Book Reviews

Peter M. Daly

The Emblem in Early Modern Europe: Contributions to the Theory of the Emblem.

This volume of essays by the great emblem scholar and bibliographer Peter Daly centers on questions of emblematic construction and interpretation: simply put, “how emblems were actually read” (3) by their early modern audiences. Concomitantly, he explores the theoretical implications of the various plausible responses provided in the book’s ten chapters. Along the way, Daly astutely summarizes the state of the field on a number of important topics: the historiography of emblem studies in the twentieth century, extending from Mario Praz’s Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1939; 2nd ed., London: Warburg Institute, 1964) and William Heckscher and Karl-August Wirth’s Emblem, Emblembuch (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1959) to Rosemary Freeman’s English Emblem Books (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948) and Albrecht Schöne’s introduction of Emblemata: Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1967); the contested status of the emblem triplex, comprising an inscriptio (either titular or in the form of a motto), a pictura (usually pictorial, though sometimes exclusively verbal), and a subscriptio (often but not always epigrammatic), the tripartite format of which proves anything but prescriptive for the history of the emblem; the argumentative and hermeneutic relation amongst the emblem’s textual and pictorial parts, whose mutual interaction leaves open the issue of semantic priority; and, of special significance to readers of this journal, the pastoral and/or political functions of the various types of emblem book produced by Jesuit authors, both individual and corporate, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Daly’s observations about the meanings of emblems and how such meanings were discerned require close examination, since he tends to embed them within the fabric of the ten chapters. The reader must sift and collate the conclusions drawn from the historical evidence. (In this respect, one might argue...
that *The Emblem in Early Modern Europe* is itself emblematic, in making its case by licensing the reader actively to rehearse the author's arguments.) Take the crucial issue of semantic univalence. Daly repeatedly invokes Georg Philipp Harsdörffer's *Frauenzimmer Gesprächspiele* (Nuremberg: Wolfgang Endters, 1644–49), which explicitly distinguishes between the variable significance—the *Sinn*—of multivalent visual motifs, such as the eagle or the serpent, and the univalent meaning of the emblem as a whole, discernible from the sum total of compatible *Sinne*, bodied forth by the emblematic motifs. The problem lies in choosing each motif's correct *Sinn*: since emblems often presume prior knowledge of these *Sinne*, rather than explicating them, their “interpretation is frequently doubtful, and, as was said earlier of lions, it can be good or evil. The snake is an image of cleverness, poisonous slander, and when it has its tail in its mouth, it is a representation of eternity” (62, quoted from *Frauenzimmer Gesprächspiele* VII, 98). The reader-viewer will know that “in a given emblem only one meaning is usually intended” (62), but distilling that meaning from the multiple meanings inherent in the component motifs can be challenging, as Harsdörffer readily admits: “one cannot judge an emblem, unless one has earlier thoroughly learned the nature and qualities of the figure, which are often hidden and cannot be depicted, hence the meaning of the emblem is difficult and dark” (128, quoted from *Frauenzimmer Gesprächspiele* IV, 244). Daly cites Harsdörffer so frequently that his theory of the emblem, which is in fact a theory of the *figura*, comes to appear normative, the standard against which other theories are implicitly measured. In the chapter “Are Emblem *Inscriptiones* always Mottoes?,” for instance, Daly apparently agrees with Hardörffer’s notion that most emblems, as opposed to their variable motifs, harbor a single or at least principal meaning: whether emblematic *inscriptiones* take the form of titular *lemmata* or mottoes, they “assist in understanding the emblem as a whole” (132), and moreover, “any *inscriptio* [...] is likely to suggest the general direction of meaning of a given emblem, and by emblem I mean visual images and text(s), which any reader will have before him or her” (133). In reading such emblems, the historicist scholar, following Harsdörffer’s model, must search for the unifying meaning comprised by motivic multiplicity.

It is very much to Daly’s credit that even while calling attention to the leading function of *inscriptiones*, he battles mightily against Wolfgang Neuber’s ascription of semantic preeminence to an emblem’s textual component—specifically, its *lemma*, which Neuber construes as necessarily a motto in his influential essay “Locus, Lemma, Motto. Entwurf zu einer mnemonischen Emblematicktheorie” (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993). He disagrees with Neuber on two grounds. First, text could not be solely constitutive of an emblem’s other elements, visual or verbal, since the mode of production was notably