Denis L. Drysdall. *Hieroglyphs, Speaking Pictures, and the Law: The Context of Alciato's Emblems.*
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Denis Drysdall's aim throughout these collected essays on Andreas Alciato and the emblem tradition is clear. It is to study the emblem on its own terms, taking into as full account as possible the intellectual context of sixteenth-century Renaissance humanism. To do this means placing ourselves as "near as possible at the viewpoint of contemporaries, to learn their terminology and definitions, to acquire their background and their mental frame." Any attempt to do otherwise would be to adopt an ahistorical methodology and to fall into anachronism and intellectual sterility. It would mean misunderstanding emblems, violently attributing to them a language and meaning that do not belong, and projecting onto them our own set of phantasmatic interpretations.

Such a project inevitably entails an exacting appreciation of contemporary literature and Drysdall is well placed to offer us the fruits of his meticulous research. Whether or not one agrees with his attempt to escape the historical positioning, the results displayed in these essays are beneficial: compendious, scholarly, and magesterial. The first problem, addressed in the early chapters of this book, is to define the emblem as Alciato might have done. As Drysdall notes, the idea of the emblem was developed from a range of legal and literary sources. The term classically refered to detachable ornaments, the contents of vases and badges, but also to commonplaces that were inserted into compositions. The term, in other words, lacked strict application and definition, and it becomes clear, on the evidence adduced by Drysdall, that Alciato used the term interchangeably with and as a cognate of similar terms such as *insignia*, *devices*, *arms*, and *impressa*.

Only in hindsight, and after subsequent Ramist reorganization by the French translator of Alciato's emblems, Bartholomy Anneau, were later scholars convinced the emblem bore specific meaning beyond its specific description. Nevertheless, in

spite of this flexiblilty, a sophisticated theory of language and symbolism emerged from Alciato's invention. As a lawyer, Alciato was particularly concerned with the use of legal imagery in legal language evidenced in his *De Verborum Significatione*. His proposition was that things as well as words have meaning. Just as the hieroglyphics of Horapollo designated meaning through a chosen object, so too could objects in emblems convey meaning. This is not to suggest that Alciato was a mystic in the Neoplatonist tradition. Drysdall provides a fascinating contrast between the emblem theory of Alciato and those of Ficino and Bocchi. For Alciato, a certain Aristotelian influence prevailed, according to which meaning was to be rooted in the natural quality of the thing being portrayed. In this sense emblems were considered to be accessible to anyone willing to learn. Under the more esoteric Neoplatonist tradition, emblems were allegories where everything refers to what is first prefigured in a divine intellect before existing in the real world. To understand such emblems involved first being stimulated by the phantasmata of the emblem and then excercising one's knowledge of the arcane myths of the ancients. This exercise in rational thinking was more a spiritual practice according to which one had to pierce the veil of unknowing in the pursuit of beauty, love, and the ultimate good. Emblems, in other words, provided ciphers to the sublime. One might even, as Drysdall continues to do, chart an evolution away from preempirical models of knowledge and meaning based on the primacy of authority toward those based on the primacy of experience.

Whatever the case, emblems emerged as a vital form in the humanist reconception of civic life. Outside of the emblem books themselves, their use tended to be public, festive, and pedagogic. The question of training in the affairs of public life, of what it meant to present oneself as an ideal citizen, were inherent in emblem theory and Drysdall is not blind to these concerns. His final few essays on Alciato's role as a jurist remind us that the very basis of civic life was a matter of engaging with all the pedagocal and philological techniques of humanism. In this sense, whether one agrees with the possibility of his historical mission to read the emblem in a sixteenth-century context, Drysdall's essays and his erudite scholarship are exemplary.

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