

“Must I Needs Want Solidnesse Because by Metaphors I Speak?”: Emblematics, Stylistics, Materiality

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Abstract Emblems and devices were typical in their hybrid nature, with textual and visual elements mutually interpreting and reinforcing each other. Using symbols and metaphors, however, did not necessarily mean producing superficial, entertaining forms of art with no “solidnesse”: rather, emblems and devices can be considered as wide cultural indexes in perennial negotiations with the materiality of their symbols. Seen from this point of view, their study can highlight various aspects that are central to the empirical study of Early Modern literature and provide a fresh look at this cultural phenomenon and at the changes in relevance paradigms in a period rife with epistemological and political tensions. Moreover, emblematic texts stressed the centrality of the interpretative moment of a participatory reader and are thus prone to fruitful stylistic analyses: in particular, the stringent theoretical tools provided by Relevance Theory’s inferential model of communication can expose not only the emblematicists’ rhetorical strategies to direct their reader, but also their increasing tendency of constraining the latter’s hermeneutic possibilities, allowing a fruitful analysis of emblematic literature and its cultural, economic and ideological bearings.

Keywords Early Modern literature, Emblematics, Relevance Theory, Materiality, Ideology, Stylistics

1. Introduction

Traditionally, emblems and devices have been branded as entertainment for antiquarians, as a repertoire of symbolic images and Baroque euphuism, as plain devotional texts, especially after their didactic potential was exploited as a vehicle for religious truths¹. However, Renaissance scholars

would emphasize their epistemological significance, and cherished emblematic compositions because of their hybrid nature, with textual and visual elements mutually interpreting and reinforcing each other.

This means that emblematics should be more correctly considered as an idiosyncratic and polyphonic form of art: its mixing of different media had obvious connections with didactic and devotional literature, but it also aimed at producing an intuitive type of communication with rhetorical and philosophical implications. Emblems and devices, therefore, can be more fruitfully considered as wide cultural indexes: they were not just functional for reflecting or illustrating an idea, but could express a concept that, in its turn, was to become the instrument of the reader’s own poetic exploration of reality.

Emblematic compositions, moreover, were not Fishian self-consuming artifacts, but texts that must come to terms with the materiality of their symbols: they were heavily dependent on their comely and enticing appearance, whose relevance as a concrete, pleasurable object cannot not be dismissed as something purely superficial and instrumental². The study of emblematics from this perspective can thus highlight various aspects that are central to the empirical study of Early Modern literature.

Finally, that hermeneutic distinctiveness of emblematics – the centrality of the reader’s interpretative moment rather than the author’s creative one – encourages fertile stylistic analyses: in a period rife with epistemological and political tensions, authors on the one hand promoted the active

Web Edition in Latin and English, <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/>; Emblematica Online, Resources for Emblem Studies, <http://emblematica.grainger.illinois.edu/>; The English Emblem Book Project, <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/digital/emblem.html>; Münchener Digitalisierungs Zentrum – Digitale Bibliothek, <http://www.digital-collections.de/index.html?c=startseite&l=en>; Emblem Project Utrecht, <http://emblems.let.uu.nl/catsretorica/html/index.html>.

² Even if it has not yet been fully analysed, the economical valence of emblematics cannot be overestimated: “Au XVII^e siècle, la marque de l’imprimeur se présente de manière systématique sous la forme de l’emblème...L’emblème, si l’une de ses premières fonctions fut celle de marque d’imprimeur, est un signe économique. Il s’intègre à une circulation, tel un titre de propriété”, Compagnon [11]. This is even more clear in the case of imprese that, despite their philosophical *aura*, bear clear traces of economical affiliation in their very name: according to Pinkus [25], “the *impresa* implies a specific goal, a struggle against obstacles, an ‘overcoming’ as much as an ‘undertaking’”.

¹ The bibliography on emblematics is vast; the classic studies by Gombrich [17], Clements [10], Praz [26], Schöne [30], Henkel – Schöne [18], are still fundamental, but many critical materials, including the reproduction of emblem collections, can be found online. Among the many useful sites from this point of view: EEBO - Early English Books online, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>; Glasgow University Emblem Website, www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk; Alciato’s *Book of Emblems*. The Memorial

participation of the reader in the creation of meaning; on the other, however, they contrived refined rhetorical strategies to direct the reader’s interpretation and constrain his hermeneutic possibilities.

In this paper I will, then, analyze some ideological and economic bearings of emblematic texts as modes of knowledge and thought from a semiotic and stylistic perspective. In particular, I will draw upon some key concepts of Wilson and Sperber’s *Relevance Theory*, since its inferential model of communication, based on the centrality of the interpretative moment of a participatory reader³, provides a significant theoretical tool for an analysis of this kind.

2. Discussion

According to Bacon [5], emblems ultimately aimed at representing a spiritual meaning reducing “conceits intellectual to images sensible” and they have usually been analysed in their philosophical connections. Yet, also their concrete aspect deserves to be taken into account, because as Pinkus [25] contends, the very term symbol “remains charged with the connotation of *materiality* as opposed to spirituality and, thus, of any action that is ‘given-to-be-seen’”. This concept was also stressed by Spica [32], who maintained that “L’emblème constitue le lieu où l’on matérialise l’insertion de l’image dans le texte, où l’on a rendu l’image porteuse de vérité” [“the emblem is the place where the insertion of the image within the text takes shape, where the image was made the bearer of truth”], implying that the materiality of the sign was not devalued as a mere sensible element to be transcended in order to get at the real, spiritual meaning.

The union of verbal and iconographic elements placed the emblematic form right at the centre of the Early Modern debate on art and nature. The interaction of text and image became a hermeneutic instrument to “re-veal” reality, and the active contribution of the reader was necessary because, in the beginning, devices or emblems were not conceived as “readable” but “writable” texts that fostered multi-layered readings⁴. The meanings of an emblematic composition were thus potentially infinite, and it was up to the reader to follow them up; yet, at the same time, this interpretative responsibility could not help being affected by ideological, cultural, historical, or social conditionings.

3 As Wilson – Sperber [34] acknowledge, “inferential communication involves the formation and evaluation of hypotheses about the communicator’s intentions”

4 On this see Spica [32]. Of course, this does not mean that any interpretation was possible: the problem of the correct, legitimate interpretation of an emblematic composition was deeply felt from the beginning and became paramount when emblematics was used to transmit religious truths. Pinkus [25] rightly stresses that “a hybrid, or combinatory, form like the emblem might effectively temper writing with images to mediate fears of misreading or dissimulation”, but at the same time “the copresence of both word and image only increases the silence emitted, so the form could potentially be replenished with meaning by readers who are ill prepared to extract the one, true significance”.

A perfect case in point is the device of Cardinal Ippolito de’ Medici (Figure 1), a famous composition that Giovio [15] praised and that all the other scholars quoted for its “perfection”⁵: it simply showed a comet accompanied by the Latin motto *Inter omnes*, in fact a quotation from Horace’s *Odes* I, 12 (*micat inter omnis / Iulium sidus velut inter ignis / luna minores*).

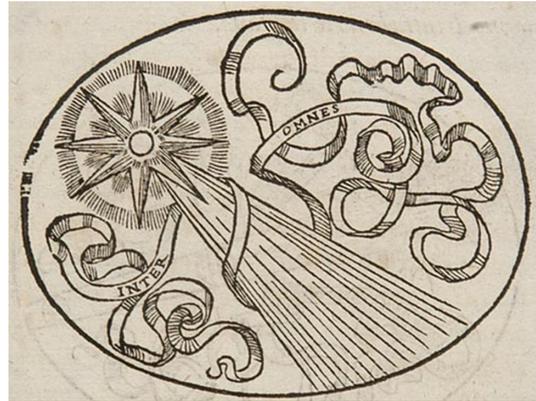


Figure 1. *Inter omnes* from Giovio [16]

As Giovio explains, the device was mainly meant to praise the beauty of Giulia Gonzaga, whose name is recoverable because in ancient Rome the comet was usually called “stella Julia” since it had appeared after Caesar’s killing and therefore associated to Caesar’s deified soul turned into a star. However, the composition can be appreciated in its allusiveness even if one is not aware of the classical allusions and could possibly be valid for any girl called Julia. Giovio’s “official” explanation does not prevent others: it is just one possible interpretation that ultimately displays the clever mind of its creator.

From a stylistic perspective, this means that the device was rich in positive cognitive effects on the reader because it produced contextual implicatures; that is, it led to conclusions that derived from the interaction between an input and a series of background information that made up the context⁶. In its turn, the emphasis on the reader’s hermeneutic effort and his ability to draw a series of contextual implications⁷ meant that the text produced some

5 Giovio himself [15], however, admits that “fu bellissima di uista & di soggetto, benché non compitamente intesa, se nō da dotti, pratici, etricordeuoli del poema d’Oratio” [“it was beautiful as to its appearance and subject, although not properly understood but by scholars who were conversant and mindful of Horace’s poem”]. Illustrations were not present in the first editions of Giovio’s treatise, but appeared regularly in the following editions starting from Giovio [16].

6 The idea that the meaning of an emblematic composition could be provided only by the interplay of its visual and textual elements is in tune with Wilson – Sperber’s idea [35] that the “most important type of cognitive effect is a CONTEXTUAL IMPLICATION, a conclusion deducible from input and context together, but from neither input nor context alone”. On the concept of cognitive effect see Sperber – Wilson [31].

7 As Wilson – Sperber [34] usefully remind, “Implicatures have two sources. Some implicatures are contextual assumptions which the hearer was expected to use in processing the explicit propositional content of the utterance: like all contextual assumptions, such implicatures are derived from memory or from observation of the environment. Other implicatures are contextual implications which the hearer was expected to recover in processing the explicit propositional content of the utterance: like all

weak implicatures that allowed him to walk along multiple interpretative paths.

This kind of emblematic composition, in other words, relied on the prodigal expense of processing efforts in the pursuit of optimal relevance⁸: its hieroglyphic features were deliberately conceived to stimulate readers to draw further meanings and stronger conclusions than would have been warranted by the writer himself⁹, so that it could be taken for granted that the meanings of an emblem or a device were potentially infinite.

Readers would consider the linguistically encoded message as a clue to a whole range of meanings and, using encyclopaedic contextual assumptions triggered off by that message, they could start deriving a potentially infinite series of cognitive effects to satisfy their expectations of relevance. As Wilson – Sperber [35] maintain, “The effect of such a flexible interpretation process may be a loosening rather than a narrowing of the encoded meaning (resulting in a broader rather than a narrower denotation)”. As a consequence, the interpretation of the message of an emblematic composition involved “both a loosening and a narrowing of the encoded meaning” as alternative ways of achieving optimal relevance by weakly suggesting a wide array of possible implicatures.

In short, early emblems were conceived as texts creating expectations in their readers, demanding additional processing effort, because they were expected to achieve additional contextual effects, and the pleasure of their interpretation lay just in the inferential process of recovering the possible meanings triggered off by the interrelationship between motto, image and text.

In the emblematisers’ mind, the act itself of processing was relevant, in that it induced a fulfilling form of intuitive knowledge: while according to Wilson – Sperber [35] “the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual”, XVI-century emblematic compositions were deliberately built to require a long and time-consuming perusal. The relevance (and pleasure) of an emblem lay not only in what readers were taught, but also in the process of intuiting and making hypotheses on other possible meanings, never being satisfied with the more accessible ones.

A device such as Cardinal de Medici’s can be so short and

contextual implications, such implicatures are derived by deductive inference from the explicit propositional content of the utterance and the context. The more salient the implicature, the stronger it is.”

8 According to Sperber – Wilson [31], an audience pays only attention to an ostensive stimulus, i.e. a stimulus that is explicitly pointed at as relevant and that conveys the presumption of its own optimal relevance. Optimal relevance is achieved when an ostensive stimulus is relevant enough to be worth the audience’s processing effort and it is the most relevant one compatible with the writer’s abilities and preferences. This definition of optimal relevance provided by Wilson – Sperber [35] is the elaboration of the original one proposed in Sperber – Wilson [31].

9 According to Relevance Theory, the reader’s goal is usually to make hypotheses about the writer’s meaning which satisfies the presumption of relevance conveyed by a message. In the case of emblematics, however, the presumption of relevance is tied to a concept of meaning that is inherently plural: the writer has of course something relevant to communicate, but he is also well aware of the fact that this meaning cannot be considered the one and only relevant message that his emblem can communicate; in the end, it is the reader who is entitled to draw conclusions and build meanings that might be not even imagined by the original author.

laconic because the optimal relevance it aims at is the production of a great amount of weak implicatures that require a long time to be elaborated, as opposed to what will happen in later emblematics where this paradigm is reversed (from short form-long consumption to long form-short consumption).

It is not just a question of hermeneutic models, however. As Young [37] demonstrated, emblems and devices were popular in highly ritualized events such as tournaments or pageants, but they were also used as means of communication, even to indirectly deliver messages or personal grievances to the monarch. In other words, they were not confined to the artificially mannered contexts of courts and academies, but became standard public modes to fashion one’s own image of courtier or writer, or to declare political affiliations and allegiances¹⁰. As Manning [22] has it, “This form spectacularly adapted itself to diverse uses... No domestic or public space was left unfilled by some appropriate emblematic decoration”.

Since a device stood in for its wearer¹¹, it became an easy metaphor not only of a man and his “philosophy of life”, but also of his own deeds and achievements¹², even their very name: Barthélemy Aneau, for example, opens his collection of emblems appropriating the hieroglyphic image of the ouroboros and intertwining it with a branch rose in order to produce a family blazon despite his humble origins¹³.

This aspect has been less studied but it is fundamental, because self-promotion and self-fashioning also had a clear economic dimension, that sometimes could become preponderant: the already quoted device of Cardinal de’ Medici, is described by Ruscelli and then by all the other *impresa* theorists in a rather different way than *Giovio*’s¹⁴. It is likely that what they had in mind was not the original device described by *Giovio*, but a mix between *Giovio*’s motto and the sign of the famous Venetian printing house of the Ziletti family (Figure 2; the printing house was usually referred to as *all’insegna della Stella*, or *libreria della Stella* [“at the sign of the star”] and, incidentally, had printed

10 It is well-known, for example, that Alciati’s *Emblemata* (1531) were conceived of as a flattering gift, or that the *Iconologia* (1593) was composed by the cook and butler Cesare Ripa while he was working for a cardinal in Rome.

11 This was a sort of commonplace in *impresa* theorists: Ammirato [2], for example, maintained that “l’impresa sta in vece dell’huomo” [“The device stands in for the man”]; Ruscelli [29] claimed that “L’imprese si fanno per rappresentar noi stessi, o altra persona, che a noi preme” [“Devices are made to represent ourselves or someone else we care about”].

12 According to Pinkus [25], Bocchi’s emblems “were presented as state gifts to the pope through the maneuvers of his contacts in the curia. In this sense the emblems aspire to serve as pawns in the game of diplomacy, dispensable items or pleasing trifles that demand return gifts as part of a larger cultural ritual of exchange”.

13 Aneau [3]: “Extraict degens non gentilz, n’apparens, / Armes n’ay nobles de mes parens. / Mon pere eut nom ANEAU, ma mere ROSE, / Du nom des deux ma marque ie compose.”

14 Ruscelli [29] “nell’Impresa della Cometa del Cardinal de’ Medici, ove sono molte stelle piccole, & la Cometa, non s’intendono però se non due figure”, [“in the Device of the Comet by Cardinal de’ Medici, where there are many smaller stars and the Comet, one does not intend but two figures”]. Aresi [4], as well, writes “Bellissima, dunque, per testimonio di M. Giovio, fù stimata l’Impresa della Cometa fra molte stelle, col motto, MICAT INTER OMNES”, [“Beautiful, then, as Monsignor Giovio testified, was considered the Device of the Comet among many stars, with the motto MICAT INTER OMNES”].

Giovio’s *Ragionamento* [15]). Perhaps this is a case in which a perfect impresa is confused with a trademark, confirming the physiological mixture of “conceptual” and “commercial” devices.



IN VENETIA, M D LVI.
Appresso Giordano Ziletti, all' Impresa della Stella

Figure 2. sign of the Ziletti printing house from Giovio [15]

The concreteness, the being ‘here and now’, the economic connections of emblems and devices cannot be dispensed with so easily: after all, such notions as costs and pleasure were becoming more and more important, so emblematisers continued to exploit the didactic potentialities of this symbolic form but had also to comply with the new market rules (please the patron, produce sellable goods, guarantee the profits for the printer).

Seen from this point of view, Wither [36] reveals a number of implications that are worth considering in more detail¹⁵. The “Preposition to this Frontispiece” that opens the volume features an interesting antiphrastic strategy. The elaborated design¹⁶ and metaphorical richness of the image are contained and disclaimed by saying that the original design was to be a “plaine Invention”:

Instead thereof, the *Workeman* brought to light,
What, here, you see; therein, mistaking quite
The true *Designe*: And, so (with paines, and cost)
The first intended FRONTISPIECE, is lost.
The AVTHOR, was as much displeas’d, as Hee
In such adventures; is inclin’d to bee;
And halfe resolv’d, to cast this PIECE aside,
As nothing worth: but, having better ey’d
Those *Errors*, and *Confusions*, which may, there,

Blame-worthy (at the first aspect) appeare;
Hee saw, they fitted many Fantasies
Much better, then what *Reason* can devise;
And, that, the *Graver* (by meere *Chance*) had hit
On what, so much transcends the reach of *Wit*,
As made it seeme, an Object of *Delight*,
To looke on what MISFORTVNE brought to light:
And, here it stands, to try his *Wit*, who lists
To pumpe the secrets, out of *Cabalists*.

On the one hand, the reader is titillated by a reference to the enigmatic nature of the picture and is given a series of inputs and weak implicatures that stimulate his hermeneutic effort; on the other, he is warned not to trust those images full of “Errors and Confusions”, distorting the “true designe” of the original. It’s not just an example case of *sprezzatura*: the image is wrong, unauthorised by the author, the work of misfortune, yet it can be useful and become an “Object of *Delight*”. Moreover, the passing mention of the “paines and cost” of the intended original picture also testifies to the high price of the real frontispiece, the one engraved by William Marshall.

This leads us to the problem of the cost of the engravings or woodcuts, which obliged authors to look for and reuse ready-made images¹⁷. Wither could avail himself of the beautiful plates Crispin de Passe had prepared for Rollenhagen’s volume [28]. As he explains in his admonition “To the reader”:

These Emblemes graven in Copper by Crispinus Passæus (with a Motto in Greeke, Latine, or Italian, round about every Figure; and with two Lines (or Verses) in one of the same Languages, periphrasing those Motto’s) came to my hands, almost twentie yeares past. The Verses were so meane, that, they were afterward cut off from the Plates; And, the Collector of the said Emblems, (whether hee were the Versifier or the Graver), was neither so well advised in the Choice of them, nor so exact in observing the true Proprieties belonging to every Figure, as hee might have bene.

Yet the Workman-ship being judged very good, for the most part; and the rest excusable; some of my Friends were so much delighted in the Gravers art, and in those Illustrations, which for mine own pleasure, I had made upon some few of them, that they requested mee to Moralize the rest. Which I condescended unto: And, they had benee brought to view many yeares agoe, but that the Copper Prints (which are now gotten) could not be procured out of Holland, upon any reasonable Conditions. (sig. A2 v)

15 As Norbrook [23] reminds, Wither was a ‘country poet’ famous for his pastoral poems but “more than Michael Drayton and William Browne, he had turned from idealized nymphs and shepherds to the actualities of political life”. For more biographical information on Wither see *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. XXI, pp. 730-39.

16 For a full analysis of the frontispiece see Bath [7].

17 This had always been a rather common practice not only for emblems but for any illustration within individual books. Aneau [3], for example, explains that he had found in Macé Bonhomme’s shop a series of old xylographies, unused because they “inscriptions ad picturam alludentes non haberet” [“did not have any inscriptions referring to the images], and thus decided to bring them back to life creating a fit text from them “recepti me ex mutis, & mortuis, vocales, & vivas effecturū” [“applied myself to produce speaking and alive compositions from silent and dead ones”]. On this practice see Luborsky [21], Praz [26], Henkel – Schöne [18], Adams – Rawles – Saunders [1].

Despite the scorn laid on Rollenhagen's verses, the many years necessary to assemble Crispin de Passe's plates and to have them at "reasonable Conditions" testify to their excellent quality, their delightful appearance and their cost. Yet, what makes these images significant is their "moralization" by the author. The symbolic figures of the frontispiece and of the various emblems in the book are acceptable only after they have been deconstructed as images and given new life by the author's moral comments (all the emblems in the Collection are "Quickened with metricall illustrations", as the title page explicitly bears out).

In fact, the de-legitimation of the frontispiece, of the narrating voice, of the author, or of the engravings is a way to stress the importance and validity of what the reader has in front of him¹⁸. This means not only that the *pictura* and its various elements shift progressively from mimesis to diegesis, but also that they have no more the purely symbolic function of alluding to something else in a transparent way: rather, they acquire an opacity that makes them significant in themselves, becoming a visual clue that binds the reader to the material world.

Wither's rhetoric of disowning, that a baffled Bath [7] termed an "awkward relationship of the author to his material", disguises quite radical ideological implications: the explicit requirement of a participatory reader and the appeal to his pleasure are also a surreptitious way to impose on him a behaviour he must comply with, so much so that in reading a collection such as Wither's one has the impression that the final goal is not to stimulate a cognitive process in the reader, but rather to bring about his fashioning¹⁹.

A good example in case is Wither's manipulation of Rollenhagen's emblem 36, which represents the highly polytropic symbol of an ostrich²⁰. Rollenhagen's emblem

(Figure 3) combines two existing devices²¹ to discuss the nature and role of the writer, as the *subscriptio* makes clear (you cannot be considered a writer only because you have a pen, just like the ostrich, who has wings and feathers but does not know how to use them).



Figure 3. from Rollenhagen [28]



Figure 4. from Wither [36]

18 Wither's rhetoric of disowning, with its conventional signalling of his inability to express adequately his mental image, allegedly aims precisely at dignifying and authorising the book: as Hughes [20] maintains, this practice "was almost invariably only done when the resultant artefact was itself highly wrought and had been brought to a state of polish which could give piquancy to the discrepancy between the appearance of finish and the declaration that the work had been, so to speak, merely broken off in despair. The formula was one of mock-modesty which, far from prejudicing the execution in favour of the 'idea', paradoxically drew attention to the cunning of the master's hand". On Wither's skillful creation of a rhetorical persona to persuade the reader see Tung [33].

19 This is even more true if one considers that the moral drawn in the various *subscriptio*es is often an attempt to impose a univocal meaning and stop the dissemination of interpretations: in emblem III.45, for example, the guiding voice says that he received "These Figures (as you see them) ready made / By others; and I mean to moralize / Their Fancies...". On this see Cavell [9].

20 In a complimentary light, the ostrich was praised because, despite its apparently harmless nature, could fight against the sparrow hawk if provoked (as such it was the symbol of Henry IV of France); it was commonly thought it could hatch eggs by only looking at them and thus able to give life by his look (as such, with the motto *Oculis vitam*, it was even associated to Christ's healing look); it was used as a symbol of Araby in a coin by the Roman emperor Trajan (*Arabia adquisita*); it was the symbol of fortitude in overcoming injustice because it could even eat and digest a piece of iron (this image is in the coat of arms of the Austrian town of Leoben and in the trademark of a series of books by the Italian publisher Einaudi); it symbolized a devotee who is preoccupied with heavenly values; its feathers were used to embellish helmets and a bunch of them alluded to divine distributive justice; it was associated to rapidity because it was faster than other animals thanks to its wings. On the other hand, it was used as the symbol of the hypocrite who, like an ostrich which opens its wings but never flies, pretends to be a good christian but is incapable of living a truly pious

life. For a detailed discussion of the symbology of the ostrich see, for example, Giovio (1574: 93-97), Camerarius (1597: 17-19) and Ferro (1623: 677-79).

21 The *pictura* usually refers to the ostrich as symbol of fortitude in overcoming injustice (the animal could eat and digest the iron nail it has in its mouth, as the motto *Spiritus durissima coquit* explains; see, for example Giovio 1574: 93), while the *inscriptio* is used to describe the ostrich as symbol of hypocrisy (the motto *Nil penna sed usus* alluded to the fact that a bird is such not because it has feathers but because knows how to use them for flying; see Paradin (1557: 49).

Wither’s emblem (Figure 4), however, gives the composition yet another turn of the wheel, transforming it into a denunciation of hypocrisy. So, whereas in Rollenhagen the emblem was used as a form of self promotion, in Wither it is associated with a clear moral teaching.

But there is more to this composition. To each of the four books of Wither’s *Collection of Emblemes* is appended a series of short Lottery poems. The last page of the *Collection* had a double-sided revolving paper dial: the reader had to turn the arrow, which pointed to a book (on the one side) and to a number (on the other side). He then had to find the corresponding Book, read the Lottery poem bearing that number, and finally go to the corresponding emblem²². In other words, chance directed the reader to a particular composition which was introduced by a Lottery poem that guided its fruition²³.

During the Early modern period, the fundamental idea underlying lotteries, divinations, or oracles, was that fate governed the fortunes of man, so they were ways to foretell what providence had in store. In this case, however, the Lottery is just an entertaining way to pilot the reader, imposing on him a certain interpretation. In the case of emblem I, 36, for example, the Lottery poem invites one to make good use of one’s gifts (emphatically termed “blessings”) and the italicized terms make for a sort of summary of the message: the opposition between seeming and being, the importance of using your natural gifts and learn the moral proposed by the emblem:

You, love to *seeme*; this, all Men see:
But, would you lov’d, as well, to *bee*.
If, also, better use were made
Of those good *Bleffings*, you have had;
Your praise were more. Marke, therefore, well,
What *Moralls*, now, your *Emblem*, tell;
And, gather, from it, what you may,
To set you in a better way.

In Rollenhagen’s emblem, both the motto and the short *subscriptio* mention utility (*usus, uti, uso*), but in Wither’s emblem this is reinforced by the long accompanying poem:

Such *Animals* as these, are also those
That *Wise*, and *Grave*, and *Learned Men* doe seeme
In *Title*, *Habit*, and all *Formall showes*;
Yet, have not *Wit*, nor *Knowledge*, worth esteeme.
And, lastly, such are they, that, having got

22 The device is reproduced at the very end of Wither’s volume and is easily visible in online editions. It is almost unique, even though it was probably inspired by a similar device in Jan David’s *Veridicus Christianus*. As Manning [22] reminds, the latter was “the first Jesuit emblem-book, published in 1601 by the famous Plantin workshop in Antwerp. This gimmick merely formalised a common practice whereby emblem-books would be opened at random, with the selected emblem being interpreted for its relevance for the reader.”

23 For a discussion on the role of Fortune in Wither’s emblems see Ripollés [27].

Wealth, Knowledge, and those other *Gifts*, which may
Advance the *Publicke Good*, yet, use them not;
But *Feede*, and *Sleepe*, and *Laze their time away*. (ll. 21-28)

Hypocrites are condemned together with those who “laze their time away” instead of using their gifts for the public good; so, the *subscriptio* indirectly alludes to the background elements of the refined image, that give a strong emphasis to practical, useful actions: there’s a forge with a blacksmith hammering a piece of metal, a man with a wheelbarrow, two other people on the right hand side, one of them carrying sticks.

The overall meaning, therefore, is totally twisted: in particular the “*usus*” which in Rollenhagen referred to the writing practice is now turned into moral and social “utility”. However, the reader is not invited to peruse the image and find possible alternative interpretations: in other words, the composition does not provide any weak implicatures, but it simply reinforces the one central message that has been already communicated by the Lottery poem, and that is confirmed by the various elements of the emblem. The impression is, thus, of a single message from a monologic voice, which is at pains to secure a proper univocal reception of the symbols proposed: the possibility of a personal elaboration by the reader is certainly not encouraged as too “costly” (to use Sperber and Wilson’s terminology).

Seen from this point of view, such traditional opinions as Wither’s alleged arbitrariness²⁴ need revising: rather, his emblems seem to reflect a radical epistemological shift that affected Early modern emblematics and literature at large, the steady passage from opening up interpretations through a great number of weak implicatures to deviously imposing more and more necessary interpretations through strong implicatures. In the *Collection*, the Lottery poem and the emblem focus on the same message and reinforce one another, imposing a strong implicature, a univocal, immediately accessible interpretation that prevents the reader from processing the text in a different way. Optimal relevance is then assured because there is only one possible interpretation that should come to mind, the other elements being just entertaining side elements that may reinforce the pleasure of reading but do not contribute to the central message.

3. Conclusions

Analysing emblems and devices as wide cultural indexes in their material relevance provides a fresh look at Renaissance emblematics, while the stringency of a stylistic approach such as Sperber and Wilson’s sheds some light on the progressive passage from lesser to more constraining texts, or from more inferential to more coded forms of communication.

24 See for example Freeman [14], Bath [6], Cavell [9], and Daly [12].

Thus, the importance of emblems and devices from a socio-political as well as hermeneutic perspective point of view cannot be overestimated, demonstrating that using symbols and metaphors did not necessarily mean producing superficial, entertaining forms of art with no “solidness”. On the contrary, their peculiar, hybrid status exposes the changes in relevance paradigms in Early Modern culture, and the new practices of interpellation on the reader, with a decisive bearing on our interpretation of XVII-century textuality.

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