

**Shifting our Vision:
Reading Early Modern Emblems in the 21st Century***

Álvaro Llosa Sanz
University of California

In modo che meritamente si può dire l'amore
nodo perpetuo e legame del mondo e delle parti
sue immobile sostegno, e della universa machina
fermo fondamento (Marsilio Ficino, *El libro
dell'amore* III, III)

The Digital Age is shifting the way we foresee our future, as well as how we understand our past. As readers, the interactivity provided by hypermedia technology is transforming our textual reading experience, placing us in a more active role before the screen, which has now replaced the page. When we shift our gaze from the page to the screen, we encounter a new type of geography. The screen transforms text and images into a space actively experienced and explored by the eye, in order to find links and anchors to enhance our reading in the search for a deeper understanding of its content. In the same way that icons and keywords on our desktop offer a basic meaning on the surface but provide access to a deeper system of complexity of meanings (our documents and programs), we explore text and images as iconic objects through the interactivity of the multimedia screen.

In this paper, I propose a digital edition¹ of an early modern emblem using the interactivity of the screen: it requires an active reader who seeks and explores links and anchors in order to decipher the specific and deeper meaning of this iconic and symbolic device. Such a meaning is experienced as a visual reading as well as an exploration of the iconic geography of the emblem itself.

First, we should note that an early modern emblem involves a multimodal performance for the mind, since it is a mixture of image, text, and the symbolic meaning established between them.² A classical emblem structure consists of a motto (a proverb or other short enigmatic expression), a picture, and an epigrammatic text (Egido 14). Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum liber* or *Book of Emblems* (1531) was the first popular collection of emblems in Europe, and it had enormous influence on the cultural production of the Western world during the 16th and 17th centuries. We will

* Special thanks to my colleagues Valerie Billing and Tim Johnson at UCD for the feedback they provided on this paper.

¹ Our example may be experienced at <http://alviontheroad.weebly.com/alciato-106.html>.

² Daly notes that "since the emblem is a bi-medial construct, we are dealing with forms of intertextuality, and even with modes of 'visual intertextuality'" (71). More accurately, the emblem calls for a multimodal reading, since several semiotic modes (text, images) are integrated inside a medium, the printed book. See Page for a detailed explanation of mono and multimodality versus multimedia concepts.

examine our digital impression of emblem number 106 from the collection, whose motto is “Love is the most powerful passion.” This well-known topic is widely used by writers and artists in Western art and has developed from Antiquity to the present. The image depicts a boy driving a chariot by overpowering a lion harnessed to it. With a whip in one hand and the reins in the other, this boy dominates the lion. The epigrammatic text clarifies the symbolic meaning of the picture and its elements: the beautiful boy is Love, who overcomes the power of the greatest beast in Nature –the Lion– with the help of the reins and the whip. The text ends with a question: “Would he, who overpowers such a beast, ever restrain his hand with us?” According to this image and its accompanying text, Love is, without a doubt, the most powerful passion.

An interesting digital edition of Alciato’s *Book of Emblems* has been developed by the Department of English at Memorial University of Newfoundland.³ It provides access to the entire collection through searches in several categories (titles, motifs, pictures), and emblems that appear in Latin are either translated into English or shown in a parallel frame. The screen contains the number of the emblem in the collection, the motto, the image, the epigrammatic text, and informative links to subsequent editions in which the emblem also appeared. From every page, the user may follow links to subsequent or previous emblems in the collection, return to the index page or read a brief commentary about the textual history of the visited emblem, which in turn includes links to other European editions. What I would like to emphasize regarding this edition is that, while all the information related to the emblem itself is linked by hypertext, simply reading the emblem itself is non-interactive and non-explorative. It is essentially the edition published 500 years ago, but printed on a screen and enriched with linked information. However, it still cannot be considered a truly powerful digital edition because it lacks the necessary dynamic interactivity on screen suggested by the visual intertextuality between words and image. Thus, we need to think again about the translation from the page to the screen. We must ask ourselves how we can transform this traditional reading into an interactive one, especially because the symbolic reading requires an interplay between text and image. Just as there was a particular method of displaying emblems on the printed page, so should there be a specific digital practice for interacting with emblems on the screen.

Emblems and emblematic devices were widely used in Early Modern European society; the Reformation and later the Counterreformation beginning at the Council of Trent in the second half of the 16th century particularly exploited them to reach an illiterate or partially literate population. Paintings, family crests, altarpieces, religious and civil architecture, and literary works were full of emblematic images whose symbolic meanings were discretely linked to a complex network of mythology, ancient hieroglyphic culture, and a vast hermetic tradition (Rodríguez de la Flor 26-27). Furthermore, in the hands of the Catholic Church, they became devices to transmit

³ The project was developed by William Barker, Mark Feltham and Jean Guthrie, with the assistance of Allan Farrell of Memorial University’s Arts Computing Centre. The project was started on October 26, 1995, and ended on April 26, 2005. It can be viewed at <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/index.html>.

moral virtues and the Revealed Truth. Educated and illiterate individuals alike needed no help reading and interpreting symbolic images. The symbolic system, although wide and diverse, was consistent on many points, and it became an intellectual game for the cultural elite and a way to reach an illiterate population through images. For an educated early modern reader who understood the motto as the key sentence linked to the image, reading an emblem like the one discussed above was an easy exercise of visual memory that enabled an understanding of both the picture as a whole and the parts that make up that whole. Therefore, I propose to develop a digital edition of emblems on this basis, considering the picture as a geographical locus, as a place where the eye walks and stops to uncover the specific meaning of its symbolic regions.

As Ignatius of Loyola does in his *Spiritual Exercises* (1522-24), I invite you to exercise your visual memory on emblem 106 from Alciato's *Book* in order to investigate the image's interactive potential under my proposed model.⁴ The image exists alone, without words to guide interpretation, so we must discover the meaning of this enigmatic picture ourselves. Nothing compels us to focus our gaze on the details; we look over them as we please. The picture itself attracts our attention, leaving us to guess at the overall meaning and discover what this picture hides inside. Next, we can interact with the screen image as we travel through this symbolic geography that reveals its meanings through the hidden words of the motto. So, imagine that, when we scan over the body of the boy in the picture, a pop-up text suddenly reveals the part of the epigrammatic text that says "See how the boy Love, unconquered charioteer, engraved on a gem-stone, overcomes the power of the lion." These words enable us to understand a piece of the symbolic puzzle. Then we pass our sight and the cursor over the arm holding the whip, and suddenly we read "See how with one hand he holds the whip"; when we examine the reins, we read, "with the other he directs the reins." This mechanism of interactive reading allows us to explore all of the symbolic elements contained in the picture. Virtuality and the technology of the screen now enable us to re-imagine emblems in this way. The reverse is also possible by taking the epigrammatic text as a starting point and finding the corresponding element in the image: a red point indicates the precise place. Thus, the picture is used as a map or geographic space where words find their places. In this way, we learn to read attentively the symbolic image by exploring the nature of its parts and, at the same time, we decipher the whole meaning contained in the motto: "Love is the most powerful passion."

⁴ Ignatius proposes a visual technique of composing images to meditate: "First Prelude. The First Prelude is a composition, seeing the place. Here it is to be noted that, in a visible contemplation or meditation –as, for instance, when one contemplates Christ our Lord, Who is visible– the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing is found which I want to contemplate. I say the corporeal place, as for instance, a Temple or Mountain where Jesus Christ or Our Lady is found, according to what I want to contemplate. In an invisible contemplation or meditation –as here on the Sins– the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination and consider that my soul is imprisoned in this corruptible body, and all the compound in this valley, as exiled among brute beasts: I say all the compound of soul and body" (*Spiritual Exercises* 47).

This route of visual exploration makes the reading interactive and requires a personal experience to discover meaning. It becomes an intuitive journey of choices and details, of regarding the picture as a map to be revealed, to be ideologically redrawn. Thus, the eye travels across the screen, becoming a digital eye with the ability to discover the interpretative text by simply looking around –moving the cursor– and stopping at the interactive locations.

During the 16th century, the ability to understand completely certain emblems, and to discover their deeper, philosophical meanings, was a skill close to magic. Magic, in this context, is understanding the hidden links between macro- and micro-cosmos and thus acquiring the power to change the nature of things and men (Culianu 129-75). When emblems are interpreted as rhetorical devices for reaching people's hearts, we can see how Loyola used these visual reading mechanisms as manipulative techniques and powerful tools for individual inner change and conversion. Counter-reformation politics employed emblems as educational devices and propaganda to create a society able to visually read and understand itself as a perfectly organized sociocultural paradigm (Maravall 79-103; 251-66).⁵

This sort of intimate comprehension of the image is the kind of magic or wisdom that the proposed mechanism of digital reading aims to reproduce. Images and words are secretly linked to uncover a superior knowledge about the power of Love, who rules everything. This mechanism is also very close to the nature of the mental and rhetorical activity developed by Early Modern humanists, since texts were seen as visual places and buildings to be visited by the memory (Bolzoni 261, 279). This interactive method of reading images may be perfectly linked to what was called the Art of Memory, an important rhetorical device used from Antiquity to organize and memorize speeches (Rossi 1-28, Carruthers). The Art of Memory had an impressive revival and development during the 16th century in Europe, precisely because it was connected to the symbolic images seen as places of memory (Yates 19-21). To briefly explain: an image allows us to remember a complete speech when each element of the image refers, in some sense, to a particular part of that discourse. Therefore, one image can contain within itself a whole discourse, a whole universe: "A picture is worth a thousand words." And it contains the power of that discourse. In fact, some of these images were also believed to appropriate some terrific power by themselves because of that secret knowledge contained in them. Only the wise could reveal and,

⁵ Maravall points out that "By utilizing artistic media, seventeenth-century culture could more fittingly accomplish its propagandistic ends. (...) Elsewhere I have written about the role of emblems from a point of view coinciding with what I have just put forth, in particular their mixture of doctrine and plasticity in didactic baroque literature. In baroque cities, triumphal arches, tombs, altars, and artificial fountains were built to celebrate or commemorate an event, to highlight its importance; as with the widely diffused emblems, this was a product of the collaboration of the plastic arts to achieve effects of social significance. (...) Even sermons used printed or etched hieroglyphs, pictures to be deciphered, all of which reinforced the call addressed to the spectator or listening public, and opened up a channel in their attention for the penetration of a doctrine or feeling of amazement, suspension, or stupor that would facilitate the public's captivation" (251-52).

thus, harness that power.

Today, Magic has evolved into Technology.⁶ Technology allows us to recover hidden possibilities as we read old documents, and digital virtuality provides a frame of interactive spatiality to be traveled in the search for new ways of understanding old meanings. Digital virtuality also provides us today with the possibility to experience and perform the inner architecture of the old Art of Memory and its visual exercise of imagination.

So, when we digitize an old emblem in the way I propose, not only are we adapting it to the digital medium in a technological, interactive, and even pedagogical way, but we are also recovering that inner mechanism with which it was created, making explicit –in a virtual, even magical sense– what at first sight was hidden from us.

We understand through our daily practices that technology has certain power over us. It grants a sense of magic on our way of rediscovering knowledge. Without a doubt, our emblem could be currently transformed into the digital motto that “Technology is the most powerful passion”, overpowering everyone who tries to shape it.

⁶ In fact, Technology has been seen as a kind of Magic for ages. Remember Arthur C. Clarke’s third law: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Figure 1
Alciato's Book of Emblems
Emblem 106
"Love, the most powerful passion"



"See how the boy Love, unconquered charioteer, engraved on a gem-stone, overcomes the power of the lion. See how with one hand he holds the whip; with the other he directs the reins. See how in the face of this boy there is much beauty. May the dreadful affliction be kept far off. Would he, who overpowers such a beast, ever restrain his hand with us?"

Works cited

- Bolzoni, Lina. Giovanna Gabriele & María de las Nieves Muñiz, trads. *La estancia de la memoria: modelos iconográficos en la época de la imprenta*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2007. [*La stanza della memoria: modelli letterari e iconografici nell'età della stampa*. Torino: G. Einaudi Editore, 1995.]
- Carruthers, Mary J. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Culianu, Ioan P., Neus Clavera & Hélène Rufat, trads. *Eros y magia en el Renacimiento*. Madrid: Siruela, 1999. [*Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.]
- Daly, Peter M. *Literature in the Light of the Emblem*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1979.
- Egido, Aurora. *De la mano de Artemia. Literatura, Emblemática, Mnemotecnia y Arte en el Siglo de Oro*. Barcelona: José J. de Olañeta, 2004.
- Maravall, José A. *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.
- Page, Ruth. "Introduction." Ed. Ruth Page. *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 1-13.
- Rossi, Paolo. *Logic and the Art of Memory: The Quest for a Universal Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Yates, Frances A. Trad. Ignacio Gómez de Liaño. *El arte de la memoria*. Madrid: Taurus, 1974. [*The Art of Memory*. London, Routledge & K. Paul, 1966.]

Web addresses:

Original digital edition: <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/test1.html>.

Our digital edition: <http://alviontheroad.weebly.com/alciato-106.html>.