A less anachronistic rendering of this essay’s deliberately provocative title might simply ask whether—and, if so, to what extent, and on what grounds—the copious and influential emblem theory of the seventeenth-century French Jesuit image theorist Claude-François Ménestrier (1631–1705) can legitimately be called modern. In what follows, I will develop an affirmative response to the first part of that query, but before undertaking that exposition, I should list a few preliminary acknowledgements and disclaimers. The most important of these is that unlike the majority of other authors in this volume, I cannot claim overall expert knowledge of Jesuit image theory in general, or even of the entire Ménestrier corpus. The work of many scholars who are legitimate experts in these areas has been invaluable to me; this is particularly true in the case of Judi Loach, as will become clear, but the writing of Ralph Dekoninck and Anne-Élisabeth Spica has also been influential in my thinking. Their

1 My use of the term ‘theory’ throughout this essay is consistent with the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines theory as ‘A supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained: A set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based: “a theory of education”; “music theory”. See http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/theory. Viewed in this light, ‘emblem theory’ is thus a set of principles or general statements intended to delineate both what the emblem is and what differentiates it from other, related forms. It may seem not only anachronistic but misguided to ask whether Ménestrier may have anticipated modern theoretical developments, given that he is often counted among the partisans of the ‘Ancients’ during the ‘Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes’, while at least some of his rivals were allied with the ‘Modernes’. This is hardly surprising, given Ménestrier’s training, temperament, and championing of classical models. As I hope to make clear, however, Ménestrier was in some respects an innovative and creative thinker; there may thus be legitimate grounds to re-evaluate his emblem theory using modern criteria. On Ménestrier’s role in the Querelle, see, e.g., Judi Loach, “Menestrier’s Emblem Theory”, Emblematica 2, 2 (1987) 317–336, at 328. Although the first salvo in the Querelle is Perrault’s 1687 poem “Le siècle de Louis le Grand”, published after the second of Ménestrier’s two treatises on emblem theory, the battle lines had been drawn up long before.
work, and that of others, will be frequently cited; even when not explicitly mentioned, however, it underpins all that follows. In developing my thoughts on Ménestrier’s potential claim to contemporary theoretical relevance, I will focus primarily on process and approach in Ménestrier rather than on the content of his emblem theory per se: in this way, too, what follows may differ from most other essays presented here.

As is well known by emblem scholars, Ménestrier wrote two printed theoretical treatises on emblem theory with the same title, *L’Art des Emblêmes*, published in 1662 and 1684. Such an occurrence is unique in his voluminous work. As will become clear below, there is considerable disagreement about the extent to which these two treatises overlap in content and purpose. Assessments of Ménestrier’s contribution to emblem theory also diverge dramatically, and, as we shall see, it is legitimate to question whether he can even be called a theorist at all. In what follows, I will begin by briefly reviewing traditional assessments of Ménestrier as an emblem theorist; I will then discuss the historical, intellectual, and personal context for the 1662 and 1684 treatises devoted to emblems and—ostensibly at least—to emblem theory; I will examine their similarities and differences in content and style, analysing explanations previously suggested for these, especially by Judi Loach, who has discussed them at length on more than one occasion. Finally, I will assess Ménestrier’s new apparent knowledge of and critical appreciation in the 1684 treatise for the place of emblems in print—as opposed to material or festival—culture: this key element of difference between the two volumes

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2 The first of these is readily available in digital form online, both through the Internet Archive (http://www.archive.org) and Gallica (http://gallica.bnf.fr). The second is not, though it has been reprinted by Georg Olms Verlag as part of the “Emblematisches Cabinet” series; Paul Allut, in *Recherches sur la vie et sur les œuvres du P. Claude-François Menestrier de la Compagnie de Jésus* (Lyons: 1856) provides a plausible explanation for the rarity of the 1684 treatise, which appears to have shared the fate of many illustrated emblem and fable books from the period: ‘Le grand nombre de figures gravées dans le texte a tenté sans doute la convoitise des enfants, qui se sont amusés à les découper, & ont ainsi détruit tous les exemplaires qui ont passé par leurs mains. Cela expliquerait la rareté de ce volume’. (‘The large number of engraved figures in the text no doubt tempted the covetousness of children, who amused themselves by cutting them out, and thus destroyed every copy that passed through their hands. That would explain the rarity of this volume’, 174) the 1662 treatise uses the spelling ‘embleme’; the 1684, ‘emblême’.

3 Ménestrier’s published output amounts to over 150 works during the half-century spanned by his career from 1655 to 1705; see Adams A. – Rawles S. – Saunders A.M. (eds.), *A Bibliography of Claude-François Menestrier: Printed Editions, 1655–1765* (Geneva: 2012) XI.