

SENATOR'S OPERA TREAT - TO A ROPE

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I take my hat off to the 'paper-and-pencil practitioner' Peter Newby for his clever article "Opera's Not Over 'Til Arepo Returns", which I naturally assume was produced without the aid of a computer. At first sight I thought he really had beaten computer buffs to the punch. A few weeks ago I tackled this classic problem, using the Wordsworth database of 14,300 five-letter words; I gave it up as impossible!

I was naturally eager to see why I had failed. It was soon obvious that I had set myself a more difficult problem because I tried to mirror the AREPO original far more closely than Peter's results indicate. The pattern of the original, with numbers allocated to its letters, is as follows:

R O T A S	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
O P E R A	2 6 7 1 4	2 6 7 1
T E N E T	3 7 8 7 3	3 7 8
A R E P O	4 1 7 6 2	4 1
S A T O R	5 4 3 2 1	5

Note that there are eight different letters and, as shown by the right-hand triangle of numbers, that the missing numbers are a mirror reflection of those above the hypotenuse. Although Peter's squares fulfill this mirroring, he departed from the original somewhat; the first and second row words each, when taken separately, contained five different letters, three of which were common to both rows. The attempt to match these Roman patterns with English equivalents was the cause of my downfall.

However, I didn't finish my study of this enigma at that stage. I had often wondered if Pompey the Great might have been involved in it during his control of the Senate. Taking the eight letters in the square, i.e. AENOPRST, Wordsworth produced the anagrams OPERANTS, PARSONET and PATERSON. But then I noticed that they also yielded SENATOR P. Does that prove anything? The longest word I found from the full complement of 25 letters was PROTOPROTESTANT (15 letters). However, all 25 letters can, rather remarkably, be arranged to spell out the title: a troublesome senator who didn't become hung up on the arts until quite late in life!

But to return to the original Latin Square, Peter's article set me off again. Would I be able to produce English equivalents if I didn't insist on the first and second rows having words of all different letters? Yes; I would. Putting Wordsworth to work again, I found 400 five-letter semordnilaps and 40 palindromes. Many of these, as were Peter's, were archaic or obsolete words.

I hoped, as I have with ten-squares, to produce a solution which consists entirely of words from a standard dictionary but, in this case, with listed words, or accepted derivations, reading both forwards and backwards. From a total of almost 200 squares, I pruned them to 19; the words in these were all to be found in the single-volume standard desk dictionaries Oxford Concise, Collins and Chambers. The three examples shown below have all their words taken from Chambers:

C A R E S	S E S E Y	T R A P S
A M E N E	E D I L E	R E L A P
R E F E R	S I M I S	A L U L A
E N E M A	E L I D E	P A L E R
S E R A C	Y E S E S	S P A R T

The right-hand square is very close to an exact mirroring of the Roman original; if T could replace A in RELAP and PALER, the mirroring would be perfect. Peter's example had spurred me on, showing that I had given up too easily. This square shows that it is possible to create an English version with first and second rows having five different letters. But more than two thousand words had been added to the database between the two attempts.

PROVERBS ARE NEVER OUT OF SEASON

This is the title of a scholarly, yet eminently readable, 284-page book by the paremiographer Wolfgang Mieder and published by Oxford University Press in 1993 (\$25 in hard-cover). It is a collection of self-contained essays, most of which were originally published elsewhere, on topics such as the definition of a proverb, their current status in society, and detailed analyses of a few specific ones such as "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" and "a picture is worth a thousand words". In Mieder's view, a proverb is a short sentence of wisdom which has had some currency for a period of time; proverb identification must thus fuse linguistic analysis and historical research. As the second example above shows, proverbs are still being minted; occasionally the individual creator can even be identified. The pervasiveness of proverbs in daily life is illustrated by their uses in such media as advertisements and comic strips, as well as by the many ironic modifications ("a picture is worth a thousand words" comes in many alternatives, encoded by the general phrase "an X is worth a thousand Y" or even "one X is worth a thousand pictures"). One of the most chilling chapters details how the Nazis bent proverbs to their own sinister use in bad-mouthing Jews and their culture. Words can hurt, as much as sticks and stones!