

*Les Questions symboliques d'Achille Bocchi: Symbolicae quaestiones, 1555.*

Anne Rolet.

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Achille Bocchi's *Symbolicae Quaestiones* stands out in the rich and varied panorama of Renaissance emblem books as a fascinating yet uncomfortable object, for its structure, sophisticated content, and the extremely articulated composition of its images engraved by Giulio Bonasone. Several traces of its influence, scattered along the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, have been detected by modern scholars in emblem books, literary works of different genres, and paintings (from Capaccio, Brixiani, and Sambucus, to Spenser, Michel de l'Hospital, and Caravaggio). And yet, after their first publication in 1555, the *Symbolicae Quaestiones* gave rise neither to a significant series of learned commentaries, nor to a high number of posthumous editions.

The more recent reception of this important emblem book offers us a picture not less mixed. Studies on Bocchi seem to have gained momentum in the last twenty years, thanks to the publication of some general and more specific contributions on the *Symbolicae Quaestiones* and the *Academia Bocchiana*. However, until yesterday, the only two versions of Bocchi's work available to modern readers, though valuable, were not critically edited: a reprographic print for Garland (1979), and an exhibition catalogue about Bonasone, including Bocchi's emblems and an Italian translation, *Giulio Bonasone*, edited by Stefania Massari (1983).

Anne Rolet's two-volume critical edition of the *Symbolicae Quaestiones* comes now as an example of meticulous scholarly editing, opening a new perspective on Bocchi's studies. Presented in large format, almost monumental for its dimensions, it includes a comprehensive 230-page introduction, a French verse translation of the original, detailed notes, and a series of annexes and indexes. The critical text is presented not only in comparison to many copies of the 1555 edition of the *Symbolicae Quaestiones* as well as posthumous editions, but is also analyzed through a series of manuscript texts containing earlier version of Bocchi's epigrams, autograph epistles, and the preparatory manuscript of the book.

The emphasis on the textual elements of the emblems is aimed at correcting the trend that has prevailed so far among interpreters of the *Symbolicae Quaestiones*, who have generally focused much more on the engravings than on the poems. Often seen as an almost autonomous corpus of symbols, images have been frequently read separately from the epigrams, leading in some cases to incomplete readings, if not misreadings, as a result. The reassessment of the relations between image and text puts Rolet in a position to propose new and more coherent interpretations for several symbols. This is made possible by analysis of the genetic process of each emblem. From that analysis, the irregular architecture of the *Symbolicae Quaestiones* emerges as the product of a complex collaboration between Bocchi and many different figures: engraver, sketches' authors,

and members of the Academia Bocchiana, whose role and weight could change substantially from one emblem to another.

At the same time, Rolet demonstrates the inadequacies of approaches assimilating Bocchi's symbols to the archetypal model of the emblematic genre, Andrea Alciato's *Emblemata*. Though the influence of Alciato remains unquestioned, the solutions deployed by the *Symbolicae Quaestiones* strongly differ from the tripartite formula of the *Emblemata*. The so-called *emblema triplex*, compound of motto, picture, and poem, far from fitting to the polymorphic structures of Bocchi's symbols, imposes a reductive scheme that obscures the importance of some elements, with distortive effects on the interpretation. The analysis of the author's poetics, relying on the principle of *varietas*, should have instead been induced to discern and describe — as Rolet now carefully does — the multiplicity of forms that gives Bocchi's work its peculiar shape. In the commentaries, the shift of the hermeneutic focus from the pictures to the text produces significant effects also on the identification of Bocchi's sources. While several previous readers, privileging the evocative power of images, have opted for a Kabbalistic and Hermetic interpretation, Rolet persuasively argues that a prominent position in the panorama of Bocchi's references must be placed in the guiding lights of classical and Renaissance culture, from Plato, Cicero, and Horace, to Erasmus, Budé, and Alciato.

The reconstruction of the intertextual relationships of the *Symbolicae Quaestiones* with its sources is fruitfully complemented by the attention paid to the role that the intellectual circle gravitating around the author, the Academia Bocchiana, played in the genesis of the book. Arguments, social rituals, and rhetorical rules of the academy influenced the form and content of the symbols, as these were objects of discussion and reelaboration among the members of the circle, formed by a group of close friends (Marcantonio Flaminio, Romolo Amaseo, Bartolomeo Raimondi, and others), joined by more or less occasional visitors (a long list, including Gabriele Paleotti, Ulisse Aldrovandi, Michel de l'Hospital, and many others).

Putting in context the philosophical, religious, and political questions raised by the symbols, Rolet attempts to delineate the evolution of the ideological conceptions that nourish the book, especially with regard to the role of philosophy and the reconciliation of pagan and Christian philosophies. The outcome of her rereading, mindful of Cantimori's and Ginzburg's studies on the subject, is to stress the influence of sixteenth-century Nicodemism and Erasmian evangelism on Bocchi's heterodox views. One of the best examples of Rolet's approach to Bocchi's work is supplied by her reading of the *symbolon* 64, whose famous picture shows a Hermes with his finger on his mouth, the Harpocratic sign for silence, while holding in the other hand a seven-branched candelabrum, a menorah (instead of a winged staff entwined by two serpents, the traditional caduceus). This emblem, whose text and image seem to be only loosely interrelated, has been often generically interpreted as a representation of Hermetic silence. Thanks to a narrow analysis of the two epigrams accompanying the image, and with the help of some of Bocchi's autographs,

Rolet reads Hermes instead as an emissary of Christ's doctrine, a symbolization that needs to be understood in light of Erasmian and Nicodemist influences. The god's attributes are hieroglyphic signs connected by a syntax that reminds one of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*: the gesture for silence stands for an invitation to a more spiritual practice of Christianity, and then, once that practice is undertaken, the Holy Spirit, whose typological anticipation is the menorah, can illuminate the temple of the soul.

Emblem specialists, art historians, and scholars of early modern European culture will welcome this edition of the *Symbolicae Quaestiones*, whose particular value lies in the combination of philological accuracy and interpretative thoroughness. If it is true that the success of an enterprise can depend more on the questions it opens than on the answers it tries to supply, it is to be hoped that Rolet's contribution will stimulate further debate and new researches on Achille Bocchi's works.

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