

Moralising Animals in the Renaissance: A Study of French and English Emblem Books from the 16th and 17th centuries

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Abstract:

The aim of this research project is to explore and conduct a comparative study of emblem books from the 16th and 17th centuries during the French and English Renaissance, through an analysis of the symbolism and moralising function of the artistic representation of animals, namely *A Choice of Emblems* by Geoffrey Whitney and *Fables* by Jean de la Fontaine. The study seeks to identify the ways in which the pictorial and graphic depiction of animals functioned as a medium of cultural and social transmission in both cultural contexts, by expressing and conveying messages of moral and philosophical nature. The objectives of this study are: the identification and in-depth analysis of the moral and didactic function of animal symbolism in emblem books of the English and French Renaissance, a comparative study of the artistic expression of animal symbolism in emblem books from the two cultural contexts and a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which animal allegories in emblem books influenced the moral ideologies of the wider contemporary audience. The methodology used in this paper is: qualitative analysis, consisting of both textual analysis (of the accompanying texts in emblem books) and iconographic analysis (a visual study of emblematic images), comparative study, involving thematic evaluation through the comparison of emblematic approaches in French and English cultural contexts, archival research, including the consultation of archives for the in-depth analysis of emblem texts and books in their original form and an interdisciplinary approach, integrating multiple research fields such as literary criticism, art history, and iconography.

Keywords: Emblem, moralising animal, Geoffrey Whitney, Jean de la Fontaine, fable

Introduction: theoretical and critical delimitations

During the Renaissance, the literary genres flourished in both the English and the French spaces, and one of these emerging genres was the emblem book. An emblem book has a rather clear definition: it is a piece of literature that is made up of a motto, or an *inscriptio*, usually in Latin that conveys the message of the emblem, the image, or *pictura*, which is a symbolical and visual representation of the literary piece; and the proper text, or *subscriptio*, which is either a poem or a short prose that tells the story described in the *pictura*. The two authors that constitute the case study of this paper are Geoffrey Whitney and Jean de la Fontaine, because, through their literary contributions, both of them became

referential for the genre, individualising it and adapting it to their cultural and historical space. Although the general characteristics are mostly respected by authors of emblems, there are some specific differences between how la Fontaine and Whitney create their artistic tableau and juggle with the form of the emblem, but these ideas will be analysed further in this paper.

An emblem seems straight-forward, even modest, at a first glance, due to its unpretentious and repetitive nature. In order to grasp the complexity of the emblem, one must not look at the simplicity of language or at the apparently ordinary verse, but at the way in which this literary genre conveys reality through simplicity and how the two authors manage to reflect their society through this combination of image and text. There are many theorists that wrote on the significance on the emblem and its purposes in terms of style, message and topics. Historically, the emblem became a well-debated subject, because it brought about an accessible and witty mode of relating to contemporaneity. Henry Green argues that:

Emblems in fact were, and are, a species of hieroglyphics, in which the figures or pictures, besides denoting the natural objects to which they bear resemblances, were employed to express properties of the mind, virtues and abstract ideas, and all the operations of the soul. (1866, x)

There is no doubt that the directness of the emblem is a hieroglyphic representation, because it consists of a written narrative transposed into images, and the entire string of stories in both Whitney's and la Fontaine's works can be interpreted as strings of pictures accompanied by texts. However, unlike the Ancient Egyptian variant of this form of art, the emblem is a unit where both components are mandatory, thus complementary. A *subscriptio* and a *pictura* cannot operate without one another, because they work as a bi-sensorial couple: the former appeals to the cognitive function, and the latter appeals to the visual function. Both are, in this case necessary to completely immerse the reader into the writer's imaginary. Literary critic Karl Enekel supports this exact idea, arguing that: "the innovative transmittive potential that was offered by the bi-mediality of the new genre: knowledge could be transmitted not only by texts, but through images as well." (2018, p. xiv) The *bi-mediality* he mentions suggests literature becomes more accessible and stimulating through the visual aspect of the emblem. The element of knowledge, which is abstract, is made practical, almost tangible, and this evolution in terms of the genre's popularization represented a major factor that contributed to its comprehensiveness by the uneducated public.

In addition to this, the Early Modern public was not an educated one, and for the illiterate it was more comfortable to look at the picture while somebody else read the written passage. This aspect meant a wider-spread of the message conveyed by the emblem. For both Whitney and la Fontaine, the feature of the readers' receptiveness was the main focus of writing such works and to make the readers aware of their moral and political present. Along these lines, another emblem critic, Peter Daly, argues in his study entitled *The Emblem in Early Modern Europe: Contributions to the Theory of the Emblem* that: "Recognition of meaning depends in such cases on an understanding of the thing portrayed." (2014, 50) The *pictura* is essential, because, in the case of the emblem, it is both

a symbolic and an educational tool, used to echo both the intention of the author and the illustrator and also to determine the readers to question their society and micro-universe through allegory.

The most important aspect about emblems in terms of the ‘thing portrayed’ is that these allegorical pieces of literature use animals as characters. The authors chose this device because it creates distance from the immediate dimension of the message conveyed, thus allowing the readers to make connections based on a specific code in order to decrypt sense, usually political, which leads to zoocriticism as an emerging literary theoretical trend as a new mode of interpretation.

What is zoocriticism in the context of emblems?

By zoocriticism we understand the way in which animal representations in literature are interpreted in the context of the resistance to anthropocentrism and its reinforcement while investigating how the symbolic use of personified animals in fiction enters in a dialogic with society, as a response to human nature, and blurs the boundaries between the human and wild identity. One of the main contemporary critics that supported zoocriticism is Jacques Derrida, who argues in his work entitled *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) that zoocriticism refers to a literature that is personal and which becomes an experience that transcends the limitations of humanity while paradoxically re-defining them: “Passing across borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal, to the animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself.” (3) Through deconstruction, Jacques Derrida is referring to the traditionalist side of western philosophy which subordinates animals to humans, making them innately inferior. Derrida argues that this inferiority comes from the fact that they lack reason and language, that being the reason they should not be denied those aspects on literature and art. Tapping into personal experience, Derrida condemns the singular term “the animal” for obliterating the immense diversity of the nonhuman and shows how those writers and philosophers from Aristotle to Heidegger have historically deployed it to subscribe to human exceptionalism. Regarding the ‘animot’, he foregrounds what he identifies as the violence inherent in our language of animals and calls for a new ethical code that recognises animal alterity and agency.

In terms of the emblem and how it intertwines with the concept of zoocriticism is the fact that the critical perception of the animal representation in the genre is given by the symbolic depiction of the animal itself, the *pictura*, in the context of the *subscriptio* and how these two create and emanate meaning. The *pictura* functions as a visual dictionary, and, for the literary critic, the important aspect is how the image exudes inherently human traits portrayed through the means of animals by assimilating the characteristics of the former to the behaviour of the latter. The iconographic study only enlarges this criticism and adds to its value due to the possibility of envisioning the narrative. The reader is no longer restricted to the understanding of the written text because there is the *pictura* that showcases instances, if not the entirety, of the *subscriptio*. In regards to this Daniel Russel writes that:

Such painted animals could presumably serve this function all the better because of the strength of the iconographical traditions that governed their depiction. After an encounter with one of these bestiary animals, the reader will be edified each time he sees it portrayed, perhaps in a tapestry, or a stained-glass

window, because the picture will function iconically to bring the symbolized qualities back to the mind of the viewer each time he sees it. (1995, 28)

This democratization of literature through the emblem is based on the icon, on the animal that becomes an exponent to of a social or economic class. The device of personification allows the allegory to become not only monumental, but to be popularized to a degree where even nowadays the readers are consciously aware of the attributes allotted to certain animals. There are even idioms with animal content such as: “crazy like a fox”¹, which means ‘very cunning or shrewd’; “a dog’s life”², which means ‘an unhappy existence full of problems or unfair treatment’; and “the lion’s den”³, which means ‘a demanding, intimidating, or unpleasant place or situation’. This can also be an aspect concerning linguistic zoocriticism that developed from the overly generalized perception of certain animals by these genres.

Zoocriticism is also concerned with. Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann develop this theory and add a subsidiary concept, called *zoopoetics*. Zoopoetics refers to how different animals influenced the writing style of the story or poem analysed and how they appear and affect written works. It explores how authors attempt to comprehend animals and transpose themselves into the animal’s skin. Rather than just writing about animals, zoopoetics investigates how animals might influence the way we write—how they alter our language, thoughts, and creativity. The zoopoetic investigation of how animals may have their own unique voice becomes itself a demonstration of authorial ingenuity and it translates into another mode of accessing knowledge about the world. Zoopoetics allows for an understanding of animals as more than just symbols or instruments for human storytelling, but as complex literary beings that share in the multitude of perspectives and feelings towards society and reality itself. In Driscoll and Hoffmann’s critical piece, entitled *What is Zoopoetics?* (2005), the two argue that: “zoopoetic texts are not [...] texts about animals. Rather, they are texts that are, in one way or another, predicated upon an engagement with animals and animality (human and nonhuman).” (2005, 4) The two critics suggest that animality is just another natural facet of humanity, and, to extrapolate in the context of the emblem, it can be interpreted as a modality in which both Whitney and la Fontaine appeal to these ages before it has been theorised.

Geoffrey Whitney and the moralising English emblem

Geoffrey Whitney’s *A Choice of Emblemes* (1585-86), originally published in Leiden in the Netherlands, is a representative collection for the emblem genre because it contains over 200 emblems that mirror and critique the Elizabethan society. What makes Whitney’s emblems iconic is the fact that he himself illustrated his own *picturas* and thus they can be interpreted as original authorial intentions. Thematically, his work focuses on the didactic and moralising feature of literature, because he shaped his narratives in the form of an educational directory addressed to the readers. For Whitney “reading emblems is a religious exercise, and emblematic modes of thought can shape our spiritual disposition and illuminate our understanding of things holy (Tamara 2007, 60-61)” which suggests that Whitney considered reading symbols as more than a mere artistic emancipation

or show of talent, but more of an effort towards a spiritual contemplation of the world around him through the eyes of animals. The emblems were designed to offer the readers a conscious guidance in terms of the values that Whitney considered essential for a true Christian lifestyle. This viewpoint echoes the Renaissance concept that pictures and words together may stir both the head and the emotions. The aesthetic edge of his emblems flourishes by how they become instruments for knowledge and a manner of making the reader become more sympathetic and observant to the world around him, allowing for a critical reading of both the collection and the world. Whitney's use of animals, ancient stories, and biblical connections attempted to lead readers to spiritual truths, which frequently pointed beyond worldly concerns to everlasting ones. Furthermore, the interpretation of *picturas* in relation to the *subscriptios* becomes not only an act of religion and virtue, but a mirror of the readers themselves and their own receptiveness to their surroundings.

Ranging from politics to social ideology, Whitney reflects the Elizabethans for what they are using, in some cases, animals as substitutes to humans. From the three emblems that this paper proposes to a case study, the most frequently used symbol is that of the lion, which is suggestive for Whitney's patriotic sentiment, as the lion is the animal symbol of the English. The personification of the lion is important in the context of the historical background of Whitney's emblems because it suggests the general superiority and gluttony of the upper class, often mistaking this avarice for a survival imperialist instinct: "Monarchists liked to imagine the lion as dignified to the point of blandness, and they excused the predatory nature of the beast [...] it would kill only as much as it needed to eat." (Sax 2013, 176) For the British, the lion does not murder for pleasure, but for survival, and monarchy sympathisers excused this symbol in the context of expansion for expansion's sake, for dominance.

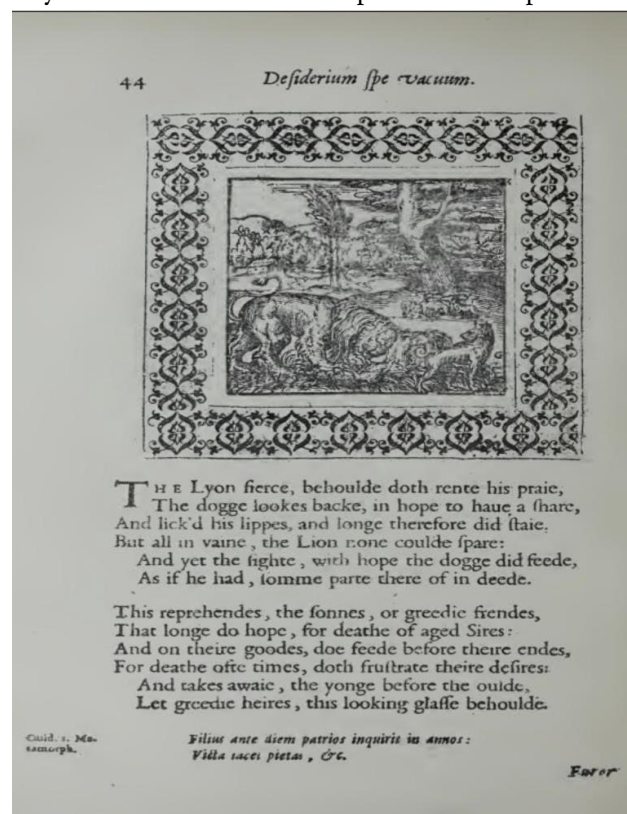


Fig. 1. Illustration by Geoffrey Whitney in *A Choice of Emblemes, And Other Devises*. Cca. 1585-86.

In the emblem above (Fig.1) entitled “Desiderium spe vacuum”⁴, the focus is the lion devouring its prey while a dog awaits patiently and hungrily remnants of the lion’s meal. Whitney chooses to showcase the topic of greed and how it unravels in the case of inheritance. This emblem focuses on the different types of greed between the young Elizabethan generation, who craves fast and easy wealth from their parents “in hope to haue a share”⁵ (Whitney 44, line 2); and the old generation, who is, too, greedy towards their own fortune. This emblem can be read as a fable where the lion is the wealthy father and the dog is the aspiring son, where the son who “lick’d his lippes”⁶ (Whitney 44, line 3) waiting for the death or demise of the father in order to access the family’s inheritance.

This emblem can be interpreted as a warning towards the inheritor who starves for his father’s money, Whitney’s intention to uncover the father’s boasting of fortune before an immature mind of his child that does not know any better. The old generation lavishes in luxury and excess, an excess that he “none could spare”⁷ (Whitney 44 line 4). According to Boria Sax, the dog:

shares the life of human society more intimately than any other animal. This, of itself, can make people feel uneasy. [...] dogs are also associated with night and with death. [...] It is small wonder that a vast range of cultures on every continent has regarded dogs as guides to the world after death. Many cultures view the howling of dogs as an omen of death. (2013, 86)

The young generation is represented by the dog because they have to be viewed as ordinary, as if nothing is attached to their name, money-wise, only their proximity to its source. They have to be humble and wait for the natural order of life to take its course, because otherwise he warns that the most humbling consequence in cases of extreme greed is for the father to bury the son, and not vice-versa, as shown in the verses: “For deathe ofte times, doth frufstrate their defires;/ And takes awaie, the yonge before the oulde” (Whitney 44, 10-11)⁸. The dog, being the omen of death, is symbolic in this emblem because the son bases his wealth off of the death of his father, while also being in danger of dying themselves beforehand, because their moral stance is degraded and will not be ignored by God.

In the following emblem, displayed below (Fig. 2), entitled “Ex damno alterius, alterius utilitas”, Whitney illustrates a boar and a lion fighting, while being watched by a vulture. From the Latin motto of the emblem, the topic of the emblem is partially laid out because the reader can deduce that it is an ethical piece as the motto is a proverb. The lion here is again a representative of English international power and dominance, but the conclusion of the emblem does not make it the winner. Whitney, contradictory to his other emblems, portrays the lion as one of the losing ends of the story, because it is a ‘when two are fighting, the third wins’ situation, which is surprising seeing as a patriot is painting the symbol of his nation in such a disadvantageous image, but this aspect will be detailed later in this section. While keeping the lion as one of the moralising animals in his collection, he also adds the boar and the vulture, which are both representative for the meaning of the emblem. In literature, the boar is suggestive for the ordinary, earthly man, but is also considered by critics as a complex animalistic symbol, because it is the sort of animal that is adaptable to a multitude of habitats and conditions. Contrastively to the pig, which is more domestic, the boar can

be regarded as a wilder counterpart, which does not abide to the homely and stable environment of the farm. A larger and more violent species of porcupine and closely related to the pig, it is considered by Boria Sax a paradoxical animal because she describes it:

as being very close to the earth they represent the joys and limitations of the flesh. The pig is holy, yet perfectly at home in Hell. The pig is gentle, yet harbors such wildness that even devils are terrified. The pig is revered, hated, loved, feared, admired, exploited, laughed at, and regarded as a friend. (2013, 193-194)

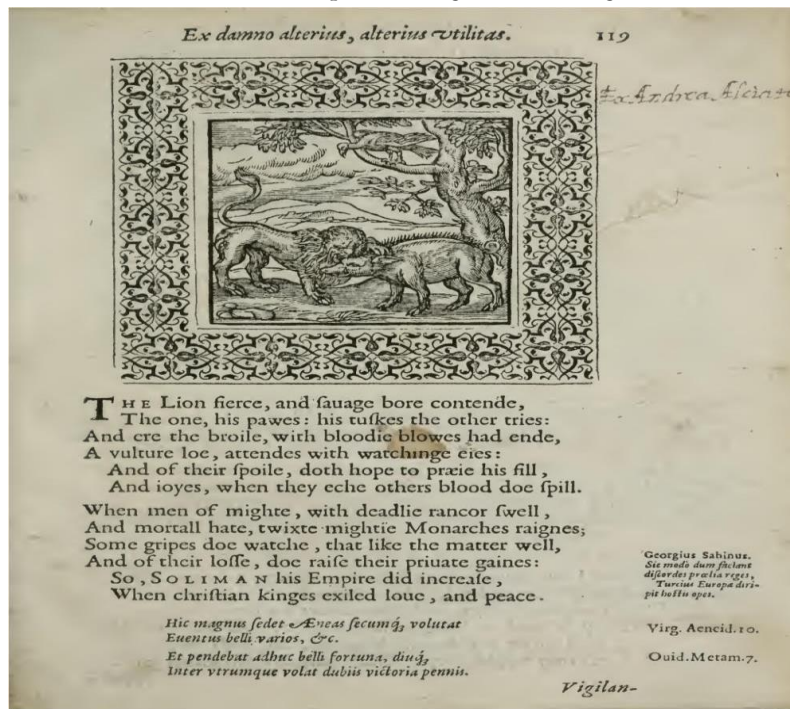


Fig. 2. Illustration by Geoffrey Whitney in *A Choice of Emblemes, and Other Devises*. Cca. 1585-86.

In the case of this emblem, the confrontation between the lion and the boar can be interpreted as a political fight. This scene plays an essential role in the political context of Early Modern Europe, because it is the period when the Ottoman Empire was expanding while the monarchies of Europe were at war with each other constantly, and this aspect is exploited by Whitney at the end of the *subscriptio*: “So, Soliman his Empire did increase,/ When christian kings exiled loue, and peace.”¹⁰ (Whitney 119, lines 11-12). The vulture “attendes with watching eies”¹¹ (Whitney 119, line 4) and is an exponent of the malicious ‘third beneficiary’. In literature, the vultures symbolically “are associated with death and share a reputation as birds of prophecy.” (Sax 2013, 72), which means that the battle between the lion and the boar would ultimately end with both of them dead or gravely injured, as the vulture is a predator and usually situates itself at such a place in order to devour the aftermath of the battle. The lines: “And ioyes, when they eche others blood doe spill.”¹² (Whitney 119, line 6) perfectly demonstrate that the vulture is the personification of the underground villain that searches to profit off the conflict between the lion and the boar in order to rise to the advantageous position. The lion is the symbol of England and the boar might be the symbol for a continental power, as the porcupine is a sign of the earth. This emblem might be interpreted as Whitney’s warning about a possible future

war or conflict with Spain, which took place eventually, and the vulture can be historically associated with Mary Queen of Scots, as she was negotiating an alliance with Spain against Queen Elizabeth I.

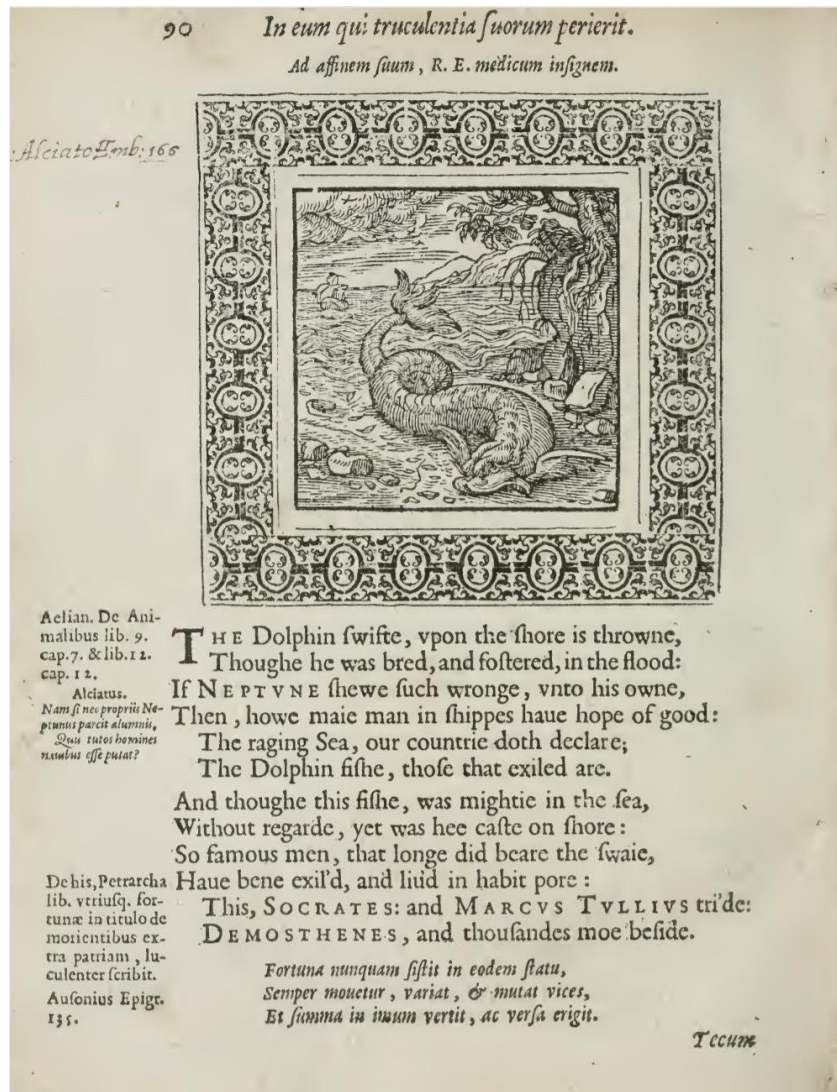


Fig.3. Illustration by Geoffrey Whitney in *A Choice Of Emblemes, And Other Devises*. Cca. 1585-86.

In the last emblem above (Fig. 3), entitled “In eum qui truculentia suorum perierit”¹³, Whitney portrays a dying dolphin exiled on the shore. The motto suggests that the emblem describes futility, the topic being isolation from one’s own kind, sentiment reflected by the *pictura*, which displays a dolphin curled up on a beach, in complete solitude. In literature, dolphins represent the evolved maritime mammals that are usually portrayed as saviours of human life, but they also are symbols for unrequited or long lost love. According to Boria Sax, dolphins are majestic creatures whose appeal stands usually in their ever-joyous and playful appearance and behaviour. They:

are confined to water, but they follow ships at sea, often leaping into the air. There are many stories, some probably true, of dolphins rescuing people from drowning. People have long viewed the upturned mouth of the dolphin as fixed in a perpetual smile. [...] the attraction dolphins appear to feel for human beings as a longing for a tragically departed love. (2013, 219-221)

Dolphins live in water, but in this emblem, the dolphin is found on the shore, on the verge between life and death, as an outcast. The element of water is interesting because the sea or the ocean have been identified over the course of literary history with the artistic creation. The solitary dolphin might be Whitney's critique of the way in which society had treated its brilliant minds and artists, rejecting them and casting them away instead of venerating them for their genius. The treachery of human nature is poetically described in the lines: "And though this filhe, was mightie in the fea,/ Without regarde, yet was hee cafte on fhore"¹⁴ (Whitney 90, lines 7-8) because Whitney raises awareness about the easiness with which the people that display exceptional qualities are thrown at the mercy of God 'without regarde' and without compassion, regardless of the benefits they brought to the world around them. Whitney points in the direction of the political injustice of being exiled from one's homeland despite one's qualities, which means that brilliance or ingenuity do not guarantee recognition and appreciation in the face of ignorance, offering as examples figures such as Socrates and Cicero.

Geffrey Whitney's emblems consecrated a genre that developed into the following centuries and spread over many European cultures, and, although the format of the emblem changed and were often replaced by writers with the conventions of the fable, such as Jean de la Fontaine, the moralising aspect of this literary genre remained the same.

Jean de la Fontaine and the moralising French Emblem

Jean de la Fontaine cannot be considered a traditional emblem writer, because he changes the conventions that Whitney uses in his literary creation, but this change comes with the reason to adapt the form of the genre to a French readership that is more interested in the straightforwardness of narrative. The ulterior editions of *The Fables of La Fontaine* keep the three components of the conventional emblem, but the changes reflect the need for directness and the tendency of avoiding metaphoric language or the use of Latin, especially as the first noticeable change is the motto, that transforms in a simple title that usually expresses the main characters of the fable, such as "The Wolf turned Shepherd". The element of moral and ethical message is kept and even developed in the case of animal portrayal and allegory, because la Fontaine's *Fables* contains almost exclusively animal characters, humans being only referenced or episodic characters. Regarding the accessibility of the genre, Jean de la Fontaine takes the emblem and makes it even easier to understand, both from the point of view of language and from the choice of not using Latin, because the use of Latin meant that the reader should have been classically educated, which was not realistic for the French illiterate population.

Zoocritically, the animals of la Fontaine are more complex, because the stories are longer and the author has the possibility to create a multi-faceted image and critique of different typologies and to create more archetypes based on the French society. The topics discussed by la Fontaine in his fables convey the same messages as Whitney's emblems, for instance the clashes between social classes, political corruption, personal and individual lack of morals and ethics and the constant questioning of

philosophical values of his contemporary society. These themes are acted out visually by animals that function as moral guides for readers which caution them and determine them to critically analyse the world they live in. These devices are the evidence which proves that the idea behind the emblem as a genre is continued, but changed in order to fit the aesthetic necessity of the age in terms of style and method of delivery. In the spirit of keeping the moralizing aspect of the emblem at the same standard, La Fontaine “sets out to show man to himself, to mark his place in society, by means of those animals who are made to share the subtle complexities of human being” (McGowan 1966, 267) This complex nature of the animal characters constitutes the moralising effect of the fables, because it allows the readers the same distance from the story that makes them involved in the narrative act which paradoxically brings them closer to its intended outcome. The reader is immersed in the fictional universe without the issue being pointed at or directly addressed, fact which makes this genre appealing and highly didactic.

In the fable below, entitled “The Wolf turned Shepherd” (Fig. 4), a wolf tries to pose as a shepherd by stealing a shepherd’s clothes in order to presumably trick a flock of sheep that is sleeping, but is in the end caught in the act because he cannot imitate a human voice and growls. La Fontaine warns against the cunningness of people that pretend to be something they are not usually with malicious intent in order to scam or exploit other members of their community.



Fig. 4. Illustration by Gustave Doré in *The Fables of La Fontaine*, 1886.

He uses the symbol of the wolf in order to showcase these negative human characteristics because, according to critics, the wolf: “has been closely associated with martial qualities [...] condemned for rapaciousness and cruelty, yet it has also been praised for fierceness.” (Sax 2013, 267) This animal

is wild, which is suggestive of why it was la Fontaine's choice for this fable, because he wanted to demonstrate the contrast between the innocent biblical sheep and the satanic image of the predator that is capable of anything in order to catch its prey. The praise of the wolf's fierce nature comes from its capacity to be self-sufficient and to survive alone, which in literature translates to the topic of solitude. However, this loneliness is not typical of the Early Modern typical sentiment that focuses on creation or the religious meditative state that can only be reached in solitude, but it is a disease that transforms animals into beasts, transcending the artistic connotations of this state of mind. In the lines: "To carry out his schemes he set,/ He would have liked to write upon his hat,/ 'I'm Guillot, Shepherd of these sheep!'" (la Fontaine 35, lines 8-10) the image of the wolf becomes an exponent of the deceiver who shows a tendency to be untruthful and, in relation to the ethical dimension of the fable, to the extreme measures that an impostor might take in order to ensure his own benefit, in this case even adopting a fake name or identity. In the last two lines of the fable: "The Wolf like Wolf must always act;/ That is a very certain fact." (la Fontaine 35, lines 30-31), the author labels the character of the wolf as unchangeable and irrecoverable, because he suggests that there is no cure to deceit, and he instructs the readers to be aware of people with such 'values'.



Fig. 5. Illustration by Gustave Doré in *The Fables of La Fontaine*, 1886.

In the fable above (Fig. 5), entitled "The Fox and the Grapes", la Fontaine recycles a narrative that originates from Æsop and in which a hungry fox, unable to reach the grapes from a tall vine on an orchard wall, angrily comes to the conclusion that they are sour without even tasting them. This story has been used since the Middle Ages as a moralising anecdote that is used to teach people not to dismiss something as undesirable just because it is out of reach. Over the course of history, literary critics and readers shared different opinions about this behaviour: "In medieval versions the fox is called wise, while in modern ones he is mocked as foolish. For a trickster, even a frustrated one, wisdom and foolishness are often very close indeed." (Sax 2013, 178) The fox is usually associated with the figure of the trickster, of the individual who cunningly achieves their goals and always finds

a means to an end using unorthodox methods. In this case, however, the fox is not cunning, but it is simply foolish enough to make itself believe that if something is hardly attainable, it means it is not worthy of the effort. The lines: “The Fox did wisely to accept his lot;/ 'Twas better than complaining, was it not?” (la Fontaine 130, lines 9-10) suggest that the fox accepts the ‘defeat’ in not being able to reach the height and get the grapes, and it moves on without resentment or disappointment, which is indeed wise. Nevertheless, this wisdom is based on another sort of trick, which is interior, because the fox here is not cunning and does not try to trick somebody or something else. The fox tries to trick itself into believing that the grapes being sour mean they were not worth the energy of trying to obtain them. This fable’s moral lesson is that cognitive dissonance as shielding mechanism against disappointment is not constructive, and judgement of something hard to obtain cannot be given unless there is a solid evidence or a direct experience associated with it.



Fig. 6. Illustration by Gustave Doré in *The Fables of La Fontaine*, 1886.

In the story above (Fig. 6), entitled “The Serpent and the File”, a serpent slithers into a watchmaker’s shop and tries to bite a dagger, but he ultimately fails and the dagger mocks him for this attempt. La Fontaine uses the snake in order to create an exponent for the entire readership, as in literature, the snake is believed to signify Androgyny, “a primeval androgynous state” (Sax 2013, 227), the complete form before the separation of the sexes into male and female. This device suggests that la Fontaine addresses every critic, regardless of gender, on their failed attempts to subjugate real and valuable works. The snake, like in the Bible, is the corruptor of minds that fuels negative attitudes towards innovation, art and modernity and which determines an established hatred towards the act of clear judgement that should be objective and unmediated. “As people turned more to patriarchal deities, there was a massive revolt against the cult of the snake. This is why serpents are so often destructive in mythologies from very early urban civilizations.” (Sax 2013, 228) The snake in this fable does not manage to be destructive because the file resists its bite, act which can be interpreted as the writer or the artist standing against unjust criticism. The picture of the snake is suggestive

because it displays it coiling the file and trying to suppress it from every angle, but the metal object, unbinding, cannot be bitten and hurt and proclaims its stance of resistance. In this fable, la Fontaine gives authority and power to an instrument, which is art itself portrayed through an ordinary object, and through this he strengthens the metaphor of the creator's tool. The watchmaker can be associated with God, whose inspiration is noticed through art made by the artist using instruments, critiquing the way in which the 'bad mouths' try to find means to demolish the act of creation from the tool that makes it possible.

Jean de la Fontaine does not abide to the conventions of the emblem and allows for a tangible democratization of the genre, adapting the moralizing message and the form of the emblem to the fable, which is more accessible through its language and simplicity of form.

Conclusions

The moralising role of the animal in the emblem, whether it is a classically constructed emblem of Whitney's *Choice of Emblems* or a more democratic fable from la Fontaine's *Fables*, is to showcase the ethical and societal issues of the time. Through the ingenuity of both authors, the genre remains timeless due to their capacity to understand human psychology and to translate it into the form of an animalistic character, personified as to fit the aesthetic of the age and the potential understanding of the readers. The moral and ethical judgments that the readers have to take from these literary pieces represent a concrete guide for the comprehension of society, human nature and the relationship between these through the portrayal of the personified animals in them. Through the illustrations and the *picturas*, the written texts become available to a visual interpretation, which is important for a Renaissance reader that is illiterate and does not have access to education, but still needs to be instructed in the ways of the world. The fictional distance between the animal and the human seems great, but the talent of the authors and their genuine understanding of human nature allows them to blur the lines between these two identities and to consecrate the figure of the animal world into the larger tableau of society in an educational manner.

Endnotes:

1. "fox" *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*, ed. Judith Siefring, 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 116.
2. "dog" *ibid*.
3. "lion" *ibid*.
4. trans. 'desire empty of hope.'
5. trans. 'in hope to have a share.'
6. trans. 'licked his lips.'
7. trans. 'none could share.'
8. trans. 'For death often times must frustrate their desires/ And takes away, the young before the old.'
9. trans. 'One's loss is another's gain.'
10. trans. 'So, Soliman his empire did increase,/ When Christian kings exiled love, and peace.'
11. trans. 'attends with watching eyes.'
12. trans. 'And enjoys when they each other's blood do spill.'

13. trans. "Against one who perished by the cruelty of his own."

14. trans. 'And though this fish, was mighty in the sea/ Without regard, yet was he cast on shore.'

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