

Sophie Chiari. *L'image du labyrinthe à la Renaissance: Détours et arabesques au temps de Shakespeare.*

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In the wake of Paolo Santarcangeli's *Le Livre des Labyrinthes* (1967), and focusing on a later period than Penelope Reed Doob's *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (1992), this book examines the many ways

and domains — emblem books, gardens, architecture, poetry, dance, drama — in which the image of the labyrinth was reappropriated in the Elizabethan period. Even though her study focuses mainly on England at the end of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, Chiari's comparative treatment of European contexts embraces Paracelsus, Ariosto, Boccaccio, Francesco Colonna, Alciato, Du Bartas, and Ronsard, and the scope of the classical sources is equally wide, from Herodotus — the first historian who mentioned the labyrinth in a description of Egypt's pyramids — and Homer to Pliny, Ovid, Virgil, and Plutarch and their translators.

Constantly reinterpreted and re-semanticized in the course of centuries, the fascinating and subversive legend of the labyrinth in Elizabethan England was mainly read in the paradoxical mode of Horace's *discordia concors*, and the corollary dialectics of artifice-as-art and artifice-as-ruse. Daedalus, the prototype of the Renaissance artist, characterized by craft and by deceit, was an accomplice of Pasiphae in serving her lust for the white bull when he designed first the wooden cow and then the labyrinth to veil the initial transgression. The construction of the maze involves the accession to a world of secrecy, of dissimulation, and of the occult, which masks the obscenity of the original fault with its refined, elegant sophistication. In the moralizing reading of the myth, the labyrinth operated as a metaphor of man's wandering and tormented life. On the other hand, secularized and emancipated from its moral reading, the motif of the maze was remodeled by the authors of gardening books like Thomas Hill, who found his inspiration in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) and imagined complex and multicursal patterns quite remote from the unicursal model of the grand pavement labyrinths found in French and Italian cathedrals. More implicit but equally recognizable, the motif of the labyrinth looms large in the "stately palace" with "intricate innumerable wayes" in Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592), when the sense of sinful love invades the vision of the King and his lover, thus reviving the medieval heritage of the inextricable prison of love.

With Alciato's *Emblematum Liber* (1531) and the vogue for emblem books, Elizabethan and Jacobean England gave pride of place to the notion of secrecy, closely associated with the Cretan motif in the political domain — that of the *arcana imperii*, or *mysterium imperii*, enabling the ruler to reach his end through indirection. The labyrinth thus became the appropriate trope to refer to the intricacies and imbroglios of Renaissance politics before it contaminated the religious sphere in pamphlets denouncing the deviant ways of the Roman Catholics led astray by a new Minotaur, i.e., the pope himself, as in Thomas Norton's *An addition declaratorie to the bulles, with a searching of the maze* (1570). In a more positive light, the labyrinth appeared as a favorite choreographic motif, in Jehan Tabourot, alias Thoinot Arbeau's *Orchésographie* (1589), or more explicitly in Sir John Davies's *Orchestra, or A Poem of Dauncing* (1596), with its distinctly Neoplatonic definition of equilibrium, harmony, and love ("Love's Maze . . . is . . . of Man's Fellowship the true-love knot," st. 116). The Horatian ideal of the *discordia concors* was also staged in court masques, the most paradigmatic being Ben Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618), with the character of the dancing master, Daedalus, symbolizing the visual aspect of the masque.

This third and final section of the book, “The Arts of the Stage,” is the most remarkable demonstration of Chiari’s subtle method (itself labyrinthine), which consists in unearthing etymologies, hidden analogies, disguised or buried motifs, overt or covert echoes. With a careful handling of Pierre Brunel’s notion of “irradiation du mythe” (*Mythocritique: théorie et parcours*, 1992), Chiari ultimately concentrates on three plays — Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595), John Marston’s *Insatiate Countess* (1613), and John Fletcher’s *Faithful Shepherdess* (1608–09) — in which the labyrinth is explicitly referred to and informs the plays’ complex dramatic economy. These pages offer an innovative window into the aesthetics at work in this *conchetto*, that of indirection, the *linea serpentinata* in Elizabethan culture. The book is a dense and challenging, if sometimes copious, piece of scholarship.

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