SIXTEENTH-CENTURY EMBLEMS AND IMPRESE
AS INDICATORS OF CULTURAL CHANGE

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An emblem combines a symbolic picture with brief texts: usually motto, picture and epigram, often referred to as inscriptio, pictura and subscriptio, which are neutral Latin labels that do not specify a particular form or function. The emblem can be regarded as a mode of thought combining thing or word with meaning, and as an art form combining visual image and textual components (Schöne, Jöns, Daly 1979b). Attempts to define the genre of illustrated books called emblem books have not been overly successful. If definitions are too narrow they exclude too much; if definitions are too wide they embrace too much. The emblem is related to the impresa, which combines verbal and visual elements in a two-part form and which originates before the emblem itself. [On the emblem in Renaissance sign systems, see chapter 12 (iv). —ed.]

Most emblems and imprese were conservative in the root sense that they conserve, i.e., reflect and support the culture that produced them. However, emblems do reveal something of the confused situation articulated at times by a middle class caught up in the social, economic and epistemological changes of early modern Europe. To that extent, they indicate the beginnings of cultural change.

The emblematic mode helped shape the print and material cultures of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. To literary historians emblem books are the most widely known manifestation of this allegorical mode, but for historians of art and architecture the use of emblem and impresa in the material culture is even more important. In terms of reception, buildings may have been more influential than books. Let us take a seventeenth-century example from Nuremberg. The council room of the town hall was decorated with a series of emblematic paintings, and these were recorded in a book entitled Emblemata politica, printed in Nuremberg in 1617 and 1640 (fig. 1). Whereas the book was probably issued in only 200 or 300 copies,
Figure 1