Alisa van de Haar is studying the educational functioning of rebus poems kept at the Forschungsbibliothek Gotha. These are poems of two or more verses that contain at least one rebus component, that is, a visual element that, when expressed orally, produces a meaning that supplies or completes the text of the poem, based on the principle of homonymy. Rebus poems were highly popular in early modern times. Many poets played with text-image relations and with the potential of images to communicate content. Nevertheless, they have been marginalized in modern research as trivial games, as a result of which little is known about their functioning. The central hypothesis of this project is that rebus poems could actually be used to educate both learned and unlearned readers, young and old, and thus produce a valuable effect in a ludic manner. This project contends that they did so by reactivating or testing factual knowledge as well as by providing training in transferable skills, which are practical competences that can be acquired or improved through practice, such as visual literacy and semiotic abilities.

These hypotheses will be tested on the rich collection of rebus poems kept at Gotha, yielding new insights not only into this little-understood hybrid genre, but also into historical text-image relations and into the history of both theoretical and practical education.

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