the equation between *rota* and *rosa* is through their mutual association with the sun. The adjective "rosy" has been applied to the sun since classical times and the sun and the rose are interdependent and inseparable symbols in the final cantos of the "Paradiso" of Dante's *Commedia*. The association of the wheel with the sun derives from the

² These terms have two other English synonyms which embody the concept of the *rota* rather than the *rosa*, i. e. "wheel-window" (1835 is the date of the only citation in the OED) and "Catherine-wheel" (earliest citation 1848).

³ *Roe* has the variants *ruee* and *reuwe*; *roet* has the variant *rouet*. The modern form *roue* (meaning both "wheel" and "rose-window") first appears in 1573 (see Edmond Huguet, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française du seizième siècle*, Paris, 1965). The form *row* ("wheel") also appears in English (cp. OED, *Row*, sb. 6) as a rare Scottish form, and even the common English noun once had the meaning "a number of persons or things arranged in a circle" (cp. OED, *Row*, sb. 1, I.1.b.). Also the term *rote* was once used in England with the meaning "a wheel used as an instrument of torture or punishment" (cp. OED, *Rote*, sb. 5). Chaucerians will of course be quick to remember that Chaucer's wife was a *Roet*, and that word-plays on wheels of various kinds are frequent in his verse.

⁴ Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'Ancienne Langue Française et de tous ses dialectes du IX^e au XV^e siècle*, Paris, 1881-1902.

⁵ *Ibid.*, *Complément*.

myth of Phoebus (the classical sun-god) and his chariot; the wheels of the chariot often represent the sun itself in medieval art, with the spokes being analogous to the sun's rays. Indeed John Lydgate's *Troye Book* (written between 1412 and 1420) contains the following line: "Whan þat þe larke. . . Gan to salue the lusty rowes rede Of Phebus' char."⁶ Although "rowes rede" may mean "red rays" (as in *day-rawe*, a synonym of *day-red*, "the rosy dawn"), it may also mean "red wheels" (see Footnote 2), and indeed Phoebus' chariot is commonly depicted with red or golden-red wheels in medieval art.

Heraldic art provides another approach to confirming the *rota-rosa* equation. The heraldic rose, especially common as the red Lancastrian rose in medieval England but also commonly found on the continent, resembles nothing so much as a wheel with spokes radiating outward from the hub. Thus the form of the conventional medieval stylization of the *rosa* links it with the *rota*.

Lastly the rhyme and alliteration of *rota* and *rosa* tend to create a mental association between these two words. Although none of the above arguments may establish the equation by itself, the sum of them persuades one that the equation is valid and thereby helps to support Professor Leyerle's thesis.

⁶ I, 1199.