

FESTINA LENTE

Literatura emblemática y aprendizaje por descubrimiento



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estudios

EMBLEMATICA BIFRONS: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE OF THE INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

DRA. FILIPA MEDEIROS

Two-headed Janus is one of the *picturae* chosen by Alciato in his *Emblemata* in order to represent the wise Prudence and the reasons of that option were clearly explained by Diego Lopez, precisely four hundred years ago. Taking into account the emblem *Prudentes*, the author of the *Declaracion Magistral* remarked that men of circumspection should always “*Acodarse delas cosas passadas, para proueer a las futuras*” (López, 1615: 71v). According to the traditional image of that ancient King, prudent men must be able to learn with the past to improve the future and this seems a perfect *motto* to define *Festina lente*, the admirable teaching innovation project that Professor María Paz López-Peláez has supervised since 2008-2009.

Reflecting on emblematic models developed during the Modern Age, the project prudently experiments a progressive method, following the most recent academic orientations. Consequently, it suggests an interdisciplinary approach that stimulates the dialogue between different areas, such as philosophy, politics, literature, mythology, art and history, among many others disciplines reached by the articles contained in this volume. According to the wide perspective defended by the comparatist theories, emblem studies have largely exceeded the literary dominium¹ and the research on this area implies, therefore, a specific method which convokes different epistemological domains.

Invented by the Renaissance spirit, the *ars emblematica* flourished in the context of the baroque culture and discloses a natural affinity to the ideal of the *bel composto* divulged by Bernini. The complexity of emblem books implies, therefore, a dynamic method of study, able to manage a wide set of transversal and specific competences. On the other hand, Emblematics provides a helpful hermeneutic tool, easily adapted to many different scenarios. In the literary dominium, for example, the knowledge of logo-iconic models

¹ See, for example, the numerous editions of *Emblematica: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Emblem Studies*, published by AMS Press since 1986.

really improves the reader's interpretative skills, especially when the reading process focuses on a work contemporaneous with the golden centuries of emblematic models.

This perception has not been valued by Portuguese academic research², although the reliability of this argument can easily be tested using, for example, one of the first best-sellers of the Lusitanian literature: the *Imagem da Vida Cristã* (1563), written by Friar Heitor Pinto (1528?-1584?). The work discusses the main themes of the religious circumstances, privileging the doctrinal goals and the visual pedagogy settled by the Council of Trent. In chapter X, entitled "Dialogue on the lonely life", the author refers Alciato's book and describes the *pictura* of the emblem *Paupertatem summis ingeniis* (Alciato, 1550: 132), comparing the human sins to the *grave onus*, which drags the boy down and prevents him from flying. Although Heitor Pinto recreates the emblem meaning, this reference enriches the philosophical content according to the rhetorical principle of *evidentia*. Taking that image into account, the author adapts the morality to a particular context and explores an original strategy of *enargeia*.

In fact, this kind of ecfrastic techniques often appears within the pages of the *Imagem da Vida Cristã*, in order to describe other visual elements such as coins, medals, tapestries and hieroglyphs. The "Dialogue on the True Philosophy" discloses a dissertation on the necessary combination of a mature reflection and a quick action:

"[...] Na deliberação ha daver tardança, & na execução da bõa obra pressa. Donde veo aquelle tam antiguo como famoso prouerbio: Apressate de vagar. O que também quis significar o Emperador Tito Vespasiano, filho do grande Vespasiano, quando mandou pôr por diuisa nas suas medalhas hũ golfinho velocissimo, enrodilhado nũa ancora vagarosa. He verdade, disse o philosopho, que pela ancora se entende a tardança, & pelo golfinho a pressa [...]" (Pinto, 1984: 4).

The proverb here mentioned translates the famous *Festina Lente* divulged by Erasmo³, which circulated all over Europe because it was printed on the frontispiece of the books published by Aldo Manutio⁴. The Portuguese dialogue attaches the proverb to the description of the medal coined by Emperor Titus Vespasian and explains its symbolism,

2 The research developed by Rubem Amaral Junior (2005) on this area has been truly inspiring.

3 "Scripsit his de rebus Plutarchus in commentario De Osiride, et Chaeremon apud Graecos, testimonio Suidae, cuius ex libris excerpta suspicor ea, quae nos super conspeximus huius generis monimenta, in quibus etiam haec inerat pictura" (*Adagia*, II, 1).

4 Francesco Colonna used these symbols in his *Hypnerotomachia* (1499).

establishing an intertextual connection based on iconic and thematic similitudes with Alciato. This semantic network would certainly be noticed by the contemporaneous readers but it is almost imperceptible to the current interpreters, who are not familiarized with the emblematic code. Consequently, it becomes clear that *ars emblematica* enables a useful guide to the investigators who want to adventure themselves through the labyrinths of Modern Age literature.

The dialogue between Emblematics and Numismatic is definitely a fertile dominium to explore, but other areas must also be mentioned, such as the printer's marks. The composition of the dolphin and the anchor depicted under the motto *Festina lente* chosen by Manutius is probably one of the well known examples. The same motive has however inspired many other artists, and further investigation on that reception process could probably shed some light on the transmission of *topoi* among visual arts. For this specific case, it is important not to forget the vignettes related to *Festina Lente* drawn by Guilherme Francisco Lourenço Debré, the popular French engraver who lived in Portugal during the magnificent reign of João V⁵.

In order to demonstrate the interdisciplinary approach based on the reception of emblematic models, heraldry must also be mentioned. Concentrating on the *inscriptio* which gave birth to the title of the project here presented, it is inevitable not to remember that King Henrique of Portugal chose as personal device the image of a dolphin winding itself around an anchor, with the motto *Festina lente* (Faria e Sousa, 1679: 36)⁶. Curiously, this classical image filled the picture of the emblem *Princeps subditorum incolumitatem procurans* (Alciato, 1550: 156), which conveyed a political message totally suitable to the Portuguese circumstances in 1580.

This intertextual reading opens the door to an unexplored universe of possible links. One of the most proficient and obvious connections has been settled between Emblematics and Iconology. Many decades ago, Panofsky (1962: 95-128) demonstrated how the emblems could play a useful role to interpret contemporaneous plastic works, arguing that the logo iconic compositions frequently represented primary or natural thematic concepts, which inspired many artistic motives, as the blind Cupid. It does not mean, however, that emblematic devices were easy to understand. On the contrary, they

5 See, for example, *Allegação de direito a favor do Ill.mo e Exc.mo Senhor D. Joseph de Mascarenhas*, Lisboa, na Officina de Joseph da Costa Coimbra, 1748.

6 The device of Cosimo I de Médici represented a turtle with a sail, accompanied by the same motto. An artistic version of this composition can be observed in the gardens of the Grotta del buontalenti (Florence).

often displayed a true enigma, even to the most erudite readers, closely familiarized with traditional semantic codes. Umberto Eco underlined the remarkable spread of this conventional language during the Middle Ages:

The meaning of allegorical figures and emblems which the medieval reader is likely to encounter is already prescribed by his encyclopedias, bestiaries, and lapidaries. Any symbolism is objectively defined and organized into a system. Underpinning this poetics of the necessary and the univocal is an ordered cosmos, a hierarchy of essences and laws which poetic discourse can clarify at several levels, but which each individual must understand in the only possible way, the one determined by the creative logos. The order of a work of art in this period is a mirror of imperial and theocratic society. The laws governing textual interpretation are the laws of an authoritarian regime which guide the individual in his every action, prescribing the ends for him and offering him the means to attain them. (Eco, 1989: 6-7)⁷

The symbolic expression was, therefore, largely exploited by the advocates of Humanism and some of them drew theoretical principles about the nature of the symbol, in the light of Aristotelian and Platonist doctrines. Many of these semiotic experiences took part in the preface of emblem books and filled hundreds of pages within the treatises on *Ars Emblematica*. In spite of their incipient nature, these theoretical writings formed a “valuable part of the history and development of modern semiotics, a discipline which has yet to achieve its goal of a satisfactory exposition of the substance and meaning of the sign” (Raybould, 2005: 317-318).

The most recent research on semiotics teaches how to reevaluate the importance of those contributions, recognizing that, even though it was genetically connected to medieval thesaurus and ancient hieroglyphics, Alciato's *Emblemata* did not implied a strict univocal symbolic expression. In fact, it conveyed “a representation of writing, its hybrid structure consisting in a chain of meanings which can extend indefinitely, one sign leading on to the next one” (Cavell, 1990: 167-185). Derrida recovered the image of the “chain of meanings”, when he developed the theory of the literary sign as a series of supplements:

⁷ Panofsky also explained that “mediaeval pictorialization had tried to simplify the complex and to clarify the difficult” (1955: 159), but the Renaissance emblem books had the opposite impulse, because *Ars emblematica* aimed to obfuscate the message.